



Speaker's Series

The Education Gospel: The Economic Power of Schooling

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City planners and urban developers seem to be very captivated by what I call, the education gospel. The education gospel is the name that we have given the rhetoric about the power of schooling in the 21st century. It is very common now in many countries all across the world as well as in international organizations like the European Union, which is fostering the Europe of knowledge, and the OECD. It often starts out with the knowledge economy transforming all work — we need more skills, we need new skills, we need skills for the 21st century. One of the big reports, almost a sacred text is the Secretary’s Report on Achievement of Necessary Skills. SCAN skills are higher order thinking skills that are distinct from rote memory of facts and procedures. The basic equation is that higher levels of education will translate to economic growth.

It’s really quite remarkable how uniform this type of rhetoric has become. The modern version started in this country with the Nation At Risk Report in 1966. The modern version in Britain started in 1976 with a particularly famous speech called the Ruskin Speech, delivered by the prime minister. The prime minister of Australia wrote a book with a great title, *Sleepers Wake*. The idea was to wake up his countrymen to develop the nation so that Australia could be a clever country. The Australians use this word, “clever,” which to us sounds like sly and sneaky, but a clever country is a country with more levels of schooling — this is true in the Chinese rhetoric and in other places, but not everywhere. Austria, for example, is a very straightforward kind of country; they are more worried about their workforce aging and therefore they have not gotten on this knowledge revolution bandwagon. However, the education gospel appears to be quite universal.

Now in the US, when you look at the history of education there is actually an outpouring of the same view around 1900. There is a lot of talk; again, people around 1900 were just as concerned about the pace of change and the radical changes in the workforce affecting everything as we are now. They were as concerned about immigration, racial issues, racial mixing as we are now. So the notion that these are new events, that the pace of change has accelerated is just bananas; it just isn’t true. And at that time, the analogue to the skills of the 21st century was something called “industrial intelligence” — the need for a worker to understand the production process in full so that he or she could adjust to the demands of production and be more skilled at it, rather than a routine worker. John Dewey worried about the pace of change and what this would do to people who had inadequate levels of schooling. So that’s what we call the educational gospel and it’s a piece of rhetoric that is widespread and is a justification for what people are doing today in education policy.

The education gospel is associated with a set of practices that we call vocationalism, which is the orientation of schooling at all levels. I am particularly concerned with high schools and community college, four year colleges and the universities, and job training and adult education — basically, the reorientation of education and schooling towards preparation for occupations.

The word vocationalism is not very elegant, I admit. The other problem with it is that when we talk about vocationalism, people think we are talking about voc-ed, or a highly specific training in high schools. But we are not. As I will argue in a second, the problem is that the universities have been the most thoroughly vocationalized level of schooling in our system. The reason that we use the word “vocationalism” is that it is attached to vocations and in English, “vocation” is a word that connotes more than a job. A job is something you do for money. Students have jobs to get them through, but professionals have careers and careers are a sequence of jobs of increasing importance, responsibility, and pay. Vocations, however, have the additional connotation of being something connected to society as a whole and something connected to god and service to god — the old connotations of the “Puritan calling.” It is the only word in the English language that we can use for that.

The Germans have a much more powerful word, *balom*, which they use to talk about their vocations. A vocation in Germany and Austria is this kind of thing to which you are incredibly wedded, which just suffuses all of your identity in ways in which you think about yourself, which is why you have to have a three-year apprenticeship even for fairly low-level jobs like baker or butcher. When I lived in Germany one summer, my roommate was learning to be a shoe salesman and it takes three years because being a shoe salesman permeates every fiber of your being. We don’t have such a word in English, but the closest is “vocation.” So vocationalism

to us is re-orienting schooling towards preparation for vocations. When you look at the history of American education over the 19th and 20th centuries, the most important change, I would argue — or to make it less draconian — one of the most important changes in schooling is that it was vocationalized at almost every level at least from high school on up.

Around 1900, high schools became explicitly vocational — explicitly geared towards preparing people for the labor market. There is a very famous quote, from a school district president who said, “for a while we were preparing all boys to be president, then we were preparing them to become professionals, now we are preparing them to get a job.” That is, in the 19th century, the purpose of education was to prepare people for leadership positions and it has evolved and is now much more about preparation for work. The sexism in that quote is, of course, a reflection of what the schools looked like.

Similarly, the university was vocationalized overtime. Probably the first step in that direction was the federal Morrill Land Grant Act — and here we sit in the midst of a moral land grant institution. The Morrill Act gave grants of land to establish public universities to serve the practical and ideal. There is this rhetoric around the practical in the name, so the early ones had engineering schools, schools of agriculture, which is what they were famous for. The ones in Texas had A & M which stood for agriculture and mining and so they were the first sort of entry into the university of an avowedly professional vocational education.

