

The Learner Precedes the Teacher

Logically and historically, society precedes the state. That's from one of my favorite thinkers, John Hasnas.

This simple fact calls into question some of our deepest assumptions about the social order. It smashes the Hobbesian notion that man outside the state suffers a brutal existence, and only Leviathan can bring order to the chaos. It casts doubt on the idea that, absent the state, civilized life is not possible. Indeed, the relationship is the complete reverse.

My good friend Chris Nelson offered a modified version of this statement yesterday: logically and historically, the learner precedes the teacher.

Consider the things everyone assumes must be taught, often forcibly and formally, by a teacher. Reading, writing, and arithmetic are the most common. If, absent the authority, expertise, method, and compulsion of a teacher, no one would ever learn these things, how did they become known at all? Unless the myths of gods coming down to teach humans are literally true (even then, who taught the gods?), people had to first be learners before they could be teachers. The act of learning must have preceded that of teaching.

This presents problems for our assumptions about education. Learning does not require teachers. In fact, the opposite is true.

This does not make teaching worthless. But it does reveal the direction of the dependency, which helps us put teaching in its proper place: as a response to an individual desire to learn in that specific way. The learner comes first. Their desire to learn a fact or method or subject is – must be – the first mover in order for genuine education to occur. If that desire prompts them to seek formal or informal teachers, the teaching is valuable. If teaching is imposed on unwilling learners, it's the opposite of valuable. It does violence to education.

The economist Eugen von Bohm-Bawerk described the capital structure of the economy and the prices of goods with the theory of imputation. The value of a higher order production good is determined by the value of the end product to the consumer. A bulldozer or factory floor's value doesn't come first, and then determine the price of the widgets at the end of the process. (A good way to go out of business is to build something and then price it based entirely on what it cost to produce). The value of those tools of production is imputed backwards through the production chain by the price customers are willing to pay for the end product. If your widget is worth little or nothing to a customer, then no matter how cool your production tools, they won't be valuable either.

It is usually assumed that knowledge flows from teachers to learners. As explained above, this is not always the case. In those instances where it is – where learners voluntarily seek teachers to satisfy their desire for knowledge – education is similar to the structure of production in the economy. The value of a teacher – or a process, method, or credential – is imputed from the value to the learner, freely shopping around to choose the method of learning that helps them best. If they don't willingly choose the classroom or the teacher, the classroom and the teacher are not educationally valuable.