

That's a Good Question: January 20, 2016

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5mins

Back when I was a student and you asked the teacher a question, you might get an answer.

Then again, maybe you wouldn't. Maybe they'd ask you why you weren't paying attention or if you were stupid. Maybe the class would hoot at you for being interested in the subject. After class they'd circle around you and intimidate you, accusing you of sucking up to the teacher.

The teacher might suggest you think about your question. If you were still interested, ask again in a later class. The teacher understood that running the gauntlet of your peers, after class, would help put your question in perspective.

Back then you chose your questions carefully. They were expensive. You didn't want to ask too many. You certainly didn't want to waste a good one.

Decades later, I was paying my first visit to my son's day-care. Only minutes after I'd arrived, a kid asked a question. I cringed and recoiled, waiting for the inevitable withering blast from the teacher, the first steps in every young person's education. You can imagine how stunned I was to hear the reply "that's a good question!". I couldn't believe my ears. It was the first time in my whole life that I'd ever heard a good question!. Had I heard right? Could it be true? I wasn't sure. I didn't say a word.

The second time I heard "that's a good question" was only minutes later. I HAD heard right. Another kid had asked a good question. I was amazed. Two good questions one after another! How could this be possible?! I'd never asked a good question even once in my life. In all my years in the education system, not one of my peers had ever asked a good question either. This was something. I sat up and paid attention.

The third time I heard "that's a good question" was only a minute or two later. I should remember this. Kids were asking good questions all over the place. I was in a room of Einsteins. There was no telling what these kids would be doing in a few short years.

By the end of my visit at day-care, I'd heard at least a dozen good questions from just about every kid in the room. My ears were ringing with "that's a good question". Every

question they asked was a good one. The statistical chances of this happening randomly were vanishingly small. I had witnessed something amazing and on my very first visit too.

As I drove to work, I wondered. Were all of these questions really good? How would I know? It's hard to reach back in time to recall the questions I might have asked, in the same circumstances. Even if I found such questions, how would I compare them for "goodness" with the questions from today's students? I didn't know.

But someone did know though. They'd gone back and found all the questions we asked back in my day and compared them with the questions from today's students. It turns out that every one of today's questions are incomparably better than the ones from my era.

Well this is exactly what you'd expect of course. With each generation, people understand more, and are better informed. Empty spots in our knowledge are filled in and misinformation that confounded our generation has been eliminated. Beliefs which blocked our educational progress have been exposed for the fraud they were.

You'd expect most of today's students to beat the best of our generation.

I couldn't wait to get home that night. I burst through the door.

(push open the door. call out)

"Sweetie I'm home! Our son's a genius!"

My wife was upstairs.

(call back down the stairs)

"That's nice dear. Can you take out the garbage."

(run up stairs and push open bathroom door. talk breathlessly.)

She was giving our son a bath. He was playing with his rubber duckies.

"No, no. You don't understand. The staff at day-care can't stop praising him!"

"Well he is lovable, but he's not old enough to even be a nerd yet."

"He's going to win a Nobel Prize!"

"He's only just been potty trained. Let's take it one step at a time."

"Be serious. The kids in our son's day-care are all geniuses, they're all asking good questions!"

"They just look like a normal bunch of kids to me."

I wasn't getting through to her. How would my son ever make it, with a mother oblivious to his genius?

It wasn't just in day-care either. I heard the same thing in my son's classes from grade school all the way through to high school. Every question they asked was a good one.

I asked a teacher about it. She said "Well, every question IS a good question".

There's a couple of problems with this

o People from my generation know there really are stupid questions. Here's an example
x You're at home.

(look down and pick up phone)

The landline phone rings. You pick it up. It's a friend. He says "Hi. Are you home?"

Here's another one. I heard this a few times as a teenager in Australia.

x "Do you think this sleeping snake will mind if I pick him up?"

I guess it's the Australian version of kissing the flagpole in winter.

How about this one?

x "We don't need to use contraception tonight, do we sweetie?"

I'm sure each of you has examples of your own.

o Another problem is that if every question is good, then you don't need to say so. It's redundant.

It's like underlining everything in a book. Back in my day, we were told this was stupid. So either the teachers are all stupid or else they're treating the students as if they're stupid. The students know this of course. They're not stupid. No matter what you do to a kid's education, they always have enough brains left to see that you're treating them as if they're stupid.

What if the kids don't believe that their questions are good? In this case your education system has failed and you're educating smart students to be stupid. It's quite difficult to convince someone they're stupid. If you're going to do this, it takes the full 12 years of school education to have any hope of success.

