

# Craft as a Liberal Education

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In what is called Philosophy of Education, craft, along with other practical activities, comes off badly, if it is ever discussed at all, because of two facts: those who practise Philosophy of Education have had a primarily academic education and so think in terms of what they have experienced, as well as believing that their specialized pursuits and interests (intellectual enquiry) are the principal or only forms of human excellence; and the dominance of the accounts of education of Professors Peters and Hirst which equate it with intellectual development and thus with academic schooling. Professor Hirst<sup>1</sup> wrongly thinks that the Greek idea of liberal education was based solely on the nature of knowledge — he has not read Plato's *Laws*. And he looks for a new rationale for the same thing. His answer is that to have a mind is to have logically differentiated knowledge — he distinguishes some six or seven forms of knowledge which are to be the core of education. To this intellectual development, other elements are subordinate and elsewhere he warns us against a 'retreat into arts and practical activities', which would be an anti-intellectual move.<sup>2</sup> For him the heart of human being is the intellect; the intellect is a matter of explicit and theoretical knowing and understanding; and thus education is education in science and scholarship — including the study of philosophy. He neglects the traditional idea of the gentleman which informed Renaissance ideals of liberal education and which was of a man who was a scholar, poet, courtier, soldier, statesman and sportsman, and seemingly wants *all* children to be trained in history, science, mathematics, philosophy, along with what he calls religion and the arts; but by 'religion' he really means theology since it is only the theoretical elements that he has in mind, and not religious practices, and it is very difficult to understand what he means by 'Literature and the Fine Arts as a Form of Knowledge' — the title of a paper in *Knowledge and The*

*Curriculum*. So dominant is the idea that education is training in modes of intellectual enquiry — science and scholarship — that he assimilates religion and the arts to them. Thus aesthetic education becomes learning about or through art (it is not clear which), to neglect of learning to write, paint, perform, play, compose and carve. We should note that this is not a part, the academic part, of education for those with the ability and taste for it, but the central part of the education of all, for Hirst seems to have the false idea that, if you know something in an explicit and theoretical manner, then you are master of it, and that there is no such thing as implicit, unarticulated and concrete knowledge, or that it is of little importance. But Julius Caesar and Hannibal were not students of Clauswitz; many a saint has not studied theology; few artists have been students of aesthetics; Shakespeare had little Latin and less Greek, and no science or philosophy; and the vast majority of men in all ages and places have successfully coped with life without the benefit of academic study while academics are not noted for practical wisdom and insight. A liberal education is one that develops the individual for his and its own sake, and thus in a general or comprehensive and not narrowly specialist way in order to make him serve some external purpose. But Hirst's misinterpretation of this idea has become so common that it is often assumed that liberal education *is* intellectual development, *is* the acquisition of distinct and theoretical knowledge, and *is* training in six or seven forms of enquiry, no more and no less.

Professor Peters, asking what we (whoever 'we' are) mean by 'an educated man', comes up with three ingredients: (a) having received valuable knowledge and skills and so on, to whose value he is committed; (b) having been taught in a morally legitimate manner; and (c) having developed 'cognitive perspective', so that he knows what he knows

in some depth and for the sort of knowledge that it is and as distinct from other sorts.<sup>3</sup> Education should be the education that produces *this* educated man. The first two conditions are, of course, uncontentious — naturally, we should not teach what is trivial or bad nor teach in a wicked manner. But the third is very different, and it is doubtful if many stand any chance of being educated and educatable if we insist on ‘cognitive perspective’, which is depth and breadth of study — *academic* study — and requires a high degree of self-consciousness and articulateness in order for one to be critically aware of what one knows. Surely, ‘cognitive perspective’ cannot be attained short of extended study and thence short of university training. What Peters has done is uncritically to canonize the ordinary equation of education with schooling, and, since schools have been largely academic in what they have obviously taught, thence with academic study. Moreover, since ‘educated’ suggests ‘*having been* educated’ and thus ‘*fully* educated’, ‘a educated man’ suggests one who has successfully finished the whole course of schooling — *i.e.* the good honours graduate, which, evidently, we are all to become.