By the way, we don’t use the term “vocation” at the university, we use the term “professional” and there are important differences that we can get into between “vocational education” on the one hand, and “professional education” on the other. “Professional” has a connotation of being built on a knowledge base and available only within schools, which have a certain kind of freedom and a public responsibility. The notion of a professional gets kind of dense here — much more dense than it is in many of the other countries I have looked at.

So the university became professional. Most of these professional schools started around 1890 — education schools, business schools, law schools, etc. Nursing splits from medicine and becomes its own profession, mostly for women. Education schools get started around then too. But not planning schools; they started much later.

The final story in the vocationalization of the university really takes place in the 1960’s and 70’s, when the regional universities were developed. These are the CSU’s [California State University] of the world, distinct from the research universities. When you look at the CSU’s, they are the model institution — there are more students in these public regional universities than there are in any other type. First of all, they are non-selective; they accept 80 or 90 percent of the students who apply. Secondly, they have low completion rates, sometimes as low as 20-25 percent — many of them in the range of 20-40 percent. Third, they are highly vocationalized; that is, about 80 percent in a place like Hayward State will be in engineering, education, nursing, library science, or business. So when you look across the country, about two thirds of the students are professional majors. So the university is thoroughly professionalized and when new forms of the university emerge, they are also vocationalized — University of Phoenix is an example. There is no point in lamenting the existence of the University of Phoenix unless we lament Hayward State. By the way, how many of you went to a regional university for undergrad? Isn’t that interesting, my contention is — I don’t know this for a fact — nobody from regional universities goes on to graduate school. If you are going to go on to graduate school, you have to go to one of the first tier research universities. I don’t know that that’s true; I haven’t looked at the data.

I used to call these institutions second tier institutions, and you know that’s not a very nice name. But there is a three-tiered structure of higher education: the research university, the regional university and the community college are developed in England, Australia, Canada, France, Germany and many of the Scandinavian countries. Many of the European countries are directly copying the US educational system so that anything we do they tend to copy for reasons that we can get into.

I’ll just mention briefly the community college and how it became vocationalized. Not only do they have occupational programs at the two- year level, they also have a variety of shorter programs for workers who need upgrading, for workers who were in dead-end jobs or dead-end sectors, such as forestry in the Northwest,

mining in the Midwest — declining sectors where they need to be retrained for another job. Community colleges have a wide range of vocational functions. There is job training, which I can talk about if you want and then adult education, which is quite interesting because adult education was born out of a whole series of voluntary efforts including workers education, union education, and Sunday school education and encampments of the Methodists and others.

What happened in the US was this really rich stew of adult education that existed in the 19th and 20th centuries became vocationalized. When you look at official adult education it is government-sponsored and its almost all basic skill instruction so that people can get back into the labor force, and ESL for immigrants — so it has been very utilitarian, very focused on getting ahead. So the moral of the story is that every level of schooling has become vocationalized and then, in turn, the vocationalization of all these levels of schooling allows them to expand. No level of schooling in this country — save for early childhood education, when women start working in large numbers in the 60's — expands without first becoming vocationalized.

So, the high school becomes vocationalized in the early 1900s and starts expanding in the 1920s and 40s. The community colleges are vocationalized in the 1960s and start expanding in the 80s and 90s. Vocationalizing a level of schooling is sort of a prerequisite for expansion and, of course, once schooling becomes the route to an occupation, you don't get to become a person with high status or high pay in that occupation unless you go through the proper schooling. Of course there are a few exceptions, like rock stars, famous singers, models, and actors whose native talents, such as they are, presumably get them where they are without going through school.

One of the things you can see is that the process of drawing more and more occupations into schooling is a process that accelerates. Additionally, every new technology brings with it new occupations, like computers and computer programming, that people used to pick up on their own, and now of course, people go and get masters and PhDs in order to get into the computer field.

The same thing is going on for web occupations. But the example that I really love has to do with visual artists — there was what we call the “School of Paris” around 1900 with Picasso and Braque and all of the people who followed them. In this group, you would live in a garret and you would work with other people and learn on the street, so to speak, and that's how you learned how to be an artist. Similarly, we talk about the “School of New York” and the abstract impressionists. They learned from one another by hanging out together, but now you get a BFA or an MFA. So you go to school to become an artist, or an actor or actress, or film director and the point is that occupations that were once seen as antithetical to schooling now have formal schooling as a central element. In fact, in the 19th century the worst thing you could be was an academic artist, trained in the academy, because that meant that you were going and doing old art, copying models, instead of doing new art, the impressionist and abstract art. An academic artist was a terrible thing to be, and now of course, everyone is an academic artist, because they have gone to art school.

