

THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE

---

STEPHEN LEACOCK

---

THE KAPPA DELTA PI LECTURE SERIES

**\* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook \***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

*Title:* The Pursuit of Knowledge

*Date of first publication:* 1934

*Author:* Stephen Leacock (1869-1944)

*Date first posted:* April 8, 2023

*Date last updated:* April 8, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230415

This eBook was produced by: Alex White & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

This file was produced from images generously made available by Internet Archive/Lending Library.

# THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE

*KAPPA DELTA PI LECTURE SERIES*



1. SOURCES OF A SCIENCE OF EDUCATION, by John Dewey.
2. LEARN OR PERISH, by Dorothy Canfield Fisher.
3. THE EXCITEMENT OF TEACHING, by William Lyon Phelps.
4. EDUCATION AND THE SOCIAL CRISIS, by William Heard Kilpatrick.
5. THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE, by Stephen Leacock.

# THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE



A DISCUSSION OF FREEDOM AND COMPULSION IN EDUCATION



by STEPHEN LEACOCK

DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE MCGILL UNIVERSITY

LIVERIGHT PUBLISHING Corporation  
NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1934, BY STEPHEN LEACOCK

*In this fifth volume of the Kappa Delta Pi Lectureship Series the Society offers a discussion of some of the administrative problems affecting scholarship on the level of higher education. Dr. Stephen Leacock draws upon his long and rich experience as university professor. The problems here considered are being faced by many college administrators and toward their solution various plans are now being tested. There is a fairly well marked trend among colleges and universities to lessen the rigidity of campus regulations, as these affect attendance upon classes, and to provide opportunities for greater student initiative. Higher education, however, especially in the smaller colleges, is still largely controlled by tradition, with its attending formalism. While Dr. Leacock views this formalism critically he does not advocate an extreme "laissez faire" policy. Rather, he believes that higher education should be controlled by inspired and inspiring teaching. Students need no coercive measures in those departments or courses where the teacher seasons erudition with the sweet reasonableness of human understanding. The supreme task of the teacher on any educational level is to prepare a way of knowing that the students may walk therein. Students will desire to know; they will pursue knowledge once the treasures of culture are arranged in an exhibit that shows their relation to individual satisfaction and social contentment. Dr. Leacock's discussion is a challenge to all teachers of higher education.*

Alfred L. Hall-Quest  
EDITOR

## CONTENTS



I. TWO RIVAL PRINCIPLES	<a href="#">13</a>
II. THE ORGANIZATION OF EDUCATION	<a href="#">19</a>
III. EDUCATIONAL METHOD	<a href="#">27</a>
IV. THE EXAMINATION	<a href="#">31</a>
V. COLLEGE AND PROFESSIONAL REQUIREMENTS	<a href="#">44</a>

## PREFACE

It is one of the most ancient of human beliefs that all things human are under the influence of two contrasting forces moving in different directions. Primitive man, no doubt, early became aware that certain things made for salvation and others not: and that the division did not correspond to that represented by mere pleasure or pain. Hence, with the tendency of the dawning primitive intelligence to think of all forces as living forces, to think of winds and storms and fire and flood, as things animated like itself, there arose the notion of good and evil, of a Deity and a Devil.

From the earliest twilight of our civilization this principle of contrasted forces shaping our destiny appears and reappears.

In the present essay the attempt is made to show its application to the advancement of learning. Here we have, on the one hand, the principle of spontaneous, natural, untrammelled development of the human mind: its native curiosity supplies the motive power of its expanding knowledge. There, on the other hand, appears the principle of compulsion, of discipline, of the assigned task and the stern necessity. Which of these is God and which the Devil would be a question hard to answer. In Scotland they would answer one way, in the easy islands of Polynesia in the other. Yet at least the inquiry is pertinent, to what extent each of these principles should govern our modern education.

STEPHEN LEACOCK

McGill University  
August 20th, 1934

# I

## TWO RIVAL PRINCIPLES

The process of education covers a large part of the activity of mankind. It includes as its major elements the acquisition of knowledge and the development of capacity. It carries with it, as at least a by-product, the formation of moral character, once its principal aim. It includes to an increasing extent the care of physical health and the training of the body. The social momentum, supplied by the institutions created for its use, carries forward into the search for new knowledge, which thus becomes, as it were, a part of education itself.