A third group of authors, Professor Downie and his colleagues, simply define ‘education’ in terms of intellectual development and knowledge about the arts, but do try to argue for this for all children.<sup>4</sup>

Based on these views is the dubious practice of ‘justifying’ elements in the curriculum, which turns out to be the thinking up of bad reasons for what we are going to teach anyway. In relation to craft, this would mean trying to show that it develops ideas, theoretical knowledge, ‘cognitive perspective’, or moral character. It seems obvious to me that, if we want these results, we should use other means. Similarly artificial reasons are produced in ‘justification’ of P.E. Through this practice of ‘justification’ borders on absurdity and lack of intellectual integrity,

it nevertheless is a distortion of something very important: namely, a desire to relate the activity in question to the development of the individual for his sake and for the sake of so developing him, and thus to make it part of a liberal education.<sup>5</sup> I have the impression that often craft teaching has been seen in terms of industrial training, and thus of enabling its recipients to earn more money for themselves or to earn more money for their future employers and so to add to the Gross National Income. Or it has been something put on the timetable in order to keep the thickies occupied while the academically bright ones get on with *real* education. In the one case, the skills of the individual are not developed for his and their own sakes, and in the other nothing is really developed at all. I think that craft, with other practical activities such as movement, sports and drama, has a particular significance for those who are not academically able, not because they will do better at it than the academically able, but because they will generally do better at it than they themselves would at academic subjects. Certainly, the ordinary man of average intelligence often finds great interest in such practical activities as gardening, car-maintenance, model engineering and model making, home-decorating and playing various sports. It is surely better for him to pursue these activities than always to sit in front of the television. In them, more of himself is engaged and developed. The authors mentioned above seem to think that the only model of human excellence is the scholar or scientist and the only form of genuinely human activity to be intellectual research and contemplation.<sup>6</sup> But surely there are other aspects of human being, equally significant which any adequate scheme of education ought to promote, especially for the vast majority who have little capacity or taste for theoretical pursuits. Not just the scholar or scientist, but also the craftsman, sportsman, handy-man, artist or connoisseur of art, and home-builder ought



to be produced by our system of up-bringing and schooling. In all of these activities there are standards to be observed and attained, and thus there is a real discipline of the self, submission to those standards, and scope for the responsible or conscientious observance of them. We do not have artificially to force them into the mould of academic education in order to pretend that they are worth teaching: they are worthwhile simply as they are — elements of genuinely human being and excellence.

Craft has a particular importance in liberal education rightly conceived. It covers or can easily extend to a wide range of domestic or industrial arts, so that a grounding in basic skills and acquisition of dexterity of hand and eye prepares one for a wide variety of activities. Hence it is not too narrow nor of but limited application and interest. It also ranges from what is purely utilitarian to what is produced principally for its aesthetic qualities, and thus includes decorative arts and runs beyond itself into the fine arts. In contrast to Romantic ideas of the Original Genius who needs only his inspiration, the fine artist needs a thorough teaching in the techniques of his art, and thus needs first to be a craftsman. For those of us who have not got the inspiration to be artists, nor even the talent to be good craftsmen, a training in crafts gives real insight into the problems and achievements of artists and craftsmen and so enables us imaginatively to penetrate and dwell in their work much more than we would do otherwise, since we know at first-hand and by our own fumbling efforts what they are trying to do, what difficulties they face, and what solutions they achieve. And this insight we cannot get from book-learning. Thus craft teaching has an important place in aesthetic education, especially as the ordinary person is perhaps more likely to come into more frequent contact with the decorative arts than with the fine arts. Indeed, craft training can both reveal to him the aesthetic aspects of home-furnishing and

enable him to do something for himself in that respect: not only to take an interest in the appearance of his home, but also to be himself something of an artist or designer, and thus to engage and develop more of his abilities and to lead a richer and more satisfying life. In relation to what is purely utilitarian, such as doing repairs about the house or to the car or practising model-making, it is surely better for people to be up and doing than passively to stare at television. Though it would be wrong to stress it, there is also a therapeutic aspect to the practice of craft for those who have to spend the day dealing with paper or people, as I know myself. For in the engagement in a craft such as decorating or model-making, those aspects of the mind which have been taxed during the day are now disengaged and one is thinking primarily with one's eyes, hands and fingers, and the rhythm of the work calms the self and restores peace and tranquility. A practical activity of this type is a necessary element in a balanced life, even more so for those whose work is predominantly intellectual or sedentary.<sup>7</sup>

