

# Toward a New Conception of the Educated Person

## Abstract

Many conceptions of the educated person have been suggested by philosophers and thinkers on education. A brief overview of a selection of these conceptions appears in the first section of this article, and sets the analytical stage for the presentation of the conception of the educated person embodied in the Theory of Question Oriented Education (QOE). The Theory of Question Oriented Education is believed to introduce yet another definition of a genuinely educated person, positing that the ability to generate thoughtful questions is the most important characteristic of the educated person.

The author submits that, by identifying the basic quality differentiating an educated from an uneducated person as the capacity to generate questions in any domain of knowledge, an additional and alternative conception of the educated person has been added to the educational field.

Following the overview, the definition and rationale for the Theory of Question Oriented Education is elaborated upon. The next section introduces a summary of different views of the educated person and categorizes them under four genres. In this section the author also analyses and critiques these different views to further clarify the main features of his proposed conception.

An image of the learning process commensurate with this theory (QOE) is presented and discussed in the next section. The learning process is captured in a model called 'Dynamic Learning Model' (DLM), conceptualizing authentic learning as learning which is spiral and dialectic. Three practical implications of the theory addressed only to practicing teachers will appear in the concluding part of the article.

## Overview of Theories and Conceptions

The review of existing theories is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, a representative number of widely known 20th century conceptions are presented in this

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section. The selection of theories discussed here also includes some of the perspectives offered by contemporary thinkers and educators.

John Dewey conceives of education as an enterprise which duly focuses on cultivating critical and reflective thinking as its most noble function. For him, an educated person is one who, first and foremost, has reached the stage of intellectual autonomy and can depend on this resource to lead a satisfying life consistent with his or her criteria of growth, both at the personal and the social level. Furthermore, Dewey considers transmission of information to be an important function of education, but is quick to remind us that, based on his frame of reference, imparting knowledge is only welcomed within the context of judgment and thought, not as an end in itself and disconnected from use (Dewey, 1986, 163). In other words, Dewey, while not rejecting transmission of knowledge as a legitimate function of education, contends that its legitimacy resides in serving as the working capital of inquiry (Dewey, 1986, 163).

Whitehead (Whitehead, 1959, 156-176) sought to make schooling more critical and reflective. In his *Aims of Education* he comments that "a merely well informed man is the most useless bore of God's earth" (Whitehead, 1967, 4). He

also coined the term "inert ideas" to signify the futility of the passive reception of disconnected information. From Whitehead's perspective, education is the art of the utilization of knowledge. An idea or information is useful or productive to the extent that it is put to use in the solution of problems.

Russell's conception of education and the educated person is derived from his repeated expression of dissatisfaction with educational systems that force children to accept certain conclusions instead of encouraging them to think for themselves. He believed that the habit of passive acceptance is disastrous in later life (Hare, 1987, 2541). Like Dewey, though, he expresses comfort over educational systems' attempting to impart the necessary minimum of knowledge without which one can not play a part in the community. He further notes that training of intelligence is not possible without imparting knowledge (Russell, 1977, 21).

Paulo Freire, the eminent Latin American educator and social activist, looks upon education primarily as a medium of social change. In this context he speaks of "pedagogy of asking question" and promotes it as the method of social change (Freire and A. Faurez, 1989, 39).

Freire, disenchanted with what he calls "banking model of education" prescribes a "democratic model". For him the former promotes the knowledge of dominant culture, i.e., established truth, as the content of education, but the latter emphasizes the knowledge of popular culture (Freire, 1972).

Freire, it could be argued, deplores the banking model because it breeds indifference by way of communicating the prescribed "facts" and "knowledge", while a democratic model breeds sensitivity to social action and social change by way of encouraging questions and criticism.

R. S. Peters' much discussed and contested view about the definition of the educated person can be derived from his fundamental belief in "man" as a "creature who lives under the demand of reason" (Peters, 1973, 254). Worthwhile education, thus, is an education which satisfies a reason-based "truth seeking" disposition, or the concern for the truth written into human life (Peters, 1973, 255).

