

Effective Education = Successful Democracy

By Jarod Heng

"Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education." - Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Education is often offered up as the solution to the world's problems, especially to issues such as conflict, strife, and war. It's said to safeguard a successful democracy. Education does possess the potential to be the cure, but only if the education being provided is effective in what it teaches and meets the criteria favorable for promoting wise decisions that safeguard an effective democracy: Individuality, empathy, and critical thinking.

Education must promote individuality. Nothing is more detrimental to informed voting than the bandwagon fallacy. The idea of "everyone I know is voting for this flavor of ice cream, so I should too" is a surefire path to the failure of democracy. The tyranny of the majority flourishes under the apathy of voters. Conscious individuality will safeguard against the bandwagon effect; voters will be more comfortable with choosing a moral good that not everyone supports. This brings us to the second requirement of a democracy-friendly education: empathy.

Empathy, tolerance, and understanding of differing ideas and ideologies is a necessity. Extreme partisanship and adherence to factional divides is extremely detrimental to a healthy democracy. Blind adherence to one's partisan beliefs will cloud judgement. Oftentimes, a desire to vote for something simply because it adheres to one's ascribed ideology or defiantly inhibits an opposing ideology results in the real issue being discarded. Therefore, the ability to understand and empathize with other perspectives, especially opposing ones, will lead to careful consideration of the actual issues at hand, rather than petty squabbles over whose group is superior. With empathy, war, violence, and hate would be incredulously scoffed at. Empathy entails the next requirement: critical thinking.

Education must promote critical thinking. To truly safeguard a successful democracy, voters must be able to discern fact from fiction, and analysis from opinion. Order and entropy must be balanced. Concepts such as multiple choice "answers" with only four or five options, filling in the bubble, staying in between the lines, strict grammar guidelines, adhering to the formulaic 5 paragraph essay, following the three-act story formula, and unquestioning obedience may be useful to teach structure, but it discourages analysis and inhibits the critical thinking and analytical discourse required for people to assess the optimal courses of action. Promoting thoughtful questioning and the development of critical analysis encourages "those who express their choice... to choose wisely."

This list, however, is limited in that there are numerous other factors and minutiae which affect a voting population's ability to choose wisely. Additionally, the course of human events and perspectives is in incessant motion. The ability for us to acknowledge our mistakes and adjust accordingly will be the greatest safeguard to our democracy. Fixing our education systems and spreading their influence worldwide, however, could take generations. Therefore, the best way to truly safeguard our democracy is to educate ourselves; change begins within each person.