Mark Twain’s Views on Education

Mark Twain, America’s greatest humorist, was also an educational philosopher with remarkable insight. Although he had only a few months of formal schooling, and almost no acquaintance with the “moderns” who were revising the educational theories of his youth, his common sense and observation led him to many liberal conclusions.

So constant was his concern with educational problems that his comments on them are found in almost every volume he wrote. However, the basic principles of his “system of education” may be found in a representative selection of his writings, namely: The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, Pudd’nhead Wilson, What Is Man?, The American Claimant, Following the Equator, his Letters, and in the official biography by Albert Bigelow Paine.

In this article Twain’s views are set forth so far as is possible in his own words. Almost all of the quotations are from the works that have been named. The remainder of his writings have all been examined, and from them could be drawn many more comments to be set down beside the ones which follow. But, if used, they would only elaborate (and perhaps obscure)—but would not change to any important degree—the summary of Twain’s educational theory.

Twain’s faith in the power of education would seem at times to be almost boundless. “My land, the power of training! of influence! of education!” cried the Connecticut Yankee. “It can bring a body up to believe anything. I had to put myself in Sandy’s place to realize that she was not a lunatic. Yes, and put her in mine, to demonstrate how easy it is to seem a lunatic to a person who has not been taught as you have been taught.” Pudd’nhead Wilson, in his laconic calendar, remarked, “Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education.” It would be hard to find a more emphatic testimony of the value of training.

“When we set about accounting for a Napoleon,” Twain explained, “or a Shakespeare or a Raphael or a Wagner or an Edison or other ex-

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trary. person, we understand that the measure of his talent will not explain the whole result, nor even the largest part of it; no, it is the atmosphere in which the talent was cradled that explains; it is the training that it received while it grew, the nurture it got from reading, study, example, the encouragement it gathered from self-recognition and recognition from the outside at each stage of its development: when we know all these details, then we know why the man was ready when his opportunity came.”

Amidst all his pessimism regarding what he called “the damned human race,” he still nourished the hope that education might lift man to higher levels. “Inestimably valuable is training, influence, education, in right directions—training one’s self-approbation to elevate its ideals,” he said in the midst of the stark pessimism of What Is Man? “Training is potent. Training toward higher and higher, and even higher ideals is worth any man’s thought and labor and diligence.” Then he explains the broad meaning he gives to the term. “Study, instruction, lectures, sermons? That is a part of it—but not a large part. I mean all the outside influences. There are a million of them. From the cradle to the grave, during all his waking hours, the human being is under training. In the very first rank of his trainers stands association. It is his human environment which influences his mind and his feelings, furnishes him his ideals, and sets him on his road and keeps him in it. If he leave that road he will find himself shunned by the people whom he most loves and esteems, and whose approval he most values. He is a chameleon; by the law of his nature he takes the color of his place of resort. The influences about him create his preferences, his aversions, his politics, his tastes, his morals, his religion. He creates none of these things for himself. He thinks he does, but that is because he has not examined into the matter.”

As the foregoing extract hints, Twain’s faith in training did not extend to approval of the formal education then offered in the schools, and certainly not to the methods then in vogue with the schoolmasters. He deplored the undue emphasis placed on “the artificial culture of books, which adorns but doesn’t really educate.” He was before Dewey in urging that the students be made partners in the educational enterprise. He urged that the teachers should eschew dry rules, explain the nature and significance of the facts as they are studied, and help the students to learn, so far as possible, by doing.

For example, “History,” he reminded the school masters, “requires a world of time and bitter hard work when your ‘education’ is no further advanced than the cat’s; when you are merely stuffing yourself with a mixed-up mess of empty names and random incidents and elusive dates, which no one teaches you how to interpret, and which, uninterpreted, pay you not a farthing’s value for your waste of time.” History was one of his own favorite studies. He invented a method of teaching English history to his children—by driving a row of pegs in the lawn, each peg
representing an English king, and each foot of space between the pegs representing one year of their reigns. By this method, supplemented with absurd drawings of the kings and wild tales of their times, history took on glamor and life. One of the reasons why he over-estimated the relative value among his works of *The Prince and the Pauper* was its service in making history real to children. When this book was dramatized and presented on the stage of various children's theatres, he wrote:

The children's theatre is the only teacher of morals and conduct and high ideals that never bores the pupil, but always leaves him sorry when the lesson is over. And as for history, no other teacher is for a moment comparable to it: no other can make the dead heroes of the world rise up and shake the dust of the ages from their bones and live and move and breathe and speak and be real to the looker and listener: no other can make the study of the lives and times of the illustrious dead a delight, a splendid interest, a passion; and no other can paint a history lesson in colors that will stay, and stay, and never fade.

He deplored the tendency to direct all education toward the professions, when it was self-evident that not all students being educated could be received into professional ranks. "At home," he declared, during his world tour, "I once made a speech deploping the injuries inflicted by the high school in making handicrafts distasteful to boys who would have been willing to make a living at trades and agriculture if they had but had the good luck to stop with the common school. But I made no converts. Not one, in a community overrun with educated idlers who were above following their fathers' mechanical trades, yet could find no market for their book knowledge." Philip and Henry, in his satirical novel *The Gilded Age*, are fair samples of intelligent young men of this type; Berkeley in *The American Claimant* is another.

Twain dwelt in an age of remarkable scientific and mechanical advancement; he was himself vastly interested in these fields, and in his books foretold not only the use of finger-prints to identify criminals, but the development of television as well. He was among the very first users of the telephone and the typewriter. He lost a fortune in promoting the development of a linotype machine, and he himself patented a number of inventions. Hence it was but natural that he should speculate upon the cause of the mechanical advance. Significantly, he did not ascribe it to the work of the schools in gathering and disseminating information. It seemed to him to be due, rather, to a new spirit of open-mindedness, of inquiry; a turning from tradition to experiment. "If I were required to guess offhand, and without collusion with higher minds, what is the bottom cause of the amazing material and intellectual advancement of the last fifty years," he said, "I should guess that it was the modern-born and previously non-existent disposition on the part of men to believe that a new idea can have value."

Twain himself had singularly little of the formal schooling which he
deplores. And he came to regret that fact in after years. His biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, with questionable judgment, found comfort in Twain’s lack of training. “How fortunate Mark Twain was in his schooling,” Paine declared, “to be kept away from institutional training, to be placed in one after another of those universities of life where the sole curriculum is the study of the native inclinations and activities of mankind! Sometimes, in after-years, he used to regret the lack of systematic training. Well for him—and for us—that he escaped that blight.” It is good to know that Twain himself rejected such an idea.

If Paine were by chance right, it would be best to exclude all promising young lads of talent from the blighting effects of education—and then the schools might as well be closed, since, as Twain pointed out, those without talent need mechanical rather than scholastic training. No academic critic, naturally, would agree with Paine, and one of them, Edward Wagenknecht, found fault with Paine’s conclusion for the following reasons: “This kind of thinking [the spontaneous kind, without formal training] has its drawbacks: one generalizes from insufficient data; one is often carried away by emotion; one fails sometimes to look up the necessary information and consequently must retrace one’s steps.” This judgment represents Twain’s own views more nearly than does the opposite conclusion of Paine.

In sum, we find Twain over-emphasizing the role of environment, and, thence, strongly stressing the value of education. He disliked the “stuffing” and rote-memory methods of the schoolmasters of his day, and advocated instead learning by association, learning by doing, learning for pleasurable motives rather than from fear of punishment, and learning for a practical adjustment to a changing world, rather than merely plodding through a traditional curriculum.