Education, according to Peters, should concentrate on the proper understanding of the disciplines of knowledge, since such understanding represents the best preparation for developing the disposition to "ask the reason why of things" (Peters, 1973, 256). This is how the human person is rewarded with the "permanent joy, satisfaction and absorption" proposed as the ultimate criteria for the "justification of education".

Peters further defends his ideal of "liberal education" on the grounds that it transforms the world view of the educated person and enables him or her, in the educational experience, to have traveled with a different view rather than have merely arrived at a destination (Peters, 1969, 110).

His view of true education and the educated person can also be inferred from his treatment of the role of the teacher. He asserts that the teacher has a provisional authority that can be justified only if his or her teaching provides the "critical equipment which would enable the students to evaluate what they were learning and to continue on their own"(Peters, 1973, 48). Finally, he sees relative merit in educational systems' attempting to impart the prescribed content to students, but suggests that "content without criticism is blind, but criticism without content is empty"(Peters, 1969, 110).

J. R. Martin (Martin,1981, 3-20), speaking from a feminist perspective, criticizes Peters' definition of the educated person, and by inference criticizes all definitions which put a unilateral stress on the development of cognitive capacities. She asserts that, contrary to what Plato contended, gender is indeed "a difference that makes a difference"(Martin, 1981, 16), at least in this context. What she means, of course, is that productive (or male) and reproductive (or female) processes are both "central to the life of each individual as well as the life of society as a whole" (Martin, 1981, 13). Therefore, the exclusion of traits and dispositions such as caring, compassion, cooperation, nurturance, sympathy and generosity, traditionally associated with roles played by females, is unwarranted and represents an injustice to the round development of man and woman alike. This is so because "we all participate in both kind of processes and both are important to all of us" (Martin, 1981, 14).

What, therefore, is regarded as a more defensible formulation of the educated person, according to Martin, is a "gender-sensitive" or a "gender-just" one (Martin, 1981, 17), a broader formulation which pays due attention to both cognitive development as well as the development of emotions and feelings.

James Marshall, a contemporary philosopher of education, draws on Snook's description of an ideally educated person, and outlines the following characteristics for such a person:

- . Has a reasonable degree of knowledge and a commitment to rationality in both beliefs and actions.
- . Is committed to some causes, can be "spirited" in the service of them and is ready to "stand up and be counted" when human good is at stake.
- . Can experience enjoyment alone and with fellow humans; finds nothing human that is distasteful.  
(Marshall, 1983, 88-89)

Vanderberg's human rights approach to the definition of an educated person considers "an adult human being who is a person or moral agent" to be educated. Such an individual, he argues, treats both others and oneself "as persons and bearers of human right". Vanderberg elaborates his position by adding that "what an educated person needs is fellow-creaturely feeling toward each person as a person"(Marshall, 1983, 88-89). For a person to be educated, he asserts, "caring

would need to be concrete and personalized, not only an abstract love of humanity in general" (Marshall, 1983, 220).

The 1980's witnessed a remarkable and unexpected revival of a view which had seemed to be on the verge of extinction; namely, the view that the central and probably the sole function of education is to impart knowledge and information. To introduce only a few thinkers on education who have expressed support for this conception of education, John Me Peck, E. D. Hirsch and Richard Rorty are mentioned and their views briefly discussed.

McPeck asserts that "critical thinking should not be introduced into the elementary school" and that it "should preferably be postponed until grade ten or about age sixteen" (McPeck, 1987, Chapter 7).

Analysis of McPeck's position leads to three specific points as grounds for the educational system's focus on imparting knowledge. The first argument is a conceptual one, in which he suggests that critical thinking presupposes possession of knowledge. Furthermore, critical thinking is not a general trait, but domain specific, and should be developed within the context of teaching "accumulated content and the epistemic aspect of disciplines" (Noddings, 1995, 90). There is no such thing as thinking critically in general (Noddings, 1995, 91).