So the vocationalized influences permeate the occupational structure as well as the educational structure — that's the moral of that story. Before I get into some limitations of all of this, I want to point out that we actually have many ways in which we talk about vocational or professional. One of the reasons that we don't have a lot of debates about it is that we don't have a set of consistent definitions or conceptions of it. One is that students think they are going to a level of schooling in order to get a better job. Second, a lot of schools that are vocationalized curriculum — whether you see courses in things like business fundamentals or introduction to accounting, in a theological schools a course on how to get money from a congregation — are creating coursework that would have not been a part of the curriculum of Harvard in the 19th century. So, you can have student intentions that are vocational, and curriculum that is vocational, but some have intentions that are vocational without the curriculum that is vocational. Kids in high school say, “without graduating from high school, I can't get a good job,” or “I am going to go to high school in order to go to college,” which means, “I am going to college to get a job.” Even though they don't face a curriculum that is vocational in any sense of the word, they see the high school in vocational terms and that generates a certain conflict with their instructors and teachers that want them to be loving history, algebra, English and physics for its own sake. The students know they are just doing it to get into college and of course the vocationalist question comes up, “why do I need to learn this?” Instructors often don't have good answers to this question.

We have a conception of vocationalism when a lot of people get work in an area related to the field of study. For example, most people who go to medical school get jobs in medicine. Medicine is a very clear example of being highly vocationalized. On the other hand, many people go to law school and don't necessarily practice as lawyers. So that connections is not as tight. Also, there are very serious problems when people go to community college in some area like automotive mechanics or electronics and then they come out and find that the market for electronics technicians is low and they don't get jobs. So the expectation is that you will get a job related to your field of study, which may or may not be related to the first two examples I mentioned. In licensed occupations there is a requirement to go to school; you can't become an architect without going to architecture school. You used to be able to apprentice to become a lawyer or a doctor, but you can't do that anymore. There are now absolute requirements for certain occupations and that is another conception of vocationalism.

Oxbridge, Oxford, and Cambridge in Britain — they have always been places to train the elite. They have an admissions process that is, you will recognize, intensely class-linked. That is, they identify leaders and incidentally reproduce the social structure. There is something quite vocational about Oxbridge in the way it works; to identify an elite — who could actually be the idiot sons of the upper class — they were not necessarily chosen for their great wisdom or their cognitive abilities. However, I think that has changed a little bit; they were members of the elite because they went to Oxbridge and therefore were respected in positions in the civil service and Foreign Service and in the Church of England simply because they had been anointed by Oxbridge. We have a little bit of that in this country but it is not as profound as it is in the British Oxbridge or the French tier of professional schools that also have this character of anointing the leaders of a country — that is another kind of vocational function. Of course, these vocational functions are not necessarily consistent, so we have lots of different ideas.

I have done a lot of work in Britain and it is very interesting to see another country that is similar in some respects but different in others, particularly in this class structure, There has always been an inattention in Britain pedagogy; they don't have any analysis of approaches to teaching that we all know and love — at least all of us who have been through schools of education. The analysis is that teaching is not very important because what counted in the public schools of the upper class, and what counted in Oxbridge, was not learned concrete information, but rather inculcating boys with manliness, Because these schools were all about manliness, that was what was important, no one paid attention to teaching subjects. I think that really clarifies what those schools were about and explains some aspects of the English schools.

Now, let me leave the issue of vocationalism and how it spreads through the system, and then talk about some problems both with vocationalism and with the education gospel. Obviously, one of the problems with vocationalism is that it really doesn't work in liberal arts and general education. It becomes much more difficult to keep general education and some conception of a liberal education — a civic and moral education — with vocationalism. One education mode started to dominate and students didn't have choice in the old universities, they just took what the university prescribed for them in the confident knowledge that professors would know what was best for students.

Now of course, professors don't think they know what is best for students. Now, students choose and if students are vocationally-oriented, they will choose vocational courses. Therefore, the whole notion of a liberal arts education falls apart. Now there are all sorts of complaints about vocationalism and professionalism — there are a series of report about professional schools — that professional schools have failed to teach the skills of the 21st century, that they have failed to keep up with the change in labor market, that they have failed to prepare people with jobs they are too academic, and they are too research-oriented. You can see this in law schools, nursing schools, medical schools, and lord knows, you see it education schools. At the same time that professional schools boomed because everyone has to go to them — you have to get into them to get good jobs — there is the complaint from the external community — the employer community, those representing workers whether they are unions or professional associations. These problems look the same place after place and you see the similarities between these complaints.