Hence, in one form or another, the process of education fills a considerable part of the life of every individual. For at least ten years it is the chief activity of all of us; for twenty years in the case of many of us; and for some it represents the work and the meaning of a lifetime. It follows that anything in the way of an analysis of educational method and machinery is of the highest social import.

Now, there may be observed as running all through the processes of education two rival principles, in a sense conflicting and yet complementary to one another. One of these is the principle of compulsion, of having to do what we do not want to for the sake of some external or ultimate end. The other is the principle of spontaneity, of doing what we want to do because we want to do it. Such a principle is easily embodied in the familiar notions of “art for art’s sake,” of “knowledge as its own reward”, and similar concepts. In the present discussion, I propose to consider the relative values of these two principles, and the way in which either of them may be carried beyond its proper use.

The history, the legends, and the very terminology of education reflect the contrasted operation of the two. Here, embedded in the Latin language, is the word *ludus*—which meant indifferently either “school” or “play.” But here is the grim word “examination” implying a weighing in the scales of Justice first applied to criminals and then extended to undergraduates.

Many of our educational terms suggest care and affection, love and good-will and the happy pursuit of learning in common. “University” and “college” are words of warmth, implying the whole ambit of learning and the genial bond of fellowship within. But the “test” and the “quiz” and the “imposition” are the words of medieval torture.

At different times and by different temperaments stress has been laid upon either the value and the virtue of severe compulsion or the charm of spontaneous activity. One recalls the famous Doctor Busby of the Westminster School of Charles the Second’s time, whose merit lay in the use of the rod. “A great man,” said Sir Roger de Coverley, “he caned my grandfather.” Indeed, for many centuries elementary education was largely based on the idea that sparing the rod spoiled the child and that the quickest way to reach the youthful intellect was from below up. But one recalls on the other hand Rousseau’s little Emile wandering among the flowers, and the rise of the Kindergarten—the children’s garden—which has ascended from infancy up throughout our system of education.

I can recall from my own childhood, in the England of nearly sixty years ago, a little elementary primer called *Reading without Tears*. This was regarded at the time as a pleasing innovation.

The point under discussion, then, is the extent to which each of these principles enters into our curriculum, and whether Doctor Busby or Jean Jacques Rousseau is to claim the major authority.

Now, it must be admitted that to a certain extent the education of to-day must be measured, circumscribed, formal and mechanical. Everything has the defects of its merits. In democratic countries where education is universal, compulsory, and is, to a great extent, paid for by society in the lump and not by the recipient in particular, the latitude of permissible freedom is at once greatly curtailed. There must be fixed hours and fixed times and fixed classes; and to a great extent fixed grades, fixed promotions. The road to learning being a public highway the traffic must be moved under direction, with fixed lights and fixed stops and a speed limit.

But the question still remains—to what extent do we lose by this necessity for fixed and regular organization something of the spirit and meaning of education? To what extent are we compelled by necessity to sacrifice the spirit for the letter, the soul for the body?

Observe that a necessity is there. We cannot in our day leave education to the unaided prompting of the individual's desire to know and the individual's self-interest in knowing. Education cannot be left to itself. To a great extent the creative arts of painting, sculpture and music may be left with no further recognition by the state and the law than a generous pecuniary support. But education by obvious necessity must be under the constant care and the detailed regulation of society at large. Whatever shortcomings are involved need to be admitted and faced or mitigated as best we can.

I propose, therefore, to write, in turn, of the effect of such necessity upon the organization of education, the method and process of teaching, and the nature of the curriculum.

## II THE ORGANIZATION OF EDUCATION

Of the first of these things, the organization of education, I will not give more than an indication of the field implied. The subject belongs mainly outside the limits of the present discussion. It is clear that the organization of learning by grades, with fixed times and means of promotion, fixed standards of acquirement to be certified step by step, departs a long way from the ideal of an education that aims to develop an individual impelled by his own zeal for continuous and ever-widening knowledge. Of necessity, the system largely overlooks the claims of genius, the right of differentiated development, the special or gifted minds. It has all the defects of the standardization of the intellect, of the “convoy” system of progress, where each must conform to the pace of the lowest. One or two practical examples may be cited for illustration’s sake at somewhat greater length. Here, first, is the question of an “Attendance Rule” at the universities. Should the students, or should they not, be compelled to attend the lectures? The example is all the more valuable in that the subject concerned is not merely a matter of what would be ideal, but a matter of an actual choice; at the same time it illustrates very nicely the educational theory involved.

