

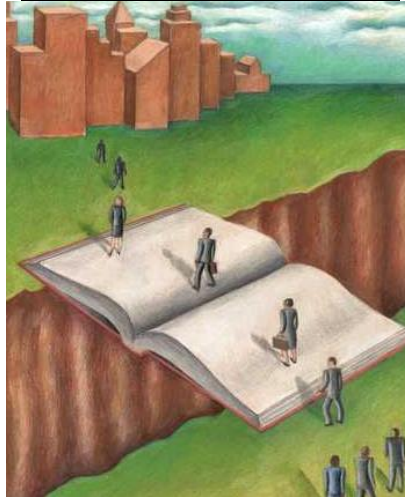


ASHBROOK INDEPENDENT SCHOOL

To Challenge and Nurture Academically Capable Students

From the Office of the Head of School, Dr. Christopher A. Schoberl

Is it Monday Yet? 5/26/23



With elective schedules ready to be published next week, the topic of this installment of IIMY? seems especially timely.

Years ago, while an administrator at a well known and venerable private school in NYC, I was approached by a parent who expressed disagreement with the school's requirement for PE or Athletics, and that they would rather have their child take an extra science or math class. The next year, a parent scheduled a meeting with me, and in the "purpose of the meeting" space on the electronic calendar app were the words, "to convince you that Latin is a waste of time!" By waste of time, this parent meant "has no practical application to life." And by this, they meant "would not help my child in his chosen career," a different version of the age-old query, "Teacher, how is learning $Y = MX + B$ going to help me in life?" As a delightful counterpoint, an Ashbrook colleague recently asked me if I would consider teaching a Latin or Greek elective!

Don't get me wrong: I think these questions came from a good place, really. These parents simply wanted to advocate their sincere belief, in support of their children and with love in their hearts, that there were better ways for their children to be spending their time in school. Nor were these conversations easy to broach; I am sure it took a lot of courage to speak to something as important as a child's future while not wanting to be seen as "that parent." As tough as these conversations can be, I'd prefer to be a part of a school culture that invites such open dialogue as one way to ensure we are doing our best for kids.

That being said, let's imagine a scenario where "alternate universe Doc" was impressed enough by these opinions to go ahead and do away with PE, Athletics, and Latin... and electives, heck, art classes altogether, and music... and theater classes and community service, and... (trust me, since that first parent approached me, each of these has been in the crosshairs of one stakeholder or another). Incidentally, I have never been asked to allow a child to take extra ceramics or more drama, though I am sure there are

many people out there who believe children need more art in their lives. Of course, allowing individual voices to dictate a school's curriculum in this way would lead to an administrative "whack a mole" marathon, as families with a range of values came and went, resulting eventually in an institutional identity crisis.

Bigger picture, I often wonder what would happen if schools offered only those courses that everyone thought were worthwhile or, said another way, if the sole design principle for curriculums was to offer only those courses that had direct practical application to life. In this case, the first task before us would be to define "practical" and then "life": who is to say what "useful" means, or which "life" we are preparing for: the one we can see playing out before us... or the one we cannot even hope to imagine somewhere over the horizon?

As you have heard me say plenty of times, my primary role as a Head of School is to ensure that everyone has what they need to provide the absolute best student experience possible. This means that a school, any school, will make mission driven decisions about providing a relevant and living curriculum consisting of courses that may not square with the opinions of individual families, families who are otherwise very satisfied members of the community. When we are asked about these decisions, it is important for school leaders to be able to speak to priorities as guided by the school mission, and if they cannot, they ought to consider making a different decision (over the course of my career, prompted by such queries, I have had many opportunities to rethink decisions, leading to a better student experience, none of which included doing away with PE or Latin, by the way). So, while I believe these questions are a valuable source of information and can help us to be a better school, I sometimes worry that schools have not done a good enough job talking about why it is important for students to take a full range of courses, such as that represented by an Ashbrook education.