What is wrong with the practice of 'justification' is that it takes the item or items of the curriculum as given, and looks for reasons for having it or them thereon, reasons which are therefore likely not to fit that which they 'justify'. Starting properly with what we ought to aim at, we can then find appropriate means for it. Craft as a part of liberal education will be concerned with (1) passing on knowledge and skills of general usefulness in life, and (2) with initiating children into activities, their standards and their excellencies, which are worth pursuing for their own sakes. In the case of (1), what is taught must be realistically related to actual life, and in the case of (2) we must aim first and foremost at arousing interest in and enthusiasm for the activity and its excellencies, although many will never acquire much competence. It is not for me who am not a teacher of craft

and whose practical skills, such as they are, have been acquired by self-teaching, to specify the details of a craft course which would fit these two basic requirements. Yet it might be worth considering if the already wide range of activities often grouped together under this or a similar heading, and in many schools joined with Domestic Science, might not be extended yet further to include home-decorating, repairs to domestic machinery and car-maintenance, and gardening. Of course, there is only so much time available, and schools should concentrate upon what is not so likely to be taught and learned elsewhere. Once it would have been laughable if it were to be suggested that the school should teach these things, for they were taught or learned at home. But mass-production has reduced the obvious need for many of these skills, and mass-entertainment has often taken away the incentive to busy oneself with a craft of some sort. Perhaps the school and the compulsory curriculum might usefully merge into the adult evening-class and voluntary activities in these respects.

Often craft activities extend beyond obviously practical activities. For example, my own hobby of model-railways, since I am modelling an obscure railway as it was sixty or seventy years ago, involves me in historical research. Now because of this richness of content, there is a temptation to substitute craft-based courses of schooling, or rather courses based on all practical activities, for academic schooling as such. This temptation comes from both the desire to make academic work interesting and 'relevant', and the false idea that, only by such more or less extraneous academic elements and more *knowing about* (as opposed to practice of) the practical activity in question, can it be made into a part of liberal education. Thus we would not have history taught as history, but also or only as adventurously attached to sports or crafts, and the same with geography, science, maths

and so on. But children will soon see through these artificial connections, and interest in football does not entail interest in learning some maths to work out the average gate for last season's matches. Furthermore, what will be learned will be merely a collection of scraps and unrelated items, without structure and real significance. If we are to teach history, geography, maths, and so on, then as with everything else, we need to teach them properly, in an orderly manner and as themselves.

The aim of this essay has been to let craft activities speak for themselves, and to reveal the errors of providing artificial reasons for including them in education and of making grandiose claims on their behalf. It should surely be the function of the intellectual élite to speak for those who are less articulate. Without wishing to imply that colleagues engaged in craft-teaching are inarticulate, I do wish to point out that those called Philosophers of Education have signally failed to do so, and instead seem to assume that we should all try to be *savants et philosophes* like themselves, as if knowing and understanding were the be-all and end-all of human life. Consequently, practical activities, crafts included, are neglected, or written off as mere ancillary or secondary elements in education, which is taken to be first and foremost purely intellectual development. From a different perspective, I have tried to show how crafts are as authentically human activities and excellences as the over-vaunted modes of intellectual research, and thus, in this respect, can provide more scope for the genuinely liberal education of the majority of children who do not have much aptitude for the heavily academic curriculum required for initiation into the modes of intellectual enquiry and into theoretical pursuits. The doer and maker is at least as human as the thinker and knower.



## References

1. *Knowledge and the Curriculum*, Routledge 1974.
2. *ibid.*, p.28.
3. See *Ethics and Education*, Allen and Unwin, 1966, Chap. 1.
4. Downie, Loudfoot and Telfer, *Education and Personal Relationships*, Methuen, 1974.
5. In the authors mentioned, and in many who apparently follow them, it is automatically assumed that liberal education is academic education. For a very different perspective, and one which has a vital place for crafts, see the writings of Prof. G.H. Bantock, especially *Education in an Industrial Society*, Faber, 1963; *Culture, Industrialisation and Society*, Routledge, 1968; and 'Towards a Theory of Popular Education', *TES* March, 1970, reprinted in *The Curriculum*, ed. R. Hooper, Oliver and Boyd, 1971.
6. Note Peters' dilation upon the advantages of the life of theoretical pursuits, *op.cit.* p.157.
7. See D.H. Lawrence, 'The Education of the People' in *Phoenix*, ed. Macdonald, Heinemann, 1936. Lawrence fully appreciated the ordinary man's enjoyment of practical activities and saw the therapeutic effect of them in the case of other people, but unfortunately mixed this, and everything else, up with a lot of confused and false anti-intellectual ideas about the spontaneous self and 'thinking with the blood'.

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