My own experience in this respect has helped me to reach an opinion. When I was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto more than forty years ago (1887-1891) attendance at lectures was not compulsory. Registered students might come to class or not as they liked. The idea was that the lectures were a privilege, an opportunity, a help towards passing the examination. Students foolish enough to stay away might do so. As a matter of fact many of us did stay away, sometimes from a whole course at a time! If we found the lectures prosy and uninteresting and the matter as easily and more conveniently learned from a book, we ceased to attend. At the time it seemed to me an ideal system, with a personal, academic freedom about it that contrasted pleasantly with the outworn discipline of the schoolroom.

I experienced the same régime with the same satisfaction as a student in the graduate school at Chicago ten years later. But when I came to teach at McGill University,—my own incomparable Alma Mater of to-day,—I was amazed and even horrified to find the rule the other way. Students were compelled to attend, their names called daily from a roll and their absence noted. Eight times in a hundred they might be absent—but after that the dark. Whether the lectures were wise or foolish, brilliant inspiration or mournful dictation, attend they must. The rule is still with us and I have grown to see that it is good. It is honored perhaps a little more in the breach as time goes on, but in the main, in both law and practice, it stands.

The virtue of such compulsion rests on the admitted weakness of human nature. Students will stay away not only from bad lectures, but from good ones; will attend intermittently in place of regularly; will allow pleasure to interfere with duty—and afterwards be sorry for it. It is likely that even the worst lecture is better than none at all,—though that is a bold proposition, not to be pressed. But certainly most lectures, if they can be heard for nothing, are, as might be said facetiously, well worth it.

I recall the case of my late distinguished colleague, Dr. Francis Shepherd, Professor of Anatomy and sometime dean of the Faculty of Medicine at McGill University (*Clarum et venerabile nomen*). Dr. Shepherd lectured on Anatomy at nine o’clock every morning. It was

his custom, as nine o'clock drew near, to stand at the door of the classroom, his watch in his hand. At the exact hour of nine he entered the room, closed the door, locked it and began his lecture. Any student locked out was counted absent; locked out eight times in the session he lost a year of his academic life. And who liked the system? The students did. They boasted of it. There is a whole generation of medical men who were brought up on it and still talk about it. I introduced it into my own classes in imitation of Dr. Shepherd, but I discontinued it as I found it meant locking myself outside rather too often. This Dr. Shepherd never did, never once. In the twenty years of his lecturing on Anatomy he was never once late.

One has to admit, of course, that this kind of compulsion, used to replace the individual virtue that is wanting, only can be applied in educational methods where public opinion will not be offended at it. This is in accordance with a general law. There are many things which are excellent in their effect, in their results, so long as no one questions their right to be or feels degraded by their use. One thinks here of corporal punishment in the schools. When I entered Upper Canada College fifty-two years ago, the "caning" of the boys by the masters was taken for granted. We perhaps felt hurt by it, but not degraded; on the contrary it gave one something of the feeling of a veteran at the wars or a proven Brave of the Plains after the Sundance. We bore no grudge. On these terms the results, as a whole, were probably very good. There was none of the harbored hatred over a long imprisonment after school hours, no weary fingers and tired eyes copying out unwelcome lines with the sunshine beckoning out of doors and the voices calling from the playground. Justice was as quick and final as capital punishment.

When I became in turn a master in the College, I handed out, for ten years, the same treatment. When I look back at it now, I marvel at the barbarity of it; but not then: the boys whom I licked the most seem to cherish the kindest memories: and seem to have succeeded best. Looking back on the list I find that I have licked no less than eight cabinet ministers, two baronets and four British generals,—to say nothing of about one-half of the bench and the bar in Toronto. Whether these men would have come to the front without my assistance is a matter I am not prepared to discuss.

But, observe, that once the idea arises that physical punishment is a degradation, then it is. It has got to go. It is, as soon as you reflect upon it, mere barbarism.

I hope I do not seem to have wandered from the point. I am trying to say that there are some educational methods of organization, or compulsion, of fixed and punitive regulation, which can only survive while generally accepted: once questioned they have to go.

