



Back-to-school Advice

My first recommendation is very basic. Don't cut class. As Woody Allen stated, "Eighty percent of success is just showing up." And it's best to show up on time. Remember the old Tibetan proverb: "Man who comes to work early and leaves late ends up with tallest stack of Sichuan rupees."

But then the Chinese collectivists came barging in and disincentivized early starts by establishing a new maxim: "Man who becomes biggest party hack gets the most Yuan, plus banned Levis and a complete set of Buddy Holly videos."



It's okay to be late for class, once, if you get backed up in traffic trying to get through one of Obama's stimulus packages, say a road project where the number of guys hanging around a pothole has been upped from 7 to 12 as part of "Recovery Summer."

But one stimulus-delayed late class is enough. After that, get up earlier or take a different route if the road guys are going to be dawdling around the same potholes for the whole semester.

If you have a class in economics, business or political science, ask the teacher how Obama could think it's smart policy to take money from business owners who create real jobs in order to funnel their money to politicians and companies who create fake jobs.

And don't forget the words of caution from Albert Einstein about the mind-numbing impact of education: "It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled youthful curiosity, for this delicate plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom."

Education, in other words, should be less about conformity and rote learning and more about what George Leonard called "the achievement of moments of ecstasy," moments of flashing awareness and new insights.

Instead, Leonard saw education being used to suppress creativity and human genius, producing students who were "usable components in the social machine," well-trained and compliant cogs, and "just about finished" as learners. "Only the inefficiency of the present school system and the obdurance of certain individuals can account for the creativity, the learning ability that survives after age twenty-five."

Teachers are "overworked and underpaid," Leonard acknowledged. "True, it is an exacting and exhausting business, this damming up the flood of human potentialities."

Similarly alert to organized mind-numbing, Bertrand Russell warned that education is "one of the chief obstacles to intelligence and freedom of thought."

More broadly, Oscar Wilde asserted that "nothing that is worth knowing can be taught," while Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed to the pulling down of the most talented: "Colleges hate geniuses, just as



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convents hate saints." Perhaps it's because great genius often comes with a touch of craziness and eccentricity.

In any case, what's correlated with genius is hard work. "Genius," said Thomas Edison, "is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration."

What matters is persistence, and curiosity. "It's not that I'm so smart, it's just that I stay with problems longer," said Einstein. "The important thing is not to stop questioning."

At the top of the list is the questioning of the experts, the leaders.

"Gaiety is the most outstanding feature of the Soviet Union," said Joseph Stalin in 1935. He was declaring that the supposed fun that he presided over was a more outstanding feature during his reign than the class genocide that he preached, a more important feature than the fact that he and his henchmen were responsible for the death of 17 million Russians.

"One death is a tragedy," he said. "A million deaths is a statistic."

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