Secondly, McPeck contends, on moral grounds, that children's desires and love of acquiring information should be respected (Hare, 1994). Last is the practical argument in which McPeck refers to the demonstrated lack of basic information on the part of children. He considers this problem such a pressing and a critical one that addressing it leaves no time to teach critical thinking within the schools programs (Hare, 1994, 4). Moreover, he argues that the traditional subject matters are most relevant to everyday life problems encountered by learners (Noddings, 1995, 90).

E.D. Hirsch (1988, Chapters 1-6) emphasizes what he regards as "shared literate information", and opts for "cultural literacy" as contrasted with "critical thinking" when describing an ideal education system or, by inference, an educated person. He insists that "teaching shared information is the principle aim of schooling." This is true especially for elementary schooling which is charged with "fundamental acculturative responsibility" (Hirsch, 1988, 27). Children, after all, should complete basic acculturation before age 13 (Hare, 1994, 5).

Finally, Rorty considers the transmission of "true knowledge" to students as the hallmark of education for citizenship. He states:

"Education should aim primarily at communicating to children enough of what is held to be true by the society to whom they belong, to enable them to function as citizens of that society" (Rorty, 1989, 128).

According to Rorty, the purpose of schooling simply does not extend beyond socialization. Schools should refrain from providing grounds for the prevailing consensus to be challenged by the students.

## Theory of Question \_Oriented Education

This section is intended to define and justify the author's conception of an ideal educational system and an ideally educated person embraced in the Theory of Question Oriented Education. According to this theory, the judgment about the level of education of an individual is ultimately based on the breadth and depth of his or her queries, questions or problems puzzling his or her mind at any given time. This criterion is essentially irreconcilable with the criteria espoused by the traditional conception of education that considers the breadth of individual's acquired information, knowledge, or "answers", as the pertinent signs. An educated person within the framework suggested in this article, is one for whom knowledge obtained is not the terminal stage, but conducts further operations on the acquired knowledge as raw data, to arrive at new questions which, in turn, enables him or her to enter new frontiers of knowledge (Mehrmohammadi, 1995). What is of fundamental importance, in other words, is the elevation or sublimation function of knowledge.

Further, not just any question is a valid icon to signal the achievement of being genuinely educated. Rather, the questions must meet important criteria such as

- . Being internally focused rather than externally framed .
- Being thoughtful rather than thoughtless
- . Being rooted in previous knowledge rather than rooted in total ignorance and
- . Being mature rather than naive

Questions in the context of this theory, therefore, must represent real tension, uncertainty, ambivalence or disequilibrium, and must have been generated in response to answers or knowledge obtained. Such are the questions that signify reaching new horizons of understanding and, thus, embark on the path to true education and learning,

Jean Fourastie, the contemporary French philosopher, in his *Conditions of Scientific Spirit*, addresses the elements comprising scientific spirit. He recognizes the person's self awareness of his or her ignorance as "the most important attribute" of one who owns such a spirit (Fourastie,1966,25). It is the author's contention that one could justifiably infer from Fourastie's perspective a broad conception of education or standards for the educated person. His perspective could be summarized in this general statement: an educated person is one who possesses a scientific spirit and is also conscious of his or her ignorance. The Theory of Question Oriented Education could be viewed as basically arguing for the same quality reflected in the question generating character of students.

The rationale for this conception of the educated person can be further sought in its utterly human character. Conceptions of education which incorporate due attention to and meaningfully rest on human capacities and qualities, particularly those differentiating human species from other species, stand a better chance to be looked upon as the preferred conception, compared

to those that represent disrespect for or underestimate such qualities and, therefore, move toward the exclusion of characteristically human potentials.