A similar instance occurs to me in the matter of compulsory cap and gown. Fifty years ago the wearing of a cap and gown by the students and by their teachers was a matter of compulsion in a great many of the best colleges. In some of them, as in my own college, the rule is still there, but the observance of it has vanished. Some false notion of equality and democracy has created a public opinion against it. It has had to go. Yet great, I think, is the loss. The college gown of my undergraduate day cost one dollar and fifty cents. It lasted a lifetime, and might indeed have served for burial. It was not killed by the cost of it, though its declining use drove the cost up. Public opinion killed it. Yet never was there anything more consistent with the dignity and democracy of knowledge. The good old gown, like charity, covered up a multitude of shabby clothes. It obliterated all distinctions of rich and poor, and for those who knew its shape and cut it was the symbol of a whole cycle of history. The doubled sleeve of the gown was in reality and originally a bag in which the impecunious student of the Middle Ages might place the food supplied to him by kindly donors. It was the

hall-mark of his local right to beg. You will note that even to-day the doubled sleeve of the gown of the doctor of philosophy has a larger cubic content than any other, and that these gowns, with their capacious sleeves, are only worn, as a rule, by the presidents of colleges!

### III EDUCATIONAL METHOD

But let me turn a moment from the discussion of the organization and framework of our education, to observe the same contrast between spontaneity and freedom in the method and process of our teaching. Here it is even more obvious and important.

We may take our point of departure from the aforementioned little Emile of Jean Jacques Rousseau of the year 1662, the world-famous type of the natural, spontaneous child, naturally and spontaneously educated. We may contrast him with his sturdy young contemporary, that tough little Briton, Smith Minor of Westminster School—first cousin a few degrees removed of John Smith of Smithville, Minnesota, Ontario and elsewhere.

All the world, of education at least, recalls the training by which little Emile was developed. It was a garden of flowers. The child wandered at will. His awakening curiosity reached out for knowledge and his hand reached out for the beautiful flowers around him. He learned without having to learn. He was told nothing till he needed to know it and asked to know it. The whole process was natural and intuitive.

Not so with Smith Minor. No one asked him if he wanted to learn. He had to. For him knowledge was not a garden. It was a steep and rough ascent on a rocky path,—*gradus ad Parnassum*. Up he went, with the stick to keep him moving. Unlike little Emile, he learned what he didn't want to learn. He didn't understand what it meant, or where it led to. He was driven like a donkey going to market, over the *pons asinorum* of Euclid. He learned the fact that similar triangles are in the duplicate ratio of their homologous side. God knows he didn't doubt it. He learned that the logarithm of a number to a given base is the index of the power to which the base must be raised to produce the given number. He was not allowed to ask why. But with it all there went, however, in a certain sense the honorable satisfaction of a task undertaken and done, a difficulty faced and conquered—a feeling unknown to little Emile.

The two boys are long since dead but their souls are with us still. All of us, who have taken pedagogical courses, have heard enough, and too much, of the spontaneous system of education, proceeding from the known to the unknown and from the concrete to the abstract. As a matter of fact all such ideas are only half truths.

Take as an example the teaching of elementary English grammar. As Smith Minor learned it, it began with the brutal, straight-out statement "there are eight parts of speech: the noun, the pronoun, the adjective, the verb, the adverb, the preposition, the conjunction and the interjection." He had no idea what this meant or where it was leading to. It was licked into him.

But little Emile—ah, no! He wandered among the flowers, murmuring words at will, until presently he should say, "Dear mama, how funny words are!" "Are they not, darling," replied his mother. "I believe that some of them, dear mama, might be called adverbs." "They are, darling, they are."

Later, let us say, the two little boys learned navigation, with a view to entering the navies of their respective countries. Smith Minor was brutally made to learn by heart that longitude meant the number of angular degrees east or west of Greenwich. Emile had to wait till he met an angular degree in the words and got in a question about it. In time no doubt little Emile

wandered onto the quarter-deck of a French man-of-war. Yet, after all, which navy beat the other?

In other words, I am trying to say that in much of our education (in practice at least) it is quicker to go from the unknown to the known. To proceed *ad obscurum per obscurius* is often as useful as to go through a tunnel to save walking round a mountain.

## IV THE EXAMINATION

One of the most important subjects which arise under the present discussion is the written examination. I may express it as my opinion that the written examination is the curse of modern education, and I may add that I do not see how we could get along without it. There is nothing which, in and of itself, is so contrary to the true spirit of inquiry, the real search after knowledge. There is nothing so much calculated to substitute the letter for the spirit: to check the ardor of the native eagerness to know: to mislead the feet of the student from the path of knowledge to the steps of the treadmill. The situation is rendered all the worse when the written examination recurs at intervals—generally of an academic year—as a necessary condition of promotion. It becomes for most students a sheer economic necessity to pass the examination: without that, they lose a year, are compelled, perhaps, to abandon their career. They *must* pass. This superlative necessity overwhelms their minds. It colors all their outlook. As the examination draws near it takes on all the imminence of approaching danger, all the menace of a possible disaster. It is like the roaring of a cataract in the ears of one borne swiftly down the stream.

