

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 27 (2000)
Heft: 4

Artikel: Further education : the future belongs to culture
Autor: Neiryneck, Jacques
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907646>

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The future belongs to culture

BY JACQUES NEIRYNCK

An education should still be valid half a century after leaving school. But in order to maximise its effectiveness, lifelong further education is needed.

LEARNING CAN ONLY BE LEARNT if you study something – if possible, something useful. A smart person does not just stuff his head with random facts in a random manner.

However you look at it, you are confronted with the insoluble problem of what to teach: which subjects will stay relevant the longest? The problem is insoluble because we have no idea what society will be like in 50 years' time. At most we can only extrapolate from current trends and hope that political crises or ecological disasters will not induce any radical shifts.

Knowledge is power

Let us therefore base our assumptions on a continuation of the trend towards a service society, where the need for labour is decreasing in the primary and secondary sectors and the focus is shifting towards the market for information.

Our society is in the midst of an internal revolution. The Internet and mobile telephony are merely the tip of the iceberg, and we cannot accurately assess its hidden depths. Undoubtedly it will be a society which places the greatest value not on soil, raw materials and capital, but on the ability to acquire and manage information. The greatest unknown factor remains biotechnology, which will bring about sweeping changes in society, if only in terms of extending life expectancy.

Jacques Neiryck is CVP National Councillor for the Canton of Vaud and Emeritus Professor of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology, Lausanne.

It is less difficult to train young people for such a society than to teach them grammar or maths. Young people learn naturally how to operate the wide range of technical tools at their disposal: computer, TV, tape recorder, CD-ROMs, DVD, scanner, Internet etc. In this respect the human species is truly miraculous: give it a new tool, and it takes

only one generation to find out and exploit its full range of possibilities. So there is no need to worry on this count.

The age barrier

With adults things are different, and in a few years' time today's young people will join these ranks. Admittedly there is an upper



Visions are needed: the campaign for further education must reach as broad a section of the population as possible.



Photos: Martin Möll

Senior citizens universities are proving very popular. Nine such institutions already exist in Switzerland.

limit beyond which an adult can no longer be assumed to be fully operative. Pensioners can be taught how to use the Internet for their own entertainment. But they will never make fully-fledged computer engineers.

However, due to the imbalance between wage-earners and pensioners, the retirement age will not drop. At the end of their working lives, people will therefore be faced firstly with the problem of fitting into the job market, then with the physical impossibility of re-entering the job market. Towards the end of their lives they will have to accept a change of job and be satisfied with lower-paid employment because they are less adaptable and less able to keep pace with the permanent technical revolution. Engineers are increasingly becoming like professional tennis players: from age 40 they can only perform the function of trainer or supervise younger members of the profession, if that!

The same problem faces teachers, who are continually over-stretched by new technologies and less able to cope with them than those they are supposed to be teaching. It is therefore perfectly justifiable to worry about how educators should be educated and question how a teacher can tackle the challenge of this ongoing revolution. To equip adults for such challenges, educators themselves must be better equipped.

To this end the age barrier must be soberly and realistically addressed. For people older than 40 or 50 – depending on the person – there are no longer any realistic prospects of re-entering the professional marketplace. That includes educators: there is nothing worse than a teacher who is not abreast of the latest technical developments. He causes more damage than good.

So is resignation the only alternative? No, not if one is prepared to go beyond the narrow boundaries of permanent vocational training. At the end of his career a professional runs the risk of having a great deal of free time on his hands, whether because he can only find a less motivating and demanding part-time job, or because he has been forced into early retirement. How can such free time be put to good use?

Ode to classical education

Classical arts such as literature, theatre, music, painting, dance or architecture are suffering from a lack of interest masked by the more or less superficial curiosity manifested by the swarms of excited visitors who hurriedly pace through the museums of this world. But hardly any creative work is being done because artists would rather express the senselessness of this world than attempt to give it some sense. They have no public audience.

In future the true challenge of education would therefore appear to be in the field of specific cultural schooling which gives life roots and lends sense to existence. Can we still interest young people with an eye on the future in these manifestations of the past, and turn them into standard-bearers for future culture? And if not all can be made to take an interest, do we have the foresight to accept an education based on two or more levels which accords the best students the privilege of culture irrespective of demagogic values?

Such discussions produce more questions than answers. The best solution is perhaps to select the best possible educators now, and train and motivate them for their future tasks. It will then be up to this elite to open up new paths of knowledge and develop future perspectives. Though heaven defend us from desk planners and overblown pedagogues! The other solution would be to promote a lively culture which is of interest to the greatest number, to allow people to find fulfilment outside the hectic world of work.

No-one knows what shape the future will take. We only know that it is long-term and has always been expected to produce surprises. So the qualities of patience, amazement and trust should be cultivated – a somewhat rare combination. 