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The Opinion Pages | OP-ED COLUMNIST

# Schools for Wisdom

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**David Brooks**

Friends of mine have been raving about the documentary “Most Likely to Succeed,” and it’s easy to see what the excitement is about. The film is a bold indictment of the entire K-12 educational system.

Greg Whiteley’s documentary argues that the American school system is ultimately built on a Prussian model designed over 100 years ago. Its main activity is downloading content into students’ minds, with success or failure measured by standardized tests. This lecture and textbook method leaves many children bored and listless.

Worse, it is unsuited for the modern workplace. Information is now ubiquitous. You can look up any fact on your phone. A computer can destroy Ken Jennings, the world’s best “Jeopardy!” contestant, at a game of information retrieval. Computers can write routine news stories and do routine legal work. Our test-driven schools are training kids for exactly the rote tasks that can be done much more effectively by computers.

The better approach, the film argues, is to take content off center stage and to emphasize the relational skills future workers will actually need: being able to motivate, collaborate, persevere and navigate through a complex buffet

of freelance gigs.

Whiteley highlights one school he believes is training students well. This is **High Tech High**, a celebrated school in San Diego that was started by San Diego business and tech leaders. This school takes an old idea, project-based learning, and updates it in tech clothing.

There are no textbooks, no bells marking the end of one period or start of the next. Students are given group projects built around a driving question. One group studied why civilizations rise and fall and then built a giant wooden model, with moving gears and gizmos, to illustrate the students' theory. Another group studied diseases transmitted through blood, and made a film.

“Most Likely to Succeed” doesn't let us see what students think causes civilizational decline, but it devotes a lot of time to how skilled they are at working in teams, demonstrating grit and developing self-confidence. There are some great emotional moments. A shy girl blossoms as a theater director. A smart but struggling boy eventually solves the problem that has stumped him all year.

The documentary is about relationships, not subject matter. In the school, too, teachers cover about half as much content as in a regular school. Long stretches of history and other subject curriculums are effectively skipped. Students do not develop conventional study habits.

The big question is whether such a shift from content to life skills is the proper response to a high-tech economy. I'd say it's at best a partial response.

Ultimately, what matters is not only how well you can collaborate in groups, but the quality of the mind you bring to the group. In rightly playing up soft skills the movie underemphasizes intellectual virtues. For example, it ignores the distinction between information processing, which computers are good at, and knowledge, which they are not.

If we want to produce wise people, what are the stages that produce it? First, there is basic factual acquisition. You have to know what a neutron or a gene is, that the Civil War came before the Progressive Era. Research shows that students with a concrete level of core knowledge are better at remembering advanced facts and concepts as they go along.

Second, there is pattern formation, linking facts together in meaningful ways. This can be done by a good lecturer, through class discussion, through unconscious processing or by going over and over a challenging text until it clicks in your head.

Third, there is mental reformation. At some point while studying a field, the student realizes she has learned a new language and way of seeing — how to think like a mathematician or a poet or a physicist.

At this point information has become knowledge. It is alive. It can be manipulated and rearranged. At this point a student has the mental content and architecture to innovate, to come up with new theses, challenge others' theses and be challenged in turn.

Finally after living with this sort of knowledge for years, exposing it to the rigors of reality, wisdom dawns. Wisdom is a hard-earned intuitive awareness of how things will flow. Wisdom is playful. The wise person loves to share, and cajole and guide and wonder at what she doesn't know.

The cathedrals of knowledge and wisdom are based on the foundations of factual acquisition and cultural literacy. You can't overleap that, which is what High Tech High is in danger of doing.

“Most Likely to Succeed” is inspiring because it reminds us that the new technology demands new schools. But somehow relational skills have to be taught alongside factual literacy. The stairway from information to knowledge to wisdom has not changed. The rules have to be learned before they can be played with and broken.

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