How can a student think about literature who has to pass an examination on literature? How can a student meditate on philosophy whose meditations must reach a value of fifty per cent or ruin him? Who dare read a book not on the curriculum? Or think a thought that has no value in marks?

As a result the attitude of the students towards their studies is hopelessly perverted. All they want to know is what must they do to be saved. In certain mechanical and elementary subjects this is no great matter. In elementary mathematics it does not matter much if a schoolboy learns the multiplication table, because he has got to, or because he is merely inquisitive about the properties of numbers. Or rather—let me correct myself—it does matter, in the ideal sense, a great deal. There is such a thing as mathematical curiosity, a rare and beautiful gift, often seen in children and nearly always fading out as they grow. And there is the wretched process of learning the multiplication table by heart and reciting Euclid by rote. But in mathematics and physics the harm done can be wiped out. A man may become a real mathematician in spite of passing examinations in mathematics. So, too, a man may become a real doctor in spite of having to learn by rote, brutally and mechanically, the two hundred and fifty bones of first-year anatomy.

But in what are called the “Humanities”—those indefinable studies which underlie the world of thought and find expression in the world’s literature, studies distinguishable only by their apparent uselessness—the result of the examination system is deplorable, devastating, often fatal. As the college examinations draw near one hears such questions as “Please, sir, are we liable for Rousseau’s Social Contract? Do we need the Declaration of Independence? Are we responsible for Chaucer?”

Those who live in the colleges will know that these quoted questions are not a whit exaggerated. The student as the examination draws near, takes his studies as the manly criminal takes his sentence. He has been sentenced to two years of Shakespeare; all right, he will see it through, get it done and come out to live it down. He puts into it, in fact, just the same kind of courageous endeavor with which he meets the oncoming difficulties of life.

And there it is,—one sees in a moment the other side of examinations. One contrasts the determined, hard-working student who has got to pass and *means* to pass, with the lackadaisical dilettante, reading a limp-leather book in a garden of lilies,—not having to pass anything, and not able to. One asks, which is the better man?

In other words, we have to admit that examinations make for character just as adversity makes a man, and the Westminster Catechism makes a Scotchman. But after all is character quite the same as learning? Moral worth and spiritual eagerness may be better things than the desire to know and the pursuit of knowledge, but they are not the *same* thing.

We should, no doubt, most of us agree that we cannot abolish the written examination. But if we understand its shortcomings and its defects we can at least avoid some of the dangers of its overuse. One of these lies in the confusion of high percentages with high standards. In certain institutions, and in one which I know so well that I will not name it, many people think that the standard of the students' work can be raised by raising the percentage of the examination pass mark. No more misleading idea ever damaged education. After a certain point a high percentage is only obtained by an inordinate and undesirable completeness. Each successive increment can only be obtained with greater and greater labor, with increased repetition, with multiplied interaction, holding back each advance in knowledge till the ground before has not only been cleared and covered and cultivated, but meticulously scratched with a pin point.

If we had to get a hundred per cent in spelling, to spell all the words in English correctly, which of us would ever get out of the spelling book? If matriculation in Latin meant one hundred per cent knowledge of all the genitives and all the genders, who would ever get beyond it? Gray-bearded scholars would be wheeled into the examination room for their sixtieth attempt to matriculate. After a certain point excellence is unwholesome. Outside of a reasonable latitude accuracy implies a limited mind, neatly and completely filled, and with no draught in it to blow anything away. The first beauty of any subject is its broad outline: the first charm of literature is its large features, of history its universal surface, of physics its grander truths. All the little meticulous details peppered in afterwards, are necessary, like the masonry between stones, but it is the stones that make the building. In learning any language what is needed is a "thorough smattering": what is not needed is a hundred per cent correctness of accident and syntax. Boys who get a hundred per cent in what is called a modern language paper,—consisting of in-and-out translation of such gems of thought as "Give some of it to them, do not give any of it to me for him,"—such boys will never speak a language more modern than Choctaw. They are equipped perhaps to translate the Bible into Eskimo, *præterita nihil*. Yet still the cry goes up: raise the per cent, raise the per cent.

