

The Merits & Detriments of Self-Education

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There's a notable difference between people who are formally educated, and those who are self-educated. As I'm self-educated, the less common of the two in the present, I've got the rarefied perspective. Perhaps the foremost err in thought by the formally educated is that their education cannot be rivaled by the self-educated. I was fortunate enough to be born into a time with local bookstores, an internet connection, online encyclopedias, and came of age with the free education movements. Tutelage at an institution hasn't been required for access to a good library for nearly three decades now.

What *is* required is far more rare – an honest and seemingly anachronistic drive for your own excellence. This is the single most valuable trait for any human when it comes to intelligence. I'm a scholarly sort, so naturally I find friends in the creative and intellectual domains. But even among my own, I am one of a handful of the formally “uneducated”, but perhaps one of the only ones who genuinely *loves* knowledge. As the years have increased since my peers ended their bachelor's degree programs, I've noticed the gap between us only grow, because four, six or eight years, even under the best teachers, will eventually pale in comparison to someone who never stops.

But this is where the biggest issue arises. For lacking externally validated credentials, I'm viewed as a wretch, and worse still, denied positions, and generally life is made harder on me for being “uneducated” among a mass of persons who last opened a textbook a decade ago. Meanwhile, persons of similar age and far less knowledge in my own field (owing to me having started in my adolescence) have now acquired titles they bandy about to be given windfalls, and assert their superiority over me while being, by any honest metric, far too inexperienceds to even compare. This is to say that the *formally educated* are a hubristic lot, and their credentials, it seems, do them measurable spiritual harm, proportional to the material good it affords them.

On the other hand are those among my “kind” who are not actually motivated by the truth, but merely wish to dismiss the credentials of the formally educated to argue their strange hypothesis. These people give the self-educated a bad name, because they believe a self-education is to read blogs, flavorful books and Wikipedia once in a blue moon. The biggest err of the self-educated title is that it *has no standards*, so you don't know *how* educated a person is. They could range from little more than a loon, to the next great sage.

There is also the notion of canon. When one is educated formally, they are taught an established and normative progression of topics in their intended domain. This curriculum can establish in them a knowledge that has been designed by a plurality of people of staunch knowledge in the

field of their pursuit, which is to say that it is a well-formed plan by knowledgeable people. It is a straight, and well-paved road.

The self-educated must instead wander the wilderness and plot their own way through. It is easy to get lost, or stumble into a ditch. This makes self-education more *hazardous*, and more likely than not to produce a person who has knowledge that overlaps with the canon in some places, but also doesn't in others. When you put such a self-educated person among the formally educated, these will appear as holes – but only to the formally educated, who we have established are an arrogant sort that think the world begins and ends at their purview.

For those knowledgeable in mathematics, consider this: I have a map between two points, plot a straight road between them, and then draw over it a curvy road between them. I break both roads down into distinct “points”, and make a set of each. Generally speaking, will the intersection of these two sets be smaller or larger than the sets of the paths themselves? Knowledge is just like this – and the formally educated often believe they know of the *entire* geography, and therefore only assess the self-educated with respect to overlaps with their own knowledge, and thus find them inherently lacking for their set *appears* to have a lesser volume.

The issue of canon is thus made intuitive. For the formally educated, the entire knowledge of a landscape is of that road, and should its architects have been prejudiced (as they often are), it is poorly designed or have some other fault, then the canon may well not include important but dismissed information. One's *actual* expertise comes from their knowledge of the total geography, and while the canon is an efficient transversal through these lands, it is not always sufficient to cover everything of value. In this regard, the wanderer is better advantaged for they will stumble on picturesque coastlines, quaint groves, and odd clearings far and away from the road well-traveled; though it will take them more time.

There is also the matter of *first-order interaction*. In an unknown wilderness there are no roads, until travelers wander it, meet, speak among themselves, and construct the agreed upon path. This is to say that the first scholars in a field must interact immediately with the subject of their study to understand it, rather than through education on it. Some fields afford this opportunity better than others, for various reasons. The first-order knowledge of surgery originated from scholars sinking their hands into the flesh of the living and dead, and *many* dying in the process to improve all our lives thereafter. Mathematicians need only to be equipped with a staunch mind, and writing instruments to address their subject without tutelage. Evidently, some geographies of knowledge are more hazardous, and require greater caution, and a stricter adherence to the paved road than others.

Put more plainly: a self-educated mathematician, physicist or software engineer is more likely to be of a well-educated manner, as they can interact harmlessly with their subject, than a self-educated physician or biologist. It is therefore more necessary in some fields than others to regard a formal education. If one were to try and gauge which they are then the question is simple: how easily, often and safely can a scholar interact with their study's subject to

experiment with it firsthand? The mind, mathematics, physics and mechanics are all rather accessible and easy outside of ones such as architecture.