In case it doesn't work, teachers have a backup plan. It's called "Stupid Question Day". On stupid question day, you're allowed to ask stupid questions without being mocked by your teachers. Of course your peers will all cooperate and won't mock you for your stupid questions either. After all, they're just as interested in the answers as you are.

You'd think that Stupid Question Day was invented by some pretty smart people, right? When do you think they schedule Stupid Question Day? This is not very difficult. Obviously you schedule it when the students have lots of stupid questions. This is right before the final exams; you've got a tonne of stupid question by then.

You won't be surprised to find that Stupid Question Day is 28th of Sept, which is so early in the academic year that you don't have any questions, stupid or otherwise.. Truly, Stupid Question Day was scheduled by people who never asked a question, the most stupid people of all.

What you do for Stupid Question Day, is save up all your questions from the previous year, you know, the one's you needed for the previous year's final exams. Then you ask them at the start of the next school year.

At least this is one more day a year than we had when I was in school to ask Stupid Questions.

Why do teachers say that every question is a good one, when all it does is show that the teachers are stupid and that they think the students are stupid? Not only that, in case the students aren't stupid already, the teachers are going to make sure they wind up that way.

Why has education become like this you ask?

Well that's a good question.

Author's notes

This piece was triggered by listening to the comic Brian Burns at Chuckle and Chortle at the Arts Center on 13 Oct 2014. Part of his routine includes someone telling him "you have to think for yourself". Brian then looks at the audience and says "I can't now".

This got me thinking about the paradoxes that we expect children to handle, but which are not understood by the adults.

Society doesn't value education and learning. Sure education is fine as a route to power

and money, but by itself, forget it.

Consequently kids don't get to learn things they're interested in. If education was to do anything for them, then they would be in a position to choose the subjects they want to study. The education Nazis would rather the student adopt their version of a rounded education, than be able to direct their own education. That someone else can set required subjects for a student, is an admission that the education is a failure; the student has been declared unfit to plan their own education. If education is to do anything, its purpose is to empower the student to take charge of their own life. By this criterion, all education in the US is a failure.

In my (australian) education system, the academics said that by the end of 3rd year, they'd given us all they were prepared to do and from here on in, we had to do it ourselves. If we wanted to go on further, we did a 4th year, of research with one 1hr seminar a week. For my PhD I had no classes. I just did research. This is what a PhD is supposed to be able to do; not pass exams.

When I came to the US, I was surprised to find that PhDs were largely coursework. The students were getting material I'd learned as an undergrad. So what were the students here in the US doing for their undergrad classes? Getting a well rounded education, which fortunately I missed out on. If I think that greek mythology will help me, I can learn it perfectly well myself thank you and I won't have to be examined by a person who has no idea what purpose I'll be putting it to.

In the US university education is being spread out into ever lengthening courses. You need a PhD here to get what I had as an undergrad. The universities love this. They tell us that people are better educated now-a-days. This is not true. They are worse educated. They haven't been allowed to determine their own education. It's just a scam to earn more money by lengthening student's education.

If you're set on getting an education, school is a most intimidating environment. The teachers don't care and your peers will mock you. You're better off learning it out of books by yourself at home and looking out the window all day at school..

Most of the students were just waiting for the end of class so they could go back to intimidating their peers, working their way to the top of the shitheap that was the school pecking order. Presumably this paved the way for getting to the top of other shitheaps in adult life. There was no interest in putting your effort into making the world better. No-one was ever rewarded at my school for making the world a better place. The most intimidating made it to the top (became the leaders in the school)

I only remember one teacher in high school who really cared about the subject; my physics teacher. For the rest it was just a job (or worse).

The teachers who are saying "that's a good question" are fighting against society. We all agree on the problem. We all agree that it must be addressed. Saying "that's a good question" addresses the problem. However it has its own problems; treating the students as if the teacher or the students are stupid. We're trading one problem for another. It may be a smaller problem (I'm not sure), but it's still a problem.

I expect treating the students with respect would be a start. But then all the teachers would have to do it. You can't expect a student who's just been told he's stupid in the previous class to ask a question in your class. The students would still have to run the

gauntlet of their peers (and their parents and society). This is difficult; the teachers can't directly address this. The peers see the contempt in which education is held in the outside world. It's easiest to fit in with society. Society has more power than the teachers.

You can't empower students. You can provide an environment where they have the option of taking power. Whether they take power is a battle between them and society. Society doesn't want them to take power. Society would prefer them to maintain the status quo, where the individual is subservient to society. Would providing an environment where students can take power and treating them with respect result in a good educational environment? It's not clear that it's enough.
