

Putting an End to ‘When Am I Going to Use This?’

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10/31/2015

The Chronicle of Higher Education



We've all, I suppose, internalized the faux wisdom of the "no stupid questions" mantra. We have agreed, for the sake of some imagined civil society, to grit our collective teeth and repeat ourselves instead of dismissing doltish inquiries.

That's fine. But there's one question that we should all put down immediately, and rage against with the last shreds of our academic freedom: the old refrain, "When am I going to use this?"

This question, I think, manages to embody the worst of our cultural situation. It is a complaint, a subterfuge, an insult, a lazy way out. And before you think I am simply railing against the generational deficiencies in our current crop of students, I'm not. I've heard versions of the theme from parents, administrators, politicians, and even, I am chagrined to add, esteemed colleagues. We must put an end to it all. Our obsession with utility — and our childish demands for it to reveal itself immediately lest we "waste" a precious second of our time that could be better spent watching Netflix — reveals our ugliest selves.

Consider the narcissism involved here. This question implies that its askers have thoroughly considered every possible reality and determined that in no future world could this course, or text, or concept, or material serve any purpose. They can see the future in a way that those around them cannot, and they also evidently hold within them every secret to a fulfilling and successful life. Nothing will be unexpected or surprising in the lives of these askers. They will discover nothing, stumble on no roadblock that they will not swiftly overcome using precisely the tools they predicted. It is quite sad that they are so sure about the realities of life — they are so absolutely certain no mysteries will come their way. They are not even curious.

And the question itself — "When am I going to use this?" — is nearly always a lie, a front. The asker is not genuinely contemplating the use-value of Material X; rather, he or she is merely announcing the intent to give up. Instead of saying this, however — instead of taking responsibility for lack of ability or interest in the material — the asker would like to suggest, It's not me, it's you. It's not that I am uninterested or having a hard time with it.

Instead, there must certainly be something wrong with the material itself: It serves no function! What drivell! What pointlessness! I can hardly be expected to be bothered with something so inherently flawed!

And that, of course, is also the insult. The askers of this question have determined, in their unquestionable wisdom, that this is pointless stuff. Thereby, they would like to suggest that anyone who is studying it is also pointless, or, at the very least, dedicated

to the purveyance of pointlessness. Sometimes the askers very much mean to be insulting. For more-innocent inquirers, this may be an unintended consequence. Either way, the ad hominem is baked in. It is more important to the asker of this question to justify his or her indifference, deficiency, or lack of support than it is to be civil, considerate, or empathetic.

But there is an obvious answer, whether it is regarding advanced calculus, Latin verbs, or Hegel's dialectic: "I don't know." This is the phrase that askers of this question are most afraid of, most unwilling to confront. We don't know.

We are all — though at varying stages — in the middle of living. There is no certainty to be had. We should all have the humility to be open to the possibility that one day we will find ourselves in a position we never expected. We are all in the middle of projects we may never complete. We are all slowly stumbling over pieces and seeing how they fit together. Maybe today in art-history class you will find a piece you'll use in 20 years; maybe you won't. We simply do not — cannot — know. It is OK not to know.

Our sense of what is "useful" is incredibly subjective, both individually and socially. It will change. It has changed. What was useful 100, 50, 20 years ago is very different from what is useful now. The vast shifts in meaning reveal the true meaninglessness of this term. I suppose we could all dedicate ourselves to these trends in utility. For example, we could all learn the now-useful skill of maintaining a social-media presence for a company, something that had no use 20 years ago. But its utility — most often a term used as shorthand for remunerative promise — doesn't actually make it meaningful or important. Shouldn't we be more concerned with something's value than with its use? Isn't that a better question?

It's certainly a more difficult question, one that we run from, hide from behind our whining demands to see the "use" of this, on paper, right now. If we can change the question, though, perhaps we can change the conversation around education, something that we can all agree desperately needs to happen. After all, when was the last time you heard someone demand to know the use of a piece of art, or a movie, or a baseball game? People seem to understand the value of these things, even if they have no immediate "use." Why not such an understanding of education?

We need to bring our better, more curious, more open, more humble selves back to education. We need to stamp out this troubling, reverberating question by revealing it for what it is — a cynical attempt to control what can't be controlled and to hide from uncertainty. It is OK not to know.

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