The conception of Question Oriented Education can manifestly qualify as an exemplar of a humane view of education because *of* its fundamental reliance on intrinsic or innate human dispositions such as curiosity, intellectual autonomy, skepticism, and so forth. Paulo Freire's remarks in this regard are very illuminating:

"One of the basic differences between me and my dogs is that my dogs have never questioned me and have never organized a seminar with other dogs to discuss the issue of how to better guard houses either. I question everyday and will perish if stop questioning. The worst possible thing that can happen to children is when parents or educators deprive them from the need and the joy of questioning"(Freire, 1992).

### Summary and analysis of conceptions

In this section the views of education and the educated person presented thus far are first summarized, and then critiqued in light of the criteria set by Question Oriented Theory.

Four basic categories of views can be extracted from the array of different conceptions presented by philosophers or thinkers on education. They are as follows:

- 1. *The Knowledge Transmission View***, representing the traditional conception of education, which has gained a new revival in the past two decades. It considers the educated person to be one who has piled up many facts and information in his or her head. In other words, he or she knows the answers to more questions than the uneducated person.
- 2. *The Rational View***, representing the mainstream modern view of education, considers rational power, intellectual autonomy, cognitive growth or critical thinking to be the fundamental characteristic of an educated person. Affective growth and development are either not present in these conceptions, or are subordinated to cognitive growth.
- 3. *The Integrated View***, representing a rival modern view of education, considers a person as educated when he or she is both cognitively and affectively developed. Factors collectively representing the affective sphere are emphasized as a fundamental characteristics of an educated person.
- 4. *The Question Generation View***, representing the new conception of education advocated in this article, shares aspects with rational and integrated views, but is different enough to warrant the label of an alternative description of an educated person. This conception suggests the disposition and the ability of individual to generate or formulate new questions to be the sole factor in appraising one's degree of education.

The conception of education and an educated person advocated here differs from the general category of the rational view in that it addresses a very specific type of cognitive criterion and focuses on a very specific aspect of intellectual development, namely, the power to generate new questions, which was not directly mentioned in earlier treatments of the issue.

Furthermore, the criterion for education suggested by the Theory of Question Oriented Education can be recognized for its due regard for and attention to the affective aspect of the human being. Although it may not appear as such in the first glance, upon scrutiny it becomes clear that a deep, existential involvement, commitment, enthusiasm and concern for personal and human development and growth is absolutely necessary for real attainment of the status of educated person in the context of Question Oriented Theory of Education. In other words, generating questions that live up to the standards and qualities alluded to earlier in the paper is unthinkable without such passion and affection.

The knowledge transmission view is the view farthest from the view defended in this article, but the two are not mutually exclusive. The criterion of education inherent in the Theory of Question Oriented Education, along with the views collectively known as the rational view, do not exhibit total disregard for the traditional function of education. Almost all of them insist that wholesale rejection of this traditional function of schooling is unwise and unrealistic, because reflection and inquiry can not take place in vacuum. What is totally unacceptable to them, though, is misinterpreting the transmission of established knowledge as the sole function of education rather than as simply the raw material for reflection. In other words, what is deplored is the displacement of means and ends in education where "facts" and "answers" block the realization of the noble end of questioning, inquiry and growth.

A brief examination of two specific views of education from the collection reviewed in the earlier section can further illuminate and shed light on the uniqueness *of* the author's position.

Whitehead's criticism of educational systems, beautifully portrayed in his concept of "inert ideas", captures the essence of the argument put forward by the Theory of Question Oriented Education, but his pragmatic interpretation *of* useful or worthwhile education or the implicit criterion *of* instrumental adequacy is not shared by the conception *of* the educated person promoted in this article. Instead, generation of quality questions rooted in knowledge previously acquired is conceived to be the necessary and sufficient condition to judge the knowledge as not being "inert".

