

Wilhelm von Humboldt, “The Königsberg and the Lithuanian School Plan” (1809)

Abstract

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) was a linguist, philosopher, and government official who was captivated by the theory and practice of education. His educational approach represented a major milestone in the history of modern German knowledge. Humboldt’s approach removed learning from the remit of local clerics and pedagogues and relocated it under state authority. This authority wanted schools to produce reliable citizens who were capable of efficient government service and lifelong learning, the idea being that the honor and utility associated with service and learning would redound to the common good. Furthermore, Humboldt’s systematic division of learning into three stages—elementary, secondary, university—lent coherence to public instruction by moving students along a continuum of progressive cognitive development. The power and success of Humboldt’s approach, which comes through in this selection from 1809, transformed not only German education but also education elsewhere, including in the United States.

Source

All schools, however, which are not run by a single class, but by the entire nation or by the state, must have general humanistic education as their goal. – Whatever is required for life or for a particular trade must be separated out and acquired after the completion of general education. If the two are mixed, then the education is impure, and the result is neither complete human beings nor complete citizens of particular classes.

Both forms of education – the general and the specialized – are guided by different principles. Through general education, the strengths, that is, the human being himself, are to be bolstered, refined, and directed; through specialized education, a person acquires applicable skills. For the former, all knowledge and every skill should advance intellectual capacity and imagination, and both in turn should advance the mind through complete insight into strictly enumerated principles or through elevation to a universal worldview (as with mathematical or aesthetic ideas). If the knowledge and skills do not have that effect, then they are dead and unfruitful. For specialized education, the person must very often limit himself to results whose causes are not understood, because the skill must be acquired, and because either the talent or the time for insight is lacking. That is the case with unscientific surgeons, many manufacturers, etc. One main purpose of general education is to provide such thorough preparation that proficiency is lacking only for a few trades, and never to the extent that it affects human beings.

The organization of the schools therefore concerns itself with no single class, no single trade, and certainly not just with scholars – a mistake of previous times, when other subjects were sacrificed to language instruction, and even the latter was undertaken – more with respect to quality than quantity – for external purposes (to acquire proficiency in exposition and writing), not for true education (knowledge of philology and antiquity).

General secondary education is devoted to the complete human being, that is,

as an athletic being,

an aesthetic being,

a didactic being, and here,
as a mathematical being,
a philosophical being, who in secondary education
is pure in the form of language
but is otherwise always historical-philosophical, and
a historical being
in the principle functions of his natural being.

This complete education therefore has but one and the same foundation. For the minds of the commonest day laborer and the most highly educated person must be tuned to the same key in the first place, if the former is not to become crude on a level beneath human dignity, and the latter is not to become sentimental, chimerical, and eccentric, falling short of human potential.

Instead, it might seem that as education gradually progresses, the methods must be varied depending on whether the goal of those methods can be envisaged through instruction as broad or narrow. Even here, however, the difference seems insignificant to me. If one remains convinced that the number and nature of school subjects are, if possible, to determine the general education of the mind in every epoch, and if every subject is to be treated in such a manner as to have the greatest and most beneficial effect on the mind, then the results must be approximately the same. To have learned Greek could therefore be just as useful for the cabinetmaker as carpentry is for the scholar. However, the choice of material allows for small differences, because every form can only be applied to one material, and consequently the choice will also be taken into consideration. Jarring contrasts can also always be avoided, and it need not come to the point that a craftsman learns Greek, or even Latin.

The limits of education, where it has not reached its endpoint, the university, with its emancipation from actual teaching (as the university instructor only guides independent learning from afar), can only be determined by what is necessary for all education: fortitude and time. If the student provides the one and has the means for the other, then the teacher can guide him, and the state must ensure it that he can be brought that far.

The duty of school authorities in organizing the school system is to prevent the student from taking a path that would be of no use to him were he not to pursue it further. Unfortunately, it is almost always the case in our schools that when a student gets bogged down in the *Tertia* or *Sekunda*, he abandons his education. This would never happen, however, if education focused (as it already does in very good schools) not on the needs of life, but on the student himself, on knowledge as knowledge, on forming the mind, and in the background, on science. For in the mind and in science (which is nothing more than the object considered from all angles), every single point is connected to all previous and future points, is neither beginning nor end, is all means and ends; and thus every step further is a gain, even if iron walls are erected immediately behind it.

If these principles are correct and if we now go from them to the various types of schools (specialized schools being always completely separated), then the first and most important principle is once again:

unity and continuity of education in its natural stages,
since any division in the institution, at a point where education has no natural division, destroys its progression and introduces disparity in the treatment and spirit of the same, rendering even the teacher, who is only supposed to provide guidance up to an arbitrarily chosen point, uncertain and confused.

I can only recognize the following as natural stages:

elementary education,
secondary education, and
university education.

Elementary education consists simply in the description of all kinds of ideas, and their first and original classification, but it can without detriment introduce into this material a greater or lesser number of items related to nature and geography. Elementary education makes it possible [for students] to learn about actual things and to be guided by a teacher.

Secondary education instructs the student in mathematics, languages, and history to the point where it would be useless to keep him tethered to a teacher and to actual instruction; secondary education gradually frees the student from the teacher, but teaches him everything that a teacher can impart.

