

AWE: Alternative Worlds Experiment

Rather than prescribe solutions to change education, it is foremost necessary to properly define the root problem: What is the purpose of education? The general conception of undergraduate education is to prepare students for the workplace. However, education for this purpose is wholly inadequate for tomorrow's society, because *mere preparation* for a future centered on the current trajectory of the status quo is solely reactive and always behind. Education has to pivot the foundation of its purpose *away from the status quo* before it can make any substantial changes for the following:

The **preparation model conceptualizes education as a stepping stone to the workplace**, leading students to work **merely for an end**, which undermines the learning process and precludes reflection and discussion of alternative, more meaningful ends. The popular undergraduate mantra, “C’s get degrees,” illustrates this mindset.

- Agency vs. Mere Adaptability: Rather than asking which jobs are likely to change to better prepare students, ask what values people desire in *a* future. Asking the former divests agency from students in creating their own jobs and from people in changing the direction of the future or preventing certain unethical futures. And it divests power from education as a grounds to actively shift the direction of society.
- Problem-Defining vs. Problem-Solving: All too often, education prioritizes “problem-solving skills” over the problem-finding and defining stages. Rather than thinking of education as a place to *develop* “problem-solving” skills to be *applied* in the workforce, we should consider education as a “problem-defining” phase and the workforce as the “problem-solving” phase, such that we can use knowledge to assess the value of work.
- Appraisal of Application: If the conception is education precedes work, then this makes education the perfect grounds to redefine work, challenge work, intercept work, experiment with work, and change the nature of work. There is so much potential in education as an *interception* of what will be applied and as an assessment of not success but of worth. In other words, rather than act as a funnel for work, it should be a check on the worth of work. Does this work need to be done, should it be done, and how should it be done ethically, sustainably, justly, mindfully, reflectively?
 - There are infinitely many more ways to be wrong than right when solving a problem (i.e. opting for bandage solutions for structural issues that make things worse), and there are just as many more pressures to feign correctness in the workforce than in education, such that people will stick to solving the same wrong problem just for the sake of success, not impact. Education, in preceding work, should be a pivot point--a checkpoint-- for a funnel system currently without checks and balances.

Preparing for the future of the status quo means **accepting its current, oppressive assumptions**.

- The Scarcity Mindset: Society as is subscribes to the scarcity mindset, which places competition over collaboration. This mindset undermines and makes conditional human worth. While the workplace does encourage teamwork, causing education to adopt team-based projects, this mindset still persists: with the notion of limited jobs, a student learns *teamwork* to get a job *for themselves*. Here, purpose remains shallow. Teaching teamwork alone does not instill an abundance mindset that there is a place, a niche, for all to fill nor does it inspire students to refine their abilities to broaden collective impact--not individual paychecks. This pursuit of mere survival, as education currently encourages, often begets students' pursuits of merely lesser despair.
- Younger Generations and Despair: Each successive generation finds itself in a more precarious situation, as structural problems from previous generations stack atop another. And yet this is precisely the same reason why younger generations are more *affected* by the state of the world. We realize that as students, we are not only part of the world but that we are also *inheritors of its current brokenness*. The young generations are increasingly *crushed* by society as it is. And we cannot continue working to maintain a system that perpetuates our own despair.
- Higher Education for Higher Purpose: Developing excellent problem-solving skills and finding different means for the same shallow ends (same structures, same oppression, different technologies, different implementations) still doesn't make the ends any more uplifting. This is why education must provide students a space to not only understand the way the world is but also to question the way the world is and propose a different way. "Looking to the future," then, no longer remains fixated on the "future that will be *given* what currently stands" and can progress to "a future that could be *if* we reconsider what currently stands in our way." By preparing for a desired future rather than passively accepting whatever future may come, education can better encourage students to pursue purpose over payment--to reshape society such that work is a contribution, not a toil.

Vitally, education needs to question its **relationship to the powers that be** before it can **empower students**. Much of the problem with education's current purpose goes back to an imbalance of power. By founding its purpose upon the state of the workforce, education inherits the flawed assumptions of the workforce, gives up its own efficacy in swaying society, and hands over judgment of human potential and worth over to the workplace. In surrendering its own power, it gives up its ability to *empower*.

Instead, education should be a system of value(s): Human worth isn't conditional; the world doesn't have to take students in. It is the students who have to evaluate the merits of the world they will take on. What society needs isn't affirmation. It's critique and

“analysis”--breakdown. Education should be a societal experiment, a testing grounds for what a world worth working for could be.

Education: a “merit system,” not of the students but *for the students*. Reconceptualizing the ***POWER*** of education in these ways, I propose, will better “prepare” students for the world, not as it is, but how they envision it to be.