Biology of the cellular or zoological natures are less so. Chemistry can be quite dangerous but otherwise accessible so long as the student doesn't try to acquire compounds beyond a certain degree of danger. But medical biology of the zoological or anthropological nature are the least accessible, with various degrees of accessibility within their fields. I could easily access the physiology of a spider, beetle or fly, but a human brain is even more volatile than a human finger. In consideration of these matters, it is better to assign the credentials of a physician regard, while a self-educated mathematician, physicist or computer scientist is likely to be equitable to their formally educated peers so long as they are diligent and enthused in their studies. In fact, in these accessible fields, it is far *more* likely that one of earnest interest will exceed the average student of canon as the bulk of students end their educations after just four years.

But there is yet more to this matter!

As a self-educated person, it dawned on me early that I benefit from rarity. I've knowledge of the geography that my canonically educated peers lack, and they me. But, by spending time among their kind (which are many), and taking up every opportunity (even should it appear redundant) to be educated by them, I may easily acquire the knowledge I lack. They are not afforded that same advantage, because each well self-educated person has different knowledge (i.e. we are *unique*) and, if we are smart, will realize we should play into their kind's hubris and act as if we are the uneducated persons they will presume us to be. It is through this, and the kindness of the formally educated who could see me plainly for what I was but helped me for mutual love of our interest and their own kind souls, that in a few short years I was able to rapidly acquire the bulk of the canonical information I lacked while being paid (on the job), and retaining my own unique edge.

But, one may point out an obvious fact: the formally educated take an expeditious route, and thereafter are equipped to freely explore themselves. In fact, that is the very purpose of the doctorate program – to educate one in the off-road exploration of their field's geography. To which I say: yes! This is quite true, but there are quite a number of dynamisms of the human mind at play here.

One who learns to explore by their own efforts will travel differently than one who needs to be taught to explore. Between the two, I would bet on the self-trained explorer than the formally-educated if both were to find themselves in a new wilderness rather than uncovering a partially known region of knowledge. A youthful explorer will benefit of that critical period in life where everything is new, the brain quite adaptable, and the years not yet having reduced their energy. The wise explorer will benefit from knowledge of pitfalls, avoiding hazards, understanding applicability and economics, and an understanding of how to get *others* to their discoveries.

Granted I'm too young to know yet, but I would wager that by the end of their life, the self-educated explorer will bare far more scars, a fatigued nature and harder convictions for having survived a more hazardous and unforgiving path. Conversely, I might think the formally-educated explorer may well have entertaining stories, a good reputation, and a sizable body of well-known work. It is clear that one is the harder road, with less in terms of material rewards, and quality of life.

But there is one factor that is peculiar to the human mind, and of importance here: a bad education can poison the mind's ability to freely travel, and when a student is taught the answer before they know the question, they will rarely have cause to examine their own education. It is thus common in The Sciences that one wrong hypothesis, taken as a pillar of fact, and spread through the canonical education, can alter the trajectory of the students thereof for decades, and so causing them to miss important discoveries which could better enable the field. This is to say that students will overlook tiny details they are taught *past*, and in doing so, remain on a well-worn road just one hedge or tree-line away from a potentially far better one.

Returning to the exploration of the formally- and self-educated, we might consider them at first to merely be the same thing in opposite chronological orders. The formally-educated are taught the canon, then wander with the tools they've learned. The self-educated wander, and if keen, later learn of the canon road. Both with their respective advantages and disadvantages for youth and wisdom. But this is where the point of incorrect scholarship becomes pivotal.

The self-educated scholar is more likely to discover novelties from wandering and stumbling through hazards, than the formally-educated is due to being taught to avoid those regions all-together. But for this novelty, the self-educated suffers in three ways. First, they must *survive* the hazards of their journey, which is by no means a foregone conclusion. Second, they are ill-equipped to understand how to get *others* to see their discovery. After all, who would freely follow a random stranger into the woods, but how many have been led by a park ranger on a tour of a national park? Third, they risk a great indignity: to never be known at all before their deaths, and in doing so, their discoveries and life's work lost to later be discovered by a formally educated successor whose name will be known beyond their own.

By now my reader might imagine that this work has tried to speak well of my life choices, but being honest, has made it rather clear they were poor ones. But there's one last thing! If the self-educated, covered in scars, half-mad with old bones in a young body, can survive all of this, and chart their way against all odds, then they are able to discover things that would have taken others decades. In doing this a self-educated explorer may become the architect of future roads, who, without, we may have never had the paths for the students to walk in the first place.

In light of this, should one be committed to a field of knowledge but yet still young enough that this fork has yet to be reached, then they must ask themselves a question: which of these paths interests you more? An easier life, with greater human rewards and certainty, but less aptitude for advancing your field's advent? Or a harder life, without respect, but per-chance gifted with an

esoteric knowledge beyond your peers that might one day revolutionize everything and afford you impossible opportunities?

But this question has existed in every age of interest. The self-educated may find similarity with pirates of the late 1600's, or the bounty-hunters of the late 1800's. By comparison the formally educated are akin to sailors, and homesteaders of the same times. And maybe, some day in the future, we will have cast aside this dichotomy and established a social mechanism for the *well* self-educated and formally-educated to work well together. But that time is not yet here.

Thank you for your time, consideration and I wish you a good day.