The US and its education system were very uneven and unequal in the 19th century. Lower class kids didn't go past the 8th grade, middle class kids went to high school, and a very tiny number went on to the university. Then, that whole structure shifts up. A few more working class kids go on to high school and a few more middle class kids start to go on to the university, but its highly unequal. The late 19th century is a period of time of increasing inequality, increasing division of labor and difference between professional and managerial jobs — clerical jobs for women and production-type jobs for working class men. The distribution of income is going like this and schooling is matching it. If you have a vocationalized schooling system, then by construction, the education system mirrors the inequalities in the occupational system. If the occupational system ends up with these great inequalities, then the schooling system will too. You could think about forms of schooling that didn't mimic the occupational structure, but then they wouldn't be preparing you for work. People with a vocational bent wouldn't go into them — and there is always a criticism, particularly in education schools, that a certain kind of knowledge is of privilege, the knowledge of power.

I have been critiqued for my use of the term standard English when I speak about Black English because I am privileging Standard English. There is a reason that Standard English gets privileged and it has to do with vocational opportunities. I am quite sure that not speaking Standard English is not good for your occupational prospects. I don't have proof but I am fairly sure it is true. So, there are a set of competencies associated with the highest level jobs — professional and managerial jobs. Those competencies come to dominate the schooling system — guess who is best at teaching those competencies? — parents who are in managerial or professional jobs. It is very difficult to see how that could not be true once you have a hierarchical occupation system.

The mechanisms for which inequality is introduced overtime change markedly when the schooling system becomes vocationalized. It is really one of the very most serious problems. Incidentally, when you look across the developed countries, you have the US with the highest levels of educational inequality, but also in Britain in the early 80s and 90s partly because of the demise of unionism, but partly because of Margaret Thatcher's virulent attack on unions and working class — both Reagan and Margaret Thatcher

The final thing I want to say on the education gospel is that it assumes we need more schooling. However, actually in all developed countries, there is a problem of over-education. Between 30 and 40 percent of the labor force is actually over-educated for the jobs they have. The notion of over-education in an older world is a crazy idea. You couldn't tell someone in the 18th century that they were over-educated, because more education was always better. But in a vocationalized system, over education means you have more schooling that your job requires, so there becomes a problem of over-education.

A second problem is that when you look at projections of demand there just isn't that much need for college educated labor, even though the currents underpinning the education gospel advocate for more college. Recent projections in the Monthly Labor Review show that only about 30 percent of the workforce in 2010 will require some college or more. The notion that everyone needs to go to college is just crazy. It just isn't there.

Now let me get to two more issues that I think are closer to your interests. Another aspect of the education gospel is its effects on growth — very badly exaggerated, including growth from both a regional perspective as well as a national perspective.

There have, of course, been pockets of the country where you see some spectacular relationship between the presence of a university and some high tech sectors; for example, Silicon Valley, Austin, Texas, and North Carolina's Research Triangle. However, in general, the relationship between schooling and economic growth has been badly overstated. In part, this is because when you look at the complexity of reasons necessary for growth to occur, the amount of labor and the amount of capital are easy to measure and the quality of capital has been worked on by economists for a long time so that's easier to measure. However, a whole bunch of other factors leading to growth that are quite important are very difficult to measure and so education becomes one particular micro approach to growth. The categories of what affects growth are the sociopolitical climate, macroeconomic policies, trade, institutional settings, legal and corporate institutions, education, labor relations, science and technology, and regulatory policies. Education is in the middle of that stew, but it is only one element in the middle of that stew.

We have a very interesting natural experiment that takes place in this country. In the early 1980s, we were feeling very sorry for ourselves, the Federal Reserve under the less-than-astute leadership of Greenspan drove down inflation rates enormously then drove up unemployment rates enormously and the dollar was sinking, and Asian countries were growing, they were buying everything, they were buying Yosemite.

We really felt we were doing poorly and the Nation at Risk Report came out of the beginnings of that feeling. By the late 1990s we are doing great; the USSR has broken up, we are the only super power around, Europe has not yet emerged, unemployment is rampant in the Asian markets — we look great. Well, is it a reversal in our education system that was responsible for it? No! Not hardly! So the National Academy of Sciences conducted a review to explain our shift from a really crummy economic state and they determined that a supportive mix of micro and macro policies — deficit reduction, conservative monetary policy, reduced economic regulations, trade liberalization, stronger intellectual property rights, federally supported research and some private sector strategies including repositioning, product specialization and on and on — were the reasons. No education in that; rather, a whole series of policies that have nothing to do with education, which, by the way, are not easy to quantify and therefore not easy to throw into growth equations.

