

Bucking Copy-Paste Mentality in the Mass-Production of Knowledge – A Personal View

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The educational system has never been as important as it is now. We have established a robust educational system with subdivisions along students' age and "level"; but, while the system offers a variety of topics to study, it also has some drawbacks. One of them is the idea that, since it is impossible to teach anything and everything from A to Z in the first 10-15 years of a person's education, a subset of targeted teaching material and topics must be chosen from a larger set. Elected officials in collaboration with the educational establishment generally do this, and the system is molded by what these elected officials and professionals in the educational field believe is most important to a child's education at any point in time. Of course, young children cannot be expected to know what to study. However, when children reach their teens, their key interests and talents have become much clearer, and by the time they reach their twenties they have certainly formed opinions about what they should be spending their time on, including what they want to learn. It is surprising that universities, which accept students roughly twenty years old and often much older, are as pedantic in their form and execution as primary schools. Grownups are typically trusted with deciding where they work and how they live their lives—but not for choosing what they study. Study arrangements, topic choices, and pedagogy are all pre-selected and pre-defined for adult students; the only thing universities allow students to choose freely is a field of specialization. After an individual chooses his or her field, not much flexibility remains. The system expects all students within a certain field to know the same basic information within that field. In order to graduate, students must finish certain mandatory courses and complete a standard number of credits, possibly adding a few elective courses within the same field. Of course, the truth is that the fields of study considered legitimate—the very definition of a "field"—have in every case been molded over the ages and are largely the product of historical events and accidents. Fields are not designed for the future; they are designed for the past. I have the following to say about this arrangement: If a university is supposed to be an institution which creates new knowledge and brings us closer to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the numerous phenomena that human curiosity, nature, and the universe present to us, I cannot comprehend why everyone must go through the same courses, read the same books, study the same material, and take the same tests.

The last time I checked, there is a substantial difference in people's interests—even after they have chosen a certain field (e.g. computer science or psychology). These fields—as with most other basic fields within university departments—harbor an immense number of unanswered questions. Many of these unanswered questions may hold the solutions to challenges that society desperately needs. However, to produce desperately needed answers, one or more individuals—armed with focus, intuition, creativity, and hard work—may have to devote roughly half their lives searching for them. To maintain this focus and

enthusiasm for two, three, or even four decades, people must start to speculate, learn, and study at an early age. And, above all, they must be passionate about what they are doing. Restricting students to certain classes in pre-determined fields is not the best way to provide the support necessary for achieving such deeds. The goal of this sort of arrangement within the educational system is, secretly and openly, to mass-produce inflexible targeted knowledge. As a consequence of this setup, an individual's versatility and flexibility within each pre-determined field of expertise will never reach its full potential. And since initiative and creativity do not have obvious and secure places within the current system, it should be clear to everyone that this standardization is not suitable for everyone. The current educational system does not adequately support the free choice of research projects, creative approach to these projects, or the creation of new fields. The only conclusion can be that in order for universities to do their jobs with dignity, and support as many students as possible to obtain the best education possible, new methods must be introduced to improve the current system and increase its flexibility. This new focus needs to reinforce independent thinking, create the possibility for trying new research methodologies and approaches, and allow for a choice of research questions and mixture of fields that excite students' enthusiasm.

Since all higher educational organizations are based on set standards, students who could excel more are in fact held back when their ideas and interests do not fit within such a system, leading these potentially valuable new ideas to never see the light of day. We must enable students who show initiative to keep working on subjects that excite their interests. They must have the opportunity to go in less conventional—even completely unconventional—directions; directions that strengthen their abilities, excite their enthusiasm, and open the doors to creativity and stimulate the creation of new ideas. Such a system would improve the versatility of the educational system, which would then lead to increased innovation within society.

Studies have shown that the sooner individuals are able to activate their own talents, the more successful they will become. It is completely clear to me that we not only could but, in fact, must add more possibilities to the current, limited structure of the educational system. I must add that I am inclined to agree with those who point out that increased flexibility is not suited to everyone, as long as those people realize that neither is the conventional educational system.

It is in the hands of individuals and dependent on their unique ideas to improve our vision for the world and humankind's way of life, and use revolutionizing scientific and technological knowledge to do so. It is in everyone's best interest to promote independent thinking, initiative, and active participation among students, so that they can discover and nurture their own capabilities and talents to achieve such feats.

The Aperio system is a newly launched study program at Reykjavík University. Its approach aims to increase curricula flexibility and diversity and help students who excel to define their path of study. One of its focal points is the use of a broader set of evaluation criteria for students' potential—to look beyond grades at the talents and accomplishments that are not typically part of, and may not even

fit within, the confines of traditional curricula. Contrary to the traditional method, where students are required to adjust themselves to a pre-determined study plan, the Aperiio study system provides students with increased freedom, allowing them to adjust their studies to match their strengths and interests, with the aim of supporting the students in realizing their full potential. This approach not only gives students unique opportunities to build upon their strengths, but also to improve their weaknesses, which might otherwise slow down or hinder a higher level of achievement, to develop a deeper understanding of their topics of study. The choice of study material, assignments, and evaluation of the progress of study, is conducted in cooperation with an experienced teacher and research scientists, both within and outside of Reykjavík University, in the chosen topic focus.