

Dialogue

Arcane education

- maybe we are looking for the wrong solution to this problem? -

Johann Heidenberg¹

Some hundreds of years ago it was still normal to teach certain subjects in arcane way; that is to say, in a secretive manner. Even the mundane subjects like astronomy and mathematics were sometimes coded. Coding was done so that not just any student would be able to learn the secrets of the trade. Reading the codes meant that a student had put a lot of effort into learning the secrets of the trade, and was therefore very motivated to learn. Every student that could read the codes was therefore a dedicated student, and worth the time of the teachers.

Today the art of arcane education seems almost lost. I fear that nowadays many people think that students should all be motivated for any subject that we (as educators) select for them. Students that are not motivated will - in fact - get more attention from the teachers! But is this really a good way for teachers to spend their time? Effort spent on students that don't seem to want to learn, is effort taken away from students that do want to learn. Students that have high motivation of their own accord are therefore not granted the same attention from their teachers.

This seems to me, to be the reverse of what we should strive for.

Have we not noticed during the last years that students that can only learn through extrinsic motivation will not continue learning by themselves once the teacher stops forcing them? In an era in which 'life long learning' is the key to a successful professional life, it seems strange that we don't develop the intrinsic motivation of our students. Do we want to develop independent learners? Do we want to develop students that put effort into their own career?

Every teacher would answer these questions with a resounding 'yes', of course. Now, why is it that we don't cultivate the intrinsic motivation more, then? I think it is of utmost importance that we do.

Now, where do we look for such methods when there are clearly none to be found in modern education? From my point of view, we should consider the methods of the ancient arcane teachers. Unsure of their students' motivations, they would make it hard for the student to even get to the subject matter in an easy way. Letting them struggle for days, sometimes weeks, to even know who their teacher was. Letting them struggle to get to the actual subject matter.

Very important to note is that these students were also encouraged to leave the subject matter well alone. In every possible way, the teachers would try to warn the students away from their subject. Every opportunity was seized to tell them that great dangers awaited those who 'dared enter'. Whenever a student didn't heed these warnings, and got through the labyrinths of code, teachers were sure they were dealing with someone worth their while. Then, and only then, would they start to invest their precious time to help students get acquainted with their knowledge.

¹ - Dr. Johann Heidenberg is the author of "The Seven Secondary Intelligences" (Frankfurt, 1508) and has been one of the most referenced scholars in the field of Arcane Education. In his works he tries to combine theology, cryptology and life long learning.

However, once a student had struggled through those initial hardships, there were plenty of other opportunities for a teacher to test their true will power. In the same manner as described above, they would test and retest their students' motivation. Some students, making it through the initiations of the lowest levels, would still fall away in later stages.

Initiations took place at every new level of knowledge or responsibility. Students could get stranded at a new initiation to prove their loyalty to the subject matter at any given moment during their studies. Commonly a student would find at least seven of such intense moments of testing. Any student that would get through all of these stages would prove to be a life long fighter for the continuation of the knowledge, and a life long master of the subject matter. Letting only those who have an earnest thirst for knowledge through this system is of course a harsh but (in my opinion) fair selection system.

Lately the discussions have once more turned to the cultivating of intrinsic motivation in students. Extrinsic motivation just isn't enough. Doors that are too easily opened, are too easily closed. Students that have to fight to open universities' doors, will probably fight to keep them opened. This, in my opinion, could well be the way forward. Educational systems that are not easily accessed, might well prove to motivate the students more, and at the very least won't waste the precious time of the fewer teachers that are available these days.

Gaming, which is a method that does seem to motivate students nowadays, makes use of a similar system as well. Any gamer that doesn't want to invest time in getting to grips with a game's rules and controls, will not advance to new levels. Now why don't we make use of these ancient methods, as well as the insights of how gamers progress through the levels?

Opening the universities' doors will cost them time and effort. Getting a teacher will be an adventure. Reading their subject matter's most advanced scholars will cost them time to decode it first. And every now and then they will be challenged to even give their life for their advancement in knowledge or skill.

Perhaps this method sounds (and really is) medieval, but I am challenging you to reconsider this ancient insight. Have we any other real options, while we watch our unmotivated students waste their universities' time?

Your opinions are most appreciated.