What I conclude from all of this is that education is one of a number of policies responsible for economic growth. It is important not to have bottlenecks in the education system — that is certainly true — but basically, education does not generate growth. A complex set of policies generate growth and then education tends to follow. However, you can't have education be the leading policy that will create growth — I believe that is true at the local and regional level as it is in the national level when you think about the complex of reasons that companies move into an area and a complex of reasons that people leave for economic development policy.

As a policy-maker, searching for simple education solutions is really a bad mistake; it is really an exaggeration of claims. One of the things that is really distressing about the education gospel is that by definition it is focused on education only and educational policies only and there has been a marked tendency to search for educational solutions to other social problems. A great example came in the recent third presidential debate — the one that was supposed to be about domestic policy, but still ended up being half on Iraq — when someone asked Bush, “what are you going to do about high levels of unemployment?” He answered, “education.” Someone else said, “what are you going to do about the great and increasing inequality of earnings in this country?” Again, he said, “education.”

This is a great example of, in the case of unemployment, not turning to macro policies or certain kinds of micro policies or going something about outsourcing off shores or other things to intervene in the labor market. Instead, it is just an educational solution — and in turn education is just one piece of it. It is true that an individual that gets more schooling will have less unemployment than people with less schooling. That individual aspect of schooling is right, but if you think of a mental experiment in which everybody who is now dropping out of high school now graduates, and a lot of those people go to college, what is likely to happen is that the whole education system is likely to shift up and more people will get masters and PhDs. Now the PhD is not the top degree because now a lot of people get post docs before they go into their serious adult work. So the notion is absolutely crazy.

I want to mention issues of equity. On the one hand, the expansion of higher education increases equity because more students who otherwise wouldn't have gone to college get to go to college. However, the problem is, with this expansion comes differentiation, so the black, Latino, and low-income communities go to community colleges. Many of them go to these second tier, regional universities, where the likelihood of them completing is lower and they are not going to get into graduate school. So you have higher education offering equity on the one hand, and taking it back on the other. So when you ask the question, “is the expansion of higher education overall serving the cause of equity?”, the answer is very ambiguous, but by and large I would say, no. Where people have looked at this more carefully, the expansion benefits middle class families, and my hunch is that is true here as well.

I want to point out an aspect of this that is really very tragic. If you harp on education as the solution to everything and don't reach beyond education to other policies, then you don't do very much for the conditions of kid's lives that make it difficult for them to learn in school. What I really have in mind is housing policies and community development policies. We know that kids who change schools frequently do worse in school than kids who don't change schools a lot, even if controlling for everything that you can throw into the regression hopper. Why kids change schools a lot isn't transparent from the data sets we use, but when I talk to teachers and principals about why kids change schools, it all has to do with housing and has to do with losing your housing — moving because you can't pay your rent, moving because your family has disintegrated and you have to move somewhere else. If you don't have a strong housing policy that enables kids to be relatively stable, then there are a lot of poor kids who are just not going to be able to do well in school. So you have to have a housing policy that complements an educational policy. You might want to have a housing policy for other reasons — you might think it is decent or humane or all these good things to have people housed — but even if you were a neo-conservative Republican and didn't care about inequality itself, if you are worried about the workforce of the 21st century you have to be worried about housing policy.

I want to comment about being anti-egalitarian. It turns out that there has been very long study of the personality correlates of conservatives and it was summarized that this is all completely straight, and the personality correlates of conservatives, include, of course, being resistant to change and being relatively indifferent to inequality. But it also involves being resistant to new influences, like travel and abstract art, new music, about being afraid — there is a certain fear factor in the conservative approach to the world. There is also a much greater concern with security. Through a series of psychological experiments that they run, they have shown that enhancing dangers brings a variety of people to the right because it engages their fear in the environment — so when I make nasty comments about Republicans it's because psychologists say it is true!

But getting back to housing issues — linked to community development issues — urban environments tend to be bad places for kids, especially black males. There is a culture of violence in black neighborhoods that is not good for children. It is not good for them as individuals, it's not good for their schooling, and it's not good for the kids around them. To do something about it would require some forms of community development. I think that is also true in less pronounced ways in the Latino community, and lower-class white communities too, but it is especially true for black males, and they really have been in bad shape. So if we don't have adequate community development progress and we don't have housing policies that foster stability for families, there is a whole dimension of factors that simply can't be rectified by the schools; these are the responsibility of people like you — city planners.

Thank you.