

Choice of Education: Standardisation versus Individuality

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The Journey Begins with Understanding

As a child, I used to watch a great deal of television. I hated reading, only realising years later that this was partly caused by my dyslexia. It was never diagnosed. This early struggle would later shape my understanding of how different minds require different approaches to knowledge. One of my favourite television series was called "Kung Fu", with David Carradine as the protagonist. He played the role of a Shaolin monk named Kwai Chang Caine, set during the "Wild West" in the United States. It was the time where law and order were uncommon and good people seemed rare. Caine travelled across America in search of his step-brother.

He was affectionately called "Grasshopper" by his Shaolin master. The highlight of the show was Caine's flashbacks to his time in the monastery, where he learnt important lessons about life. The Shaolin order from China was a Buddhist monastic tradition built upon two main overarching

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principles: pragmatism, and the belief that a healthy mind can only reside in a healthy body.

Today, there is a real-life "Grasshopper" named Shi Heng Yi, a modern Shaolin monk and headmaster of the Shaolin Temple of Europe. In one of his lectures, he explained that every human being exists at different levels of growth and development. Everybody is given what he or she needs when they are ready to receive it. It is up to the individual to accept this 'gift' and use it to progress to their "next level elevation".

Progress can only happen when one is mindful and asks what makes one happy, content and at peace. Life is like a continuous journey and stagnation should be avoided at all costs. The needs and circumstances of each individual differ. Therefore, although the questions may be the same, the answers can be different depending on the person responding to the question. Sometimes, the answers can be the same, although the questions can be different. This highlights the multiple paths to understanding.

The Educational Dilemma

This wisdom presents a fundamental dilemma in any education system. The very word 'system' entails standardisation. Modern and traditional systems alike require standardisation for mass implementation. It seems impossible, or at least extraordinarily difficult, to provide mass education—or 'equal' education for all—without standardisation. Classrooms in schools and universities imply standardisation by their very nature. But this raises crucial questions: Is standardisation a natural progression? When we speak of equal education for all, does 'equal' education mean to teach the same thing to everyone?

My own experience with undiagnosed dyslexia illustrates this tension. In a standardised system that privileged traditional reading and writing, I would have appeared to be a reluctant learner, or even stupid to teachers. Yet my mind was actively seeking knowledge through different channels—visual storytelling through television, philosophical concepts through narrative and daydreaming of things that could be better. The system failed to recognise or accommodate this different learning pathway, potentially limiting not just my educational experience but that of countless others who process information differently.

However, can we ever achieve comprehensive education or full literacy without some form of standardisation? Standardisation requires measurement, assessment, and comparison. Some experts argue that facts are only possible if we can measure them. Without measurement, they claim, we would only deal with hypothesis or conjecture. This is because we cannot prove things to be true without quantifiable evidence.

The Limits of Measurement

Yet this raises the question: can everything meaningful be measured? Can love be measured? Can truth be quantified? Can meaning be defined? In education, we often find ourselves trying to assess the immeasurable—creativity, critical thinking, emotional intelligence and wisdom. Some people are comfortable with inanimate objects precisely because they do not have minds of their own, entailing fewer variables to measure. Modern research often prefers systems with minimal variables for this very reason.

Newton likened the Universe to a clock, with God as the clockmaker—a simplified mechanical model of existence. Although this model can be useful in many ways, this mechanical view can no longer explain many recent scientific discoveries, particularly in quantum mechanics. Similarly, perhaps our mechanistic approach to education, with its emphasis on standardised measurement, cannot fully capture the ‘quantum’ nature of human learning and development.

The Paradox of Individual Growth

Where do we stop being individuals and start being members of the wider community? Children are told to think outside the box without being warned that being outside the box can be lonely. Thinking outside the box means stepping outside the norm, venturing into territories where few have travelled before, and where everything a person encounters will be different. Being outside the box means there are no textbooks for reference, no Google searches, no ChatGPT prompts to guide them. Yet we tell these same children that they need to perform well in examinations, attend university, and secure good employment—like everybody else.

This paradox extends beyond education into life itself. Like the protagonist, Dr. Bruce Banner, in another series from the same era, "The Incredible Hulk", we often find ourselves on solitary journeys of discovery. Dr Banner travelled from city to city, alone, with a specific purpose of finding a solution to his problem. This journey was perilous, for he had no one to depend upon but himself. Through his travels, he learnt about the human condition, about modernity, and most importantly, about himself. Both Caine and the Hulk's protagonist represent the archetypal learner—individuals on transformative journeys that cannot be replicated or standardised, yet which hold universal lessons and growth. This theme is repeated in many other TV series, such as "The Quantum Leap", "The Fugitive" and many other TV series of this genre.

Towards a Middle Way

Perhaps the best approach to this dilemma is to develop a middle way—a system that is hybrid and flexible. Such a system would help individuals understand their current stage of development and decide which path they wish to pursue. Young people need the choice to continue on a standardised, technical path or to forge their own route. This decision should depend on their stage of development and individual readiness.

For this to succeed, children need confidence in their ability to direct their own learning. They must take charge of their developmental path, with formal education serving as one component in their journey. They require the discipline and resolve to complete what they begin, the ability to observe their surroundings and recognise available opportunities. They also need the self-awareness to understand who they are and, what brings them fulfilment to recognise their end goal.

In our increasingly automated world, it may not matter what one does but how well one does it – to be the best at one's vocation. Excellence requires dedication and practice. Can we imagine someone investing countless hours in something they despise? This reality makes the early identification of individual passions and strengths crucial.

Redefining Education's Purpose

“Helping individuals discover themselves” should be education's primary purpose. Education should build confidence to face life's challenges, develop resilience and diligence, and remain flexible enough to address the students' developmental needs at each stage of their journey. This is admittedly difficult, perhaps because we remain trapped within rigid definitions of what education should be.

Historically, arguments for rigidity have prevailed. However, with the advent of artificial intelligence and automation, humanity faces a critical juncture where this rigidity could prove self-defeating. The word 'educate' derives from two Latin roots: *educare*, meaning to "train" or "mould", and *educere*, meaning to "draw out" or "lead forth". Contemporary education emphasises the *educare* component. We must shift towards *educere*.

The concept of *Guru* in Indian languages means to "remove darkness"—to provide illumination. This implies that teachers provide light to see things clearly. However, the journey of discovery remains the learner's responsibility, now that he sees things as they are. This transformation cannot be achieved through curriculum and policies alone; it requires exceptional teachers. My friend said this about a good teacher, “A student may not remember everything they were taught, but they will always remember that someone cared”.

The Path Forward

Good teachers are integral to any education system, but only if they can build their students' confidence to embark upon the journeys of discovery, regardless of the subject being taught. The ultimate target of any education system must be the learner. Learning is fundamentally an individual process—a journey that is often solitary but need not be lonely when properly supported.

We cannot teach those who do not wish to learn, but we can create conditions where learning becomes a natural expression of human curiosity and growth. Like the wanderer seeking truth in an uncertain world, each learner must find their own path whilst being supported by wisdom, compassion, and the recognition that every individual's journey, though unique, contributes to our collective understanding and well-being.

The challenge ahead lies not in choosing between standardisation and individuality, but in creating educational environments sophisticated enough to honour both the need for shared knowledge and the irreplaceable value of personal discovery. Only then can education fulfil its true purpose: not merely filling minds with information, but nurturing the development of the holistic human beings, to achieve his or her full purpose.

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