It may be argued that the conception *of* education and the educated person closest to the conception put forward in this article belongs to Paulo Freire. His proposal that "the aim of education must be enabling students to pose good questions" seems to be in perfect agreement with what the author advocates. Nevertheless, the difference between the author's proposal and that of Freire is that Freire clearly operates within a radical or revolutionary ideology of education and, therefore, looks at questioning as a fundamental quality of a "liberating or emancipatory pedagogy". Student questioning, however, as contemplated by the author, is inclusive and not limited to questions yielding social action and social change. In other words, thoughtful or "good questions", as Freire refers to them,

need not be politically charged in order to be viewed as a sign of true and authentic education. Purely academic questions are equally valued.

### Dynamic Learning Model (DLM)

The model depicted in Figure 1 is intended to give a graphic account of the prescribed learning process that remains faithful to the conception of educated person embraced in the Theory of Question Oriented Education (QOE).  
Genuine learning

According to this model is recognized by two significant attributes, being dynamic and being dialectic. The learner charged with dynamism manifests a never ending existential quest for learning. The dialectic feature of the model simply asserts that a person should enter a personally constructed path of constant interaction between his or her known and unknown, usually yielding higher stages of knowledge and personal growth. This model of learning shares similar premises and features with the model referred to in the literature as "generative-constructivist"(Cole, 1993).

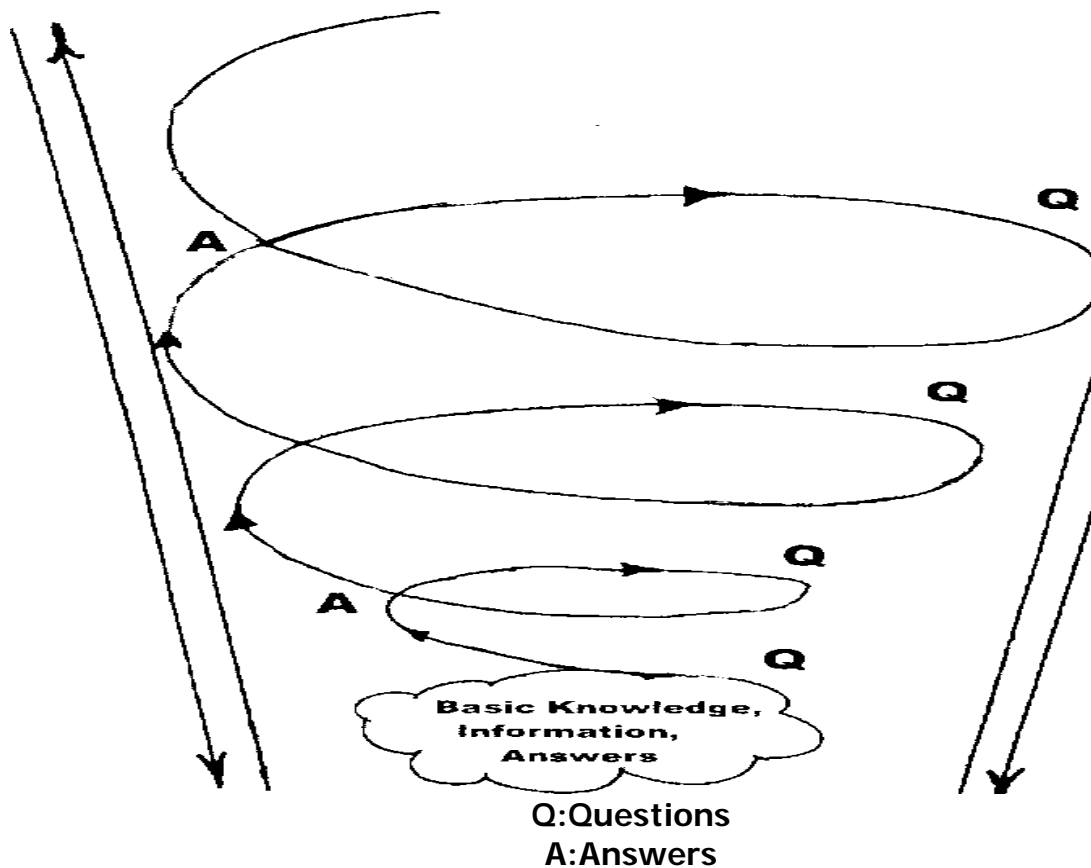


Figure '1':  
Dynamic  
Learning  
Model



A brief explanation of major points associated with this model follows.