Full disclosure: I believe that providing students with opportunities to study art and participate in athletics (and field trips, for that matter), and the full range of experiences represented by what has been called "a whole child curriculum," provides children with a healthy, interesting/joyous, and well rounded student experience that will be the solid foundation upon which to launch successful adult careers. Indeed, there are important lessons to be learned on the field of play or in the art studio or on a stage that cannot be learned in any other way. Although the dots may be difficult to connect from a child's elementary or middle school years to their adult career, here is my top ten list of reasons to deliver a curriculum that asks students to take a full range of courses, even those which might not have obvious immediate or even distant practical application. Such courses will eventually make our children happier, more productive, interesting & interested, and fulfilled by

1. broadening their knowledge and understanding;

Studying different subjects exposes students to a wide range of ideas, perspectives, and ways of thinking. It helps develop a well-rounded person and a comprehensive understanding of the world.

2. enhancing their critical thinking skills;

Each discipline has its own method of analysis and problem-solving. By engaging with diverse subjects, students learn to think critically, analyze information, and develop logical reasoning skills. These skills are transferable and can be applied across various domains of life.

- 3. fostering their creativity;**
Different academic disciplines encourage creativity and innovative thinking in different ways, especially when presented by Ashbrook's teachers, who work super hard to "imagine" interesting and engaging lessons. Moreover, studying subjects like art, music, or literature can inspire imagination, foster self-expression, and encourage creative problem-solving skills that can be valuable in any field.

- 4. promoting their intellectual curiosity;**
Exploring a variety of subjects in school can ignite intellectual curiosity and a passion for lifelong learning. It helps students discover their interests and strengths, and may even lead to unexpected career paths or hobbies in the future.

- 5. cultivating their well-rounded communication skills;**
Effective communication is vital in every aspect of life. By studying disciplines such as language, literature, or social sciences, students develop strong written and verbal communication skills, which are essential for success in professional and personal relationships.

- 6. developing their collaborative and teamwork chops;**
School is a social setting, and education is a social enterprise including a full range of human behavior, values, and motives. Working with others on group projects, or working on projects that might present a challenge (regardless of the content), provides students with an opportunity to work through the difficult moments all adults encounter in their professional lives when facing differences of opinion, colleagues who can be difficult to work with, "unreasonable expectations" from those we report to, "stuff-we-aren't-crazy-about-doing," or impossible deadlines. Honing these chops at a young age is transferable across any career path students might choose.

- 7. building their empathy and cultural understanding;**
Subjects like history, anthropology, sociology, or even art and art history, provide insights into different cultures, societies, and historical events. Studying these disciplines cultivates empathy, understanding, and appreciation for diversity in all its forms, contributing to the development of well-rounded global citizens.

- 8. nurturing their personal growth;**
Studying a variety of disciplines can have a profound impact on personal growth. It encourages self-reflection, promotes self-discipline, allows students to better understand their own values, provides opportunities to practice a critical awareness, and gives them a chance to develop a personal aesthetic sensibility (What is it about that painting that I like, and why do I like it? How, specifically, am I being manipulated by this advertisement?). In these ways, the challenges

and rewards of studying diverse subjects contribute to personal development and character-building.

9. building their foundation for lifelong learning; AND

School is a time for acquiring fundamental knowledge and skills that provide a solid foundation for learning throughout life. Studying different disciplines equips students with a deep fund of knowledge, allowing them to be culturally literate, adapt to new situations, learn new subjects, and stay intellectually engaged throughout their lives.

10. expanding their career opportunities.

While immediate practical application may not be apparent, the knowledge gained from studying different disciplines can open doors to a variety of career opportunities. Many jobs require a combination of skills and interdisciplinary knowledge, and a diverse educational background can be advantageous in a rapidly changing job market. On top of this, who knows WHAT a current student will do with his or her life 20 years from now? Having a fuller range of experiences while in school could provide just the right combination of the skills or interests that open doors later in life, yield optionality, and future proof a person for opportunities no one could've anticipated.

Ultimately, the best reason to study a variety of subjects, even those that do not seem to have practical application, is that students in elementary and middle school will have plenty of time to specialize, major in, focus, or elect paths that they feel will lead them to a career they are passionate about. Now is the time of their lives where, developmentally, they are most open to possibilities and, at the same time, when they are starting to think about "what they want to be when they grow up." In this context, providing them with the broadest range of experiences, rather than narrowing that field of vision as if decisions about the future have already been cemented, seems to make good sense.

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