

Ask A Genius 77 – American Education Now
Scott Douglas Jacobsen and Rick Rosner
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Scott: At the moment, there are some issues in the American educational system. What parts of it are important? What parts of it are not very important? What will be some of the public reaction to what's ongoing in the United States?

Rick: The biggest threat to American education is if Betsy DeVos becomes the Education Secretary. She is super terrible. She's helped wreck the schools in Michigan, or knock them down to the bottom third or bottom quarter of schools on average among all of the states. She favors school vouchers, private schools, and religious-based education.

She's never had anything to do with the public schools. She's never attended public schools. Same with her kids. She has never taught. She is a lady who has donated \$9.5 million, not sure directly to Trump, but to creepy Right-wingy political organization stuff. She may become narrowly confirmed because there are more Republicans in the Senate than Democrats. She is a dolt. She has a horrible agenda. Public schools don't need another kick in the butt like this.

It leads to public schools being screwed, I think, informationally, because public schools were some of the most informationally rich areas you could go. America was an agricultural nation at the beginning of the 20th century. Schools were set up around the farming era. That's why schools in America were off for 3 months in the summer, so kids could help with farming in the summer.

We went from a 90% of people being employed in agriculture to now less than 2%. What that meant 200 years ago is school was information-rich, so you were more likely to love it because it is better than walking behind a cow pulling a plow. Now, schools are often the least information-rich parts of students' days because everybody has a personalized information feed going all of the time. Not feeding more in-school information, but feeding you delicious personal information such as YouTube clips, Netflix, porn, and sexting if you want it, then you have to turn off your device and sit in class for 40 more minutes and learn how to factor polynomials.

Schools have a huge handicap to overcome in terms of just holding people's attention. There are other problems with schools, at least in America, where there are plenty of great and dedicated teachers, but teaching doesn't pay that great. It is not valued as a profession. Statistically, teachers are some of the least able people on average among all of the professions that require advanced education. You have a National Teacher's Union. Teachers need protection, but the National Teacher's Union maybe protects incompetence in a lot of instances. It is hard to shake crappy teachers and administrators out of the system.

I'm sure some systems are better than others. LA schools are notorious for not getting bad people out. It is called the Dance of the Lemons. Parents can have trouble getting them out of one school. Once they are out, they are moved to a school where they are harder to get out. Maybe, it is in a school where English isn't main language and the community isn't as well-off such as a worse neighborhood. Nobody has figured out how to make education keep up with the current

structure of information. There are some other problems with education like getting into college in America right now.

It is super ridiculous, where computerized applicants encourage people to apply to 10, 12, and 16 colleges. It means that the number of apps going to each college has doubled over the last 15 years, which means their acceptance rates have dropped by 50% because so many people are applying to every college. The spending is huge for most people that want to go to a selective college. We have immigration issues that are going to mess things up.

America has 5% of the world's population, but because we have excellent colleges and technology. It means we're able to attract the most attractive among the remaining 95% of the world. But if we're going to start making it tough for those people to come over here, then we're going to lose our technical advantage because people will find other places to use their talent.

There are some encouraging trends, but they are still kind of hokey. The whole area of online learning is at this point haphazard, where there are good online systems. I finally graduated college by testing out via a distance learning system. That, in itself, is rinky-dinky. I took GRE subject tests after studying on my own. I tested out of everything. That is not for most people. More and more people will get into online learning.

They will take more advantage of it. I don't know how it stands in the US. I don't what percentage of college students or non-college students are taking advantage of online learning opportunities. It is still in its infancy. The collegiate class of Americans continue to want to attend college in person to be in dorms and have campus life. Many people spend \$60-70,000 per year to attend an elite college. Another challenge to American learning is the general slovenliness.

With online learning, it is hard to tell whether the "yeehah!" anti-elitism, anti-Trumpism right now is an anti-studying and keeping up with the rest of the world technologically with education. The image of us being fat video game players who believe in angels, are skeptical about evolution and global warming, doesn't help us. To the extent that it reflects our actual attitudes, which is hard to tell, it will hinder us from being a technologically superior nation. People who play an ass-ton of video games are better at certain tasks - send those people to war zones or to fly drones because they've been in simulated situations for years.

Eventually, we can hope that education can take advantage of the ways people like to use and use information and absorb information. The schools haven't kept up. Eventually, things will kind of catch up. We live in an interesting time. It appears the Senate is divided 50-50 on whether to make Betsy DeVos Education Secretary. I think she's the least qualified of all of Trump's nominees for any Cabinet position. She would be in charge of public schools and to some extent college debt. She and her family have never gone to public schools because she married into the Amway fortune.

She and her family donated \$9.5 million to Republican schools and causes. She believes in school vouchers, which is a way for people to be given money instead of going to the public schools to be given money, or the money equivalent, by the government to spend on schools of

their choice, which are charter schools. It is basically a way to strangle public schools. Her method, because she has been active in Michigan schools, has brought the Michigan schools down to the bottom 1/3 of schools nationwide. She doesn't know anything. She did the worst of any Cabinet nominee in Senate hearings. Public education has been one of the shining areas of American excellence for the past more than 100 years.

Scott: What about the University of California system too?

Rick: California, where I live, has an excellent junior college system that feeds into our really good university system. We have the Cal State system and the UC system. For a long time, they have provided super high quality education for almost nothing. Now, some of them are fairly pricey. A semester at UCLA might cost \$12,000. It will be a sad time for education if DeVos is confirmed. To get her confirmed, it looks like the Vice President will have to break the tie in the Senate if no more Republicans defect.

Whether Betsy DeVos is a Secretary or not does not effect the long-term prognosis for education in general, education will have to change to address how people use information now. In the past, future education was presented often as a pill you'd take and then you know French, or you have something jacked into your head and then your head fills with knowledge. Obviously, those are hacky ways of acquiring knowledge, but sitting in class and being talked to for 40 min. times 7 periods a day might not be the most currently effective way for people to learn.

It is going to take some sorting out because right now the way that people absorb information from their devices is that it is all candy, all junk, and almost no stuff that takes serious effort to absorb. You can go to your favorite information sources and go to ones that have been formed to your cultural niche and biases that has been knocked down into 800-word articles. You can just read the photo captions because the market place only rewards stuff that people click on. We're stuffed with informational candy.

It is not clear year how we're going to get people to absorb via those same few ways and how we're going to get the education system to adjust to new ways of absorbing information that includes non-delicious information. Whether you're sitting in a classroom or doing homework or trying to absorb lessons in partial differential equations online, it still takes effort. We're at risk that people in less developed and less rich countries have more incentive to be more disciplined to not click on crap and study.

I have fallen into the rut of doing very little work over the past 4 months. It is almost all delicious information. I generate tweets, which are simple and, thus, delicious to generate. I read my niche sources. I get worked up over the political situation and get very little work done. I am more current case of modern information disease. We need to find ways to harness America's ability to be educated.

Otherwise, we're screwed.

Author(s)



Scott Douglas Jacobsen
Editor-in-Chief, In-Sight Publishing
Scott.D.Jacobsen@Gmail.Com
In-Sight Publishing



Rick Rosner
American Television Writer
RickRosner@Hotmail.Com
Rick Rosner

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