**First**, possession of basic knowledge and information relevant to the knowledge domain is the absolute prerequisite and the point of departure for this process of learning

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In other words, access to knowledge considered "basic" in any knowledge domain serves as the platform for other stages in the process outlined in this model.

**Second**, knowledge obtained must serve as the context (thesis) which gives rise to a new question, problem or identification of an indeterminate situation (antithesis). The outcome of such a temporarily disturbing and disquieting state of mind is new knowledge and understanding (answers) leading to yet another cycle in the ongoing cycles of learning.

**Third**, learning progresses in a spiral fashion. Each forthcoming cycle of learning represents a growth with respect to the breadth and depth of learning compared to the earlier cycle.

**Fourth**, while internally focused questions, questions originating from the individual's personal, existential concerns and involvement, are the essential element of learning, the solutions (answers) to such questions should not necessarily be internally based. It can be facilitated or directly provided by external sources.

**Fifth**, the simplicity reflected in the figure does injustice to the process of learning.

This process is, indeed, much more complicated than the figure suggests. For example it may very well be the case that at each cycle of learning more than one question or problem occurs to the learner's mind and that there is no real one to one correspondence between the knowledge obtained (answers) and the questions raised. Furthermore, the questions may relate to the answers obtained at earlier cycles when one becomes skeptical of supposedly established answers. It can, therefore, be concluded that learning, as envisaged here, does not necessarily take place in a linear fashion. It is not additive or accumulative in character.

### **Practical Implications**

In the concluding section of the article, three significant implications of the conception referred to as the Question Oriented Theory are being outlined. There are, needless to say, significant other implications which will not be dealt with here. The comments are confined to teachers and the teaching process.

First of all, what teachers and educators usually do is to suppress students' questions by different methods because the questions seemingly disturb the regular and preplanned flow of instruction. Teachers, according to this conception, should be prepared to confront unanticipated questions and be ready to respond passionately and, to the extent possible, persuasively, so that questioning gradually becomes part of the classroom culture. The student who "owns" questions, it is argued, is analogous to a spring compressed under a sizable force and thus charged

with comparable amount of unreleased energy. The learner infused with such energy for learning is undoubtedly in an advantageous position to experience efficient and meaningful learning. The promotion of such an image of the question generating mind among educators is long overdue.

Second, and related to the first point, teachers should welcome student's questions and not worry about their authority's being threatened (Collard, 1994). The confession of not being ready to answer the questions raised is not a liability in the context of this conception, but is an effective technique to encourage students to ask questions, because such an occasion is pregnant with the implicit and yet clear message that "it is all right to ask questions and make your knowledge deficit public". After all, the teacher does not have the answers to all questions either.

Along the line of strengthening the norm of questioning in the classroom, it is suggested that other than occasions that realistically call for such a confession on the part of teacher, at times teachers are advised to pretend that they do not have the answer to students' questions at the moment and that it requires further study and investigation.

It can, therefore, be concluded that within the framework of Question Oriented Education, teachers' concern about risking their authority as a result of not being able to respond satisfactorily to students' questions is unwarranted. Witnessing such instances by students is deemed necessary and the net result is judged to be a noticeable educational gain in favor of mobilizing an orientation toward asking questions.

Last among the practical implications is to suggest to teachers that they equally value students' questions when assessing the students' educational achievement. Thoughtful and reflective questions are no less significant than the answers, and must be considered a metaconceptual bonus attained by questioning minds. Such questions,

Therefore, must be actively elicited at the time of examination or other suitable occasions, assessed, and given proper weight in the classroom evaluation scheme.

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