

When one reflects upon it, the belief that we should educate people for paid employment is indeed a strange one. In a typical working day, only one third of that time is spent on one's work. Bearing in mind that those who work, work on average a 40-hour week, the proportion of working time is reduced even further. And, of course, one does not work for the entirety of one's life. Making the somewhat generous assumption that a person works from the age of sixteen until the age of sixty, on my reckoning we arrive at the statistic that only 15% of one's life is actually spent in paid employment, and this figure reduces even further when we take into account holidays, time spent off sick, early retirements, shorter working hours, and, of course, the spectre of redundancy and unemployment.

In a situation in which there are well over three million unemployed, and in which the figures for long-term unemployment are the highest since the depression of the 1930's, the problems which are posed for the educational system are obvious. First, is there any point in training students for a degree or even a vocational qualification when these are no longer passports to employment? Secondly, how are we to respond to the situation in which a student actually has to choose between receiving an education and getting a job? I recall very clearly an occasion when an extremely able student sought my advice on whether he should abandon a very promising career in order to accept a post he had been offered as a chef. Understandably, when jobs are scarce, one is very tempted to give up one's education if one is offered a job, for there is no guarantee that at the end of the day the student will be able to find suitable employment.

It is understandable that, in the face of mass unemployment, an educational establishment should take the view that its curriculum should be geared towards ensuring greater employability for its students. From the student's point of view this may make sense: if I cannot get a job, I will want to improve my qualifications for employability so that I can increase my chance of doing so. In response to this kind of demand, we therefore not only ensure that students are adequately trained for employment (as far as possible), but that they also acquire basic employment-seeking skills such as writing a *curriculum vitae*, and interviewing techniques.

Such training will assist those individuals who are fortunate enough to obtain employment at the end of their training. But they are really of no value in coping with unemployment in general. If I am trained well in how to perform at an interview, I may obtain my job, but this will inevitably be at the expense of someone else who simply was not so well briefed about his interview techniques. The more techniques of this kind that we teach, the higher the requirements for attaining employment will become, and in the long run the unemployment problem is simply redistributed. Those who have learned the relevant additional skills will secure employment, whereas those who have not, but formerly might have had a serious chance of employment, will not. To advise an individual to stand on tip-toe in order to see a spectacle makes sense; but to invite the whole crowd to do so makes the activity of seeing universally more difficult.

In fact, it may be contended with some justification that to go on training people for jobs when the number of jobs appears to be diminishing seems quite absurd. The reason for this philosophy, one suspects, may be a political one. If it is possible to persuade people that the fundamental reason for unemployment is that, on the whole, the unemployed are insufficiently trained, then one may hope to persuade the unemployed, and indeed the public at large, that the unemployed are in their present situation through their own fault: if they had only taken the trouble to better themselves they would not be in the state in which they now are. Thus it is impossible for a government to exonerate itself from blame in the face of mass unemployment.

It seems likely that the trend towards less time spent on paid employment will continue, partly on account of the unemployment situation, and partly because of increased automation and computerisation. If this is so, then it behoves the educational system to respond to such a change in society. I want to suggest a number of ways in which it might do this.

Firstly, and most obviously, there is a need to recognise the value of 'education for life'. If employment occupies 15% of one's life, the other 85% still needs to be taken into account by the educational system. It is a fallacy to suppose that what is done outside 'working' hours is less demanding and more 'mindless' than the work for which one is paid. The tendency to exalt paid employment and to downgrade leisure is largely the result of the Protestant work ethic which stems from the Puritans. The whole philosophy on which the 'work ethic' is based is questionable. The notion was derived from the Calvinist doctrine of predestination: that God had pre-ordained that certain individuals should form the 'elect' who would, through divine grace, and not through their own efforts, inherit God's kingdom, whereas the 'damned', equally through no choice of their own (but rather through sin, which they inherited genetically in any case) were destined to eternal torment. As a confirmation of this doctrine, the Puritans looked to the earthly realm to discover whether

they could find this doctrine reflected in human affairs, and they detected a reflection in the respective economic prosperities of the rich and the poor. Although material prosperity was not a means of attaining God's favour (for one's eternal fate was decreed from the moment of creation), nevertheless it was a sign of God's blessing and a reasonable indication that one was on the way to the right eternal destiny.

