It's Not What You Know, but How You Use It: Teaching for Wisdom

RADOVAN KARADZIC, wanted for war crimes committed in Bosnia, is, if anything, well-educated. He is a physician, trained as a psychiatrist. Unfortunately, he is not alone among war criminals in his attainment of impressive educational credentials: Many top-ranking Nazis were highly educated, possessing doctoral degrees of various kinds. Similarly, today's compleat terrorist is not an uneducated young man yanked off the streets, but a well-educated, carefully trained weapon of mass destruction.

Traditional education, and the intellectual and academic skills it provides, furnishes little protection against evil-doing or, for that matter, plain foolishness. The United States has had some very well-educated politicians and even presidents whose foolishness in their lives has cost them and their reputations dearly. The recent Enron and Global Crossing bankruptcies have made clear that the shenanigans of the well-educated apply to business as well as politics, and those of us who reside in the groves of academe know that foolishness can be found there as well.

I recently edited a book, *Why Smart People Can Be So Stupid* (Yale University Press, 2002), in which scholars who study human intelligence analyze why smart people are susceptible to actions that seem foolish to the world at large and often, some time later, even to those who acted foolishly. My own view is that smart and well-educated people are particularly susceptible to four fallacies, precisely because they *are* so skilled:

- The egocentrism fallacy, whereby they come to believe that the world revolves, or at least should revolve, around them. They act in ways that benefit them, regardless of how that behavior affects other people.
- The omniscience fallacy, whereby they come to believe that they know all there is to know and therefore do not have to listen to the advice and counsel of others.
- The omnipotence fallacy, whereby they come to believe that their brains and education somehow make them all-powerful.
- The invulnerability fallacy, whereby they come to believe not only that they can do what they want, but that others will never be clever enough to figure out what they have done, or to get back at them.

The high and mighty often have spectacular rises followed by spectacular falls. Their falls often occur, in part, because they succumb to those fallacies. Examples abound—Nixon with Watergate, Clinton with Lewinsky, Lay with financial mischief at Enron, and so forth. What were these people thinking when they did what they did? According to the view I've sketched, they were thinking something like this: that they were omniscient, omnipotent, and invulnerable, and concerned only with themselves instead of others.

It once was thought, and many people still believe, that intelligence and/or education are the answer to many of the world's problems. Luis Alberto Machado, who in the early 1980s was Venezuela's minister for the development of intelligence—probably the first such official in world history—believed that higher intelligence somehow would create better, more humane people. And a variety of studies shows that higher levels of education are associated with higher intelligence. Research by James Flynn, of the University of Otago, in New Zealand, has shown that, during the 20th century, IQ's increased by an average of about nine points per generation. (One could not detect the increase simply from looking at standardized-test scores, because the tests are adjusted every so often to bring the mean IQ back to 100.) That increase, essentially worldwide, was probably due in part to better education. But what does such an advantage confer upon people?

While IQ's rose, the 20th century also saw historic levels of massacres and genocides, not just in Nazi-occupied Europe, but also in Bosnia, Rwanda, Burundi, Cambodia, the Soviet Union, and many other places. As the example of Karadzic points out, some of the most highly intelligent and educated people use their skills cynically, to foment hate and violence. So whatever benefits go along with increased intelligence, wisdom does not necessarily appear to be one of them. Indeed, focusing exclusively on the development of academic skills may take time away from activities that might help to develop wisdom.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE? Although I do not claim to have any solution to the problems of hate and foolishness, I do believe that we need to rethink our goals in education. Increased academic skills may be necessary for many kinds of success, but they are not sufficient. Students need something more. In my work and that of my colleagues at Yale University's Center for the Psychology of Abilities, Competencies, and Expertise, we are seeking a solution—teaching students from roughly age 10 or so to think wisely. Underlying this program is the view that we need to teach students not only knowledge but also how to use that knowledge well.

The basis for our instruction is my own "balance theory" of wisdom: People are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God. And they balance these interests over the long and the short terms. They adapt to existing environments, or shape those environments, or select new environments to achieve ends that include, but go well beyond, their own self-interest. Because they gain a perspective both on themselves and on others, they are unlikely to fall prey to the four fallacies.

Our goal is not to teach values but to help children develop positive values of their own that promote social welfare. We try to give students a framework in which to develop those values—seeing things from others' perspectives as well as one's own, and thinking not just about one's interests but also about a common good. In some ways, our views are in contrast to those of many educational programs, which stress the acquisition of knowledge but not how such knowledge will be used. The high-stakes testing movement, for example, seems to emphasize knowledge acquisition much more than the socially desirable use of that knowledge.

Teaching for wisdom means helping students to know what they know but also to know what they do not know, and even, at a given time, cannot know. Wise scholars realize that learning is lifelong, that there is no end in sight to what they can learn to broaden and deepen their work. Foolish ones may believe that they, and even they alone, have discovered "the truth," and as a result, stop growing intellectually from that point onward.

Teaching for wisdom also means helping students to think dialogically—to be able to understand other people's points of view, whether or not one agrees with such views. Successful negotiations of any kind, whether in a close relationship, a work environment, or an international setting, typically involve such an ability to see things as others see them.

Wise scholars share credit, because they see things from the standpoint of those who collaborate with them. Foolish scholars may hog credit, thinking that it will be to their greater glory. It may be—in the short run—but in the long run, it costs them more than it benefits them, in terms of lost reputation and the consequent unwillingness of others to work with them.

SOME PEOPLE may be concerned that teaching for wisdom amounts to teaching values. In fact, it is teaching that encourages students to develop their own values while understanding multiple points of view. At the same time, teaching for wisdom recognizes that there are certain values—honesty, sincerity, doing toward others as you would have them do toward you—that are shared the world over by the great ethical systems of many cultures.

Our own course on teaching for wisdom, used now in the sixth grade in six schools, is included in American-history courses, where students learn to understand this history not only from the standpoint of the European-American majority culture, but also from the standpoints of other cultures, within the United States and abroad. This means that American history is not taught as though everything the United States has ever done is morally right and not in need of questioning. For example, students learn that what Americans may have seen as manifest destiny, Mexicans or Native Americans may have seen as the theft of their land.

Teaching for wisdom can be made part of any subject matter, because wisdom is a way of looking at the world, a vision that we have seen in such leaders as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela. The wisdom displayed during the brief presidency of Mandela in South Africa stands in sharp contrast to that of Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe. Both were resistance heroes against oppression, but Mandela brought his country out of a swamp of hatred and retribution, while Mugabe has entrenched his country more and more firmly within the swamp.

The current conflict in the Middle East is a good example of a situation where wisdom is sorely needed—where it is essential to find a path to some kind of common good that will benefit all parties to the conflict. Otherwise, the conflict shows no sign of ever abating.

The world risks falling deeper and deeper into that swamp. Teaching for wisdom may be our best hope of pulling ourselves out of it.

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