

Hello and welcome to my special COVID-19 edition of my video log 'Fanning the flames of wonder'. I'm not going to be buying into too much of the current controversy around how COVID-19 has affected schooling.

Much of the commentary has been around when school should open, how much teaching and learning has been affected by the move to online, who's been affected in terms of lost learning, etc. etc. Instead I'd like to take the opportunity of this interesting time in our history to reflect on the enduring purposes of education and the fundamental things that make education important.

One way of getting into this is perhaps to reflect on that often asked question by secondary students in particular, things like 'why should I be learning Shakespeare', 'what is that going to be any good for in terms of finding a job?' Well putting aside for a moment the fact that learning Shakespeare can tell you lots about things that might be important for work, such as the notion of what a person of good character is in lessons about power, about relationships, about morality, about communication, self-awareness, problem solving.

Putting all that aside for a minute the problem with this question in the way it's framed is that it seems to assume that the fundamental purpose, the only purpose of education is around finding and job. Now of course that is a very fundamental and basic purpose of education, but it is not the most important, it is the most basic function.

It serves our need for physical survival for life itself if you like and therefore it is 'vital' in the sense of serving life. But there are other functions that education serves, other values, social values, cultural values, and personal values. I want to take a little bit of time to talk about those.

So in terms of its social function, education is really important in helping us be socialised, learning how to get on with people to cooperate, to collaborate, learning what it means to interact in and participate in ever widening groups.

Obviously our family is the first place where we learn how to interact and get on with other people, but schooling also is a collaborative exercise where we learn together and socialisation is important for other reasons for participation in sporting teams and in workplaces, in church groups and in friendship groups.

And so, education operates at that social level as well and it can also by honing all those skills help us be more effective in the world of work. Then there is education and how it operates as a culturally important function.

It helps us understand the society that we live in, how it came to be the way it is, how our own sense of being part of a community is shaped and nurtured through our communal history through things like creative art, and literature and religion, and science over thousands and thousands of years.

So, education serves that cultural function, it's very important. Now I guess in doing so inserting that cultural function, education is helping us grapple with the big questions about the meaning and purpose of life and inducting us into the answers to those questions that society that we live in what answers does it give to those questions.

But ultimately what we need as individuals to do is to come to our own sense of what our own lives mean and what purpose is going to drive us forward in the way we live our life and education is crucial to that. So not just does education serve us in terms of our physical circumstances and prepare us for earning a living, it also serves a social function, a cultural function.

But we need to remember that we are not just the products of our physical circumstances of our society in our culture. Those things might shape us, but they don't determine us. We need to become our own person, and this is where education functions at the level of personal values, helping us to become people of integrity and authenticity, and wisdom.

And so, when education functions at that personal level it empowers us to be agents of change so that we can become fully rounded human beings, better human beings, and we can help make our world a better place. So simultaneously education not only serves the purposes of social and cultural continuity in one sense, it also serves the purpose of social and cultural change.

And what ultimately education is about is helping young people understand that they have minds and that they can use them to shape the world and themselves to become better.