The theological doctrines on which such contemporary materialism was based are now, to say the least, suspect. Nevertheless, the conclusions on which the Puritans drew about the value of work and the desirability of financial reward continue to prevail. Yet it is not the case that work is necessarily absorbing, ego-involving and significant, while leisure, by contrast, is not. Much of one's paid employment can be trivial, even unskilled. Equally, one's unpaid activities can be highly significant. Reading a newspaper, voting in an election, identifying with a particular movement or cause, even pursuing a hobby or engaging in a stimulating conversation, can demand as much skill and intelligence, if not more, than paid employment does. It was the educationalist John Dewey who was most noted for his recognition that there was more to the self than one's paid employment:

There is doubtless - in general accord with the principle of habit - a tendency for every distinctive vocation to become too dominant, too exclusive and absorbing in its specialised aspect. This means emphasis upon skill or technical method at the expense of meaning. Hence it is not the business of education to foster this tendency, but rather to safeguard against it, so that the scientific inquirer shall not be merely the scientist, the teacher merely the pedagogue, the clergyman merely one who wears the cloth and so on. (1)

If Dewey is right, then the educationalist should not have so much of an obsession about what employers want, moulding the student to fit 'the demands of industry'. Apart from situations in which a company is directly sponsoring a student to pursue a course of study (and it is only a minority of students who are in this situation), the industrialist is not even paying for his demands to be met. (Indeed, one might even, with justification, reject the logic that it is those who have the money who should control the channeling of other human minds.)

In most cases, of course, it is the public, or 'society', who pays for the education of our students. Yet if the putting up of funds for education were to give the payee the right to decide what should be taught, then education would become a form of social control. The aim of producing 'good citizens' may sound laudable enough, until one realises that what is a good citizen is a contentious question. Would one describe the Greenham Common women as 'good citizens', for example? If one's criterion is obedience to the law, then perhaps not. Yet many would contend they have taken a responsible and reflective stance on a highly important issue. Whether or not one supports the cause of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, it seems vital that the educational system should enable individual students to support or even initiate changes in society, rather than to conform mindlessly.

A 'good citizen' is certainly not identical with a conforming citizen, and in particular a good citizen is not necessarily one who accepts the Protestant work ethic and regards gainful employment as a virtue and unemployment as a stigma. The value of paid employment is in fact grossly overrated. It is highly questionable whether someone who works, let us say, in the advertising industry is doing society a service by persuading people to adopt standards of living which they cannot afford, or to buy commodities which they do not need or necessarily even want. Conversely, if one is unemployed, it is not the case that one is on the scrapheap or incapable of doing anything useful. Much unpaid work in our society is grossly undervalued: for example, the Citizens' Advice Bureau worker who accepts no payment for his or her services, the prison or hospital visitor, and so on. I recently met one of my former students who, as yet, has not secured a full time paid position. He was undertaking some full time unpaid work to travel round the city ascertaining what facilities various stores offered for the disabled, and what provisions they would be willing to implement. The work was unpaid, but yet surely much more valuable than many a paid job.

If, as I have argued, life is more than paid employment, we should expect to see this reflected in the patterns of our education system. It does not follow from what I have said that this is a plea for the old-fashioned 'liberal studies' approach, where it used to be fashionable to inject students of plumbing, mechanical engineering or electronics with a timetabled slot of 'high culture' in which the unfortunate students were dragged along unwillingly - often on a Friday afternoon between four and six o'clock - to receive doses of modern poetry, drama, ballet or whatever. Such an approach was patronizing in the extreme, implying that those who were studying science or engineering subjects, or those who were learning a trade, lacked culture, which we, the high priests and custodians of this esoteric knowledge, could dispense as a great privilege.

To acknowledge the fact that life is wider than paid employment, rather more radical changes are needed to education than the occasional injections of liberal studies for engineers or 'scientific culture' courses for humanities students. Firstly, the requirement that educational courses should have to justify themselves in terms of available job opportunities for graduands is one which should be radically reconsidered. A very high proportion of students, in fact, end up in paid employment which bears little, if any, relationship to their formal qualifications. If it makes sense to train students vocationally, then arguably the best vocational commodity which one can teach is the ability to be versatile and adaptable. Indeed, if one's course of study has been devised with regard to the current situation, what one has acquired during one's course of study may be precisely what enables the graduand to lead a fulfilled life without paid employment. When a polytechnic is briefed to meet the 'needs of the community', this need not be construed as vocational skills, but individual psychological and human needs.