The university is reserved for what the human being can find through and in himself, insight into pure science. To perform this self-motivated act in the truest sense, freedom is necessary and solitude helpful; the entire external organization of the universities derives from the combination of these two elements. Attending lectures is only a secondary consideration; the essential thing is to spend several years living for oneself and for science in close communion with people of the same age and mindset, and with the awareness that there are a number of fully educated people in the same place, people who dedicate themselves solely to elevating and spreading knowledge.

If we look at this entire course from the first elements to leaving the university, then it becomes apparent that, viewed from the intellectual perspective, the highest principle of the educational authorities (though only rarely expressed) is to produce the deepest and purest notion of science itself. To do so, the entire nation, to the extent possible and preserving all individual differences, sets out on the path that leads to knowledge if pursued further, and to the point where, in keeping with different talents and situations, science and its results can be variously sensed, understood, examined, and practiced, thus helping the individual by the enthusiasm awakened by the pure collective sentiment.

Not everywhere, however, can actual education be provided in its entirety in one institution. Since, however, these obstacles are only incidental, in my opinion, every other difference except the ones mentioned above, is also only incidental and should be treated as such.

The resulting practical guidelines for the educational authorities are as follows:

in places where there can be academic schools (that is, schools that carry instruction to its endpoint), no separate non-academic city schools [*Bürgerschulen*] are necessary, only elementary schools.

on the other hand, in places where this is not possible, there can and must be non-academic city schools, which, however, consist only of the lower grades, taught separately.

But just as it is the duty of every practical procedure to ensure that the unity of principle does not swallow up the benevolent multifariousness of reality, elementary schools can, in the first case, be given such latitude that they definitely carry the pupils further than the non-academic city schools from Grade One of the plan. They must only never intrude into the territory of the academic schools by providing instruction in Latin. Otherwise, they will destroy the unity of education. In history, too, they must stop at certain boundary points. In mathematics, however, only the talents of the teacher and student, and time, can set the boundaries in such cases. It is a separate subject in which knowledge can be more easily acquired, and the subject can therefore be more generally presented.

Because of the equal accommodation precepts, the so-called non-academic city schools in the second case must consent to go further in mathematics than the lower grades of the academic schools would otherwise go, and they will also incorporate more purely historical information.

If I now take a closer look at the present plan, I find above all the following central contradictions among the guidelines developed here:

1. The proposed precept that combining non-academic city schools and academic schools in one institution is tolerable, but that the opposite is actually desirable. The policy that the city should provide for the former and the province for the latter is already very questionable in this regard, and according to the plan it results in twice as many regulatory authorities. In this case, it seems to me quite impossible to have a good academic school. No matter how carefully the deputation might approach the cities, it can no longer vouch for the true excellence of the non-academic city schools, and especially not for their suitability as preparation for the academic schools. Therefore, it seems better to me:

a. either to give the royal *funds* only to cities where there are academic schools and to combine those funds with the city funds there, doing what can be done with them, or
b. to completely take over the academic schools from their lowest grades on at royal expense, and to require the unburdened cities to provide instead to their elementary schools alone a sum relatively equal to the amount other cities apply to elementary and non-academic city schools together. Inequalities are the nature of the world, and something being better than something else is easy to tolerate.

2. The grade divisions seem far too meager to me. A non-academic city school with one grade can hardly accomplish more than any elementary school. For a non-academic city school that is supposed to simultaneously serve as the preparatory school, two grades are still too few. The academic schools could accomplish nothing despite their best efforts, if their students came from outside schools with one or two grades, and they themselves only had a scant three. It would soon be necessary to redivide, recombine, etc.

Even in elementary school, a single teacher, when he wants to instruct properly, must split lessons at least sometimes. Very complete, good elementary schools should have two grades, although one could be the rule.

So-called non-academic city schools must absolutely have two grades, or, whenever possible, three, and still very strictly admit students who were not very solid in elementary school. Otherwise a third or fourth grade must be added.

Academic schools (better here: provincial schools, which are combined with the non-academic city schools of the plan) can make do with five grades.

3. There seems to be a certain tendency in the plan to move away from the possibility of future knowledge in the non-academic city schools and to think of immediate, everyday life. Why should mathematics, for example, be taught according to Wirth and not Euclid, Lorenz, or another rigorous mathematician? Any head suited for mathematical rigor, and most are, is capable even without a multifaceted education, and if additional applications are to be mixed into general education by way of necessity, on account of a lack of specialized schools, then this can be done toward the end. Only the pure should be left pure. Even for number relationships, I dislike too frequent applications using carolines, ducats, etc. The deeper the person who cannot be educated on a higher level unfortunately must plunge into life, the more carefully he is held to the few formulas that he is capable of understanding. Precisely this has a very considerable influence on morality, through the strictness of the duty

concept, which only appears as a compulsion if no other pure concept is known, and on religion through a retreat from sensory material.

This is approximately what, I think, on the whole, is worth keeping in mind in advance, because it needs to be considered in context and is not suitable for a conference with the deputation. By the way, aside from the contested points in which the Section can be mistaken, even if I did not go beyond its opinion, the spirit of the entire plan is splendid. Very many individual details are in complete agreement with the Section's system; other details, such as the fact that the teachers are still far too overwhelmed with lessons, can be taken up orally.

Gumbinnen, September 27, 1809

Humboldt

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