

## The Re-Education of Education

My mother admires Lady Gaga. Now my mom is a hard-edged, fast-taking, sharp woman-- sharp in both manner and turn of phrase. In terms of mental processes she values the analytical; in terms of society she values capitalistic progress. Her tastes don't run toward Gaga's variety of meat-dress avant garde chic. My mom doesn't spare attention for the Lady's body awareness campaigns, or other political agendas. My mother admires Lady Gaga because Lady Gaga, unlike many of the glittered & synthesized pop-stars of modern America, earned a university degree.

The value of education is culturally constructed. While education is necessary in a democratic society the meaning of "education," and the significance an education is imbued with, is socially defined and dependent upon the definitions of power within a given culture. Critical analysis of the significance of education or receiving an education in contemporary America, of the changing role of student-hood, requires some cross-cultural perspective, some investigation of the failures of the system, some awareness of the successes. Finally, rather than dwelling in the indefinite, I propose an alternative to our current educational institution, a community based system of grassroots education that allows people to take charge of their educations in the ways that matter to them, where individuals work together to create an integrated, relevant and responsive body of knowledge.

When my mother speaks her words curl at the edges, still tinted by the Tagalog that was her first language. She's from the Philippines-- a cultural context that flavors most of her assumptions and perspectives. Education in the Philippines has different significances than education in the United States. In the Philippines power and

influence are measured by how far away you are able to get, both physically and symbolically, from the subsistence farming and fishing that support the poorest of the poor (Philippine Statistics Authority, 4 July 2014). Education becomes a status symbol as much as a door to new horizons. My mother admires Lady Gaga because Lady Gaga's education and ensuing success speak to my mother's own traditions and perspectives.

Growing up Filipino in the United States means negotiating the social mores and perspectives of two cultures. Going to university was a two-fold requirement for me, based on the ideals of both cultures. The Filipino imperative is the imperative of status and personal growth. The American imperative is the imperative of engaging in the system of capitalism, of becoming a commodity.

Dissatisfaction with the American university system is growing. As student debt in the United States skyrockets university graduates experience more health problems, greater general financial problems, and less sense of personal well-being (Gallup Poll, 7 August 2014). The quest for worth, the quest to become a commodity, has come to cost more than many can earn back both financially and in terms of community. To be a commodity in a capitalist society is to be moveable, transient. However, community is generally place based, formed around collective history and identity. People uprooted still form attachments, but they are bonds to the institutions built upon the land, not the systems integrated into the space, place, and people. This type of education system reifies itself, raising the products of education above the critical issues and conflicted landscape that fields of inquiry are founded upon.

Education is both beautiful and necessary. It is critical to democratic processes, because democratic society is founded on a critical, engaged public. As noted by James Madison, drafter of the constitution and fourth president of the United States,

A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to Farce and Tragedy or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance and a people who mean to be their own Governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. (James Madison to W.T. Barry, 4 August 1822)

Information is readily available now with the internet, and as many have noted, this opens a new realm for education and critical analysis in popular society. Yet while information is directly at hand, the ability to use that information for critical inquiry is not so easily discovered. This is where the Liberal Arts education comes in. It offers tools for critical investigation, for combining disciplines, and creating an engaged people. Yet, despite the immense potential of the university system, people are not engaged politically, not connected to the issues of the country around them.

Resolving the tension between the socially constructed significances of “being educated” and the real need that democratic society has for an informed, questioning, and interested public requires breaking down the elitist definitions of education in our society, challenging the idea of “humans as commodities,” and reasserting the place and space of community. Education through the community is the solution. In a community, people can experientially engage the skills they are learning and concretely apply the concepts they have learned. Theory is important-- it discusses the broader

significances of topics before application. However, for education to have meaning and value the ideas learned must be reconnected, and tested, through experience and reality.

Education must be framed against the cultural tableau it was created in. Frustration with the system of learning can only be addressed in consideration of what is, of what values are either easily accepted or thrust upon the people within the system. It's easier for people to fight the injustices against them than the structures that grant power and privilege. Yet both are blinding and at least need to be brought to the light. Community based learning and an education that incorporates experiential, real-world applications into the classroom is one way to do that-- one way to challenge the unconsidered value of a university degree.

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