But it is not just the subject matter which requires reappraisal in the light of dwindling employment opportunities. What is needed is a reappraisal of the entire structuring of the system of higher and further education. The conventional undergraduate is one who is preparing for employment and who is using a course

of study as a kind of apprenticeship for paid vocation. Many graduates will testify that one's education, if not wholly geared to the employment which one attains (if one is successful) provides one with many indispensable skills and much necessary experience for coping with the 'outside world': one is able to be more confident and assertive, to argue one's case well, to appear well-informed on the matters one has studied, and so on. Yet, while education provides valuable experience for work and for life, it is also true that a background of employment and experience in the 'outside world' can stand one in better stead for receiving an education. The mature student is often much more able to see the value of the subject-matter with which he is presented, to be more articulate in discussion, and to bring to bear on the taught material a profitable background of skills and experiences. There therefore does not seem to be any good reason why the accepted norm should be that full time education should precede vocation, rather than *vice versa*. Indeed the prevalent convention that full time education is the precursor of full time vocation is precisely what gave rise to my student's conflict about whether to continue his course of study or to accept the chef's job.

If one is to cope with such dilemmas effectively, and if one is to recognise that it is just as desirable for employment to precede education as for the reverse, then much more flexible patterns in our educational system ought to be emerging. The existence of more part-time courses of study would enable those who had secured employment to undergo further education without sacrificing a career on which they had embarked after considerable difficulty. A pattern which enabled more transference from full-time to part-time modes of study would assist the student who, mid-way through a course of study, secured employment.

When one looks at the conventionally accepted norms for undergoing education, they really seem on reflection to be illogical in the extreme. To take a degree one must normally be fairly immature, in one's teens (preferably 18). One normally qualifies for the privilege of higher education by having passed two examinations ('A' levels), which need not have any bearing whatsoever on the subject to be studied, and at which one's success bears no correlation to the quality of the degree which one finally earns. During one's course of study, one may not earn, with the possible exception of holiday jobs, and one is condemned to a period of poverty, in which one is deprived of the opportunity to earn a proper wage or salary, but rather must survive on a very low 'grant'. One may not normally interrupt one's course of study, and if one wishes to do so, a convincing case has to be made and accepted by the institution. After three years, one's education is deemed to be 'complete': one is not normally permitted to return, and few normally do so. Those who wish to do so find that the chief barrier is that no awarding body will sponsor them: after all, have they not been educated?

When stated in this way, such attitudes of course seem absurd, as indeed they are. What requires recognition is that education is not something which one 'completes'. To complete an educational qualification is often to abandon it entirely, annulling many of the benefits which one's formal education has endowed.

As someone who has actually secured employment in what is basically a not very marketable subject - namely, philosophy - I can recal my former philosophy professor taking aside his intending specialist philosophy students and counselling us that philosophy was not a subject by which one could normally expect to earn a living. Predictably, most of my fellow-students ended up in professions which demanded different skills - the legal profession, the civil service, the church. Having lost the ability to pursue their specialist subject, on their own admission, they have now forgotten most of what they ever learned. This points to a case for enabling a subject which is studied to become part of a continuing process of education, with facilities for erst- while students to return, if they so desire, to keep abreast with what has developed in that subject since their undergraduate days.

For those who are unemployed, or for those who have time which they wish to use outside their main employment, education can actually form part of life, as well as preparation for life. Classes, in extra-mural departments of universities, or in organisations such as the Workers' Educational Association, perform a highly important task here. The Open University also fulfils a role in continuing education, with much more flexible patterns of study than conventional universities and polytechnics. It is unfortunate that recent government policy has caused the Open University to increase the financial demands on its students, so that for many men and women the Open University's doors are closed.

I have put the case for placing education more in the context of 'life' than of paid vocation, and argued that much greater emphasis should be placed on this notion. Of course, any system which is more flexible than our present one will involve enormous logistical problems in order to make it successful. It is not my task as a philosopher to suggest how my proposals might be tackled logistically, although it cannot be denied that what is educationally desirable has often to be subordinated to what is practically possible. What I hope I have done, however, is to suggest by my analysis of the function of education, that such a reappraisal of our educational system would be worth working on, and that it would place the respective roles of paid employment and life in general in a much more balanced perspective.

References:

1. John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York and London: Collier-Macmillan, 1966), p. 308.