But the full devastation of the examination system is seen, I say, in its application to the humanities and above all in its application to literature. Here it defeats its own end and destroys what it would promote. A student is assigned,—shall we say *sentenced*?—to a course on English poetry in the nineteenth century. It is one of the "units" for the "credits" by means of which in two more years he will get a license to be a druggist. He buys and studies what are called "texts," a reverent word straight out of the fifteenth century. He is a conscientious fellow and he "does" it all, does every poet, except two or three for which he is told he is not "responsible." Then comes the written examination,—"*Name the five chief beauties of Keats. Name two beauties which Keats had which Tennyson didn't have. Indicate under six heads the philosophical ideas of Robert Browning. What other ideas had he? 'Twilight and Evening Star*

and after that the dark.' Who said this? And at what time is it twilight in the Isle of Wight on June 20?" . . . and so on.

There is no exaggeration in that. The underlying truth is that you cannot "examine" on literature and that you cannot "teach" literature in any regulated, formal, provable, examinable way without destroying literature itself. Which leads me to another of the ghastly shortcomings of our organic compulsory education, the attempt to *teach* things that can't be *taught*,—in any way, that is, to be measured, estimated, commended and condemned. The only time when you and I really entered into literature, entered the kingdom of letters, was when each of us sat as a child absorbed in the magic pages of a book: in some snug corner of a quiet room or sheltered in some lost recess of the seashore with the muffled sound of the wind and sea to concentrate our thought—that is reading, that is literature.

I often think in this respect of Charles Dickens, my favorite author of a lifetime,—and all the people who have read Dickens. All over the world for a hundred years, almost, there have been people reading Dickens. In town and in country, at home and abroad, in winter with the candles lighted and the outside world forgotten; in summer beneath a shadowing tree or in a sheltered corner of the beach; in garret bedrooms, in frontier cabins; in the light of the camp fire and in the long vigil of the sickroom—people reading Dickens.

And everywhere the mind enthralled, absorbed, uplifted; the anxieties of life, the grind of poverty, the loneliness of bereavement, and the longings of exile, forgotten, conjured away, as there arises from the magic page the inner vision of the lanes and fields of England, and on the ear the murmured sounds of London, the tide washing up the Thames, and the fog falling upon Lincoln's Inn.

But at the end we must add the college class reading Dickens as a unit of credit for a distiller's license, getting ready for the Dickens examination. *Name the six humorous sides of Mr. Pickwick. Distinguish four particular kinds of villainy in Jones Chuzzlewit, etc., etc.*

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to the University of Toronto for the course in "Honor English"; and especially to the fact that there were no lectures on Dickens.

I am not implying here that there should be no such subject as English literature in the curriculum of the school or college. I only mean that we should all understand the limitations under which we teach it, understand what we *can* do and what we cannot do. You can take a horse to the water but you cannot make him drink. You can give a student the opportunity to read, to enjoy, and to appreciate. But you cannot make him do it. The more definite and formal and systematic the instruction the worse its ultimate results. The true professor of English would be a sort of inspired person, a little silly, fond of reciting and reading aloud, unconscious of time and place, filled with intense admiration and terrific denunciations, admired and pitied by his students. Such a man with his childish conceit, his tattered wits, his flushed cheeks, and his transparent sincerity is the inspiration of the classroom,—he is the spirit of literature itself. Can a man like that *examine*? Of course not. He lets them all through. But even the least gifted has caught something of our inspiration.

Observe that none of this can be reduced to rule and plan and system. Imagine a college advertising for such a man: *Wanted a professor of English, half-silly, slightly flushed, etc., etc.* . . . Yet some people are never satisfied with a discussion on education unless what is said can be reduced to statute, embodied in legislation. But in reality statutes and legislation are just the embodied effects, the crystallized form of the rock for which first was needed the incandescent heat of thought.

I trust that I am not misunderstood in what I say in regard to the study of literature in the colleges. I am not in any sense endeavoring to deprecate or belittle it. On the contrary, there is no study that seems to me of more transcendent interest and importance. There is none where the professor can do so much for his students: none where good lectures can count so much and personal inspiration aid in the unfolding of the minds. The lonely study of literature is a meager thing. All forms of art live on companionship, on intercourse, on discussion. Appreciation that is shared is multiplied. Divided, it increases. When we read a good book we want to talk about it; when we are thrilled by a drama we want to discuss it. So it is with literature in the classroom,—a forum of discussion, a market place for thought.

But who that sees a good play would want forthwith to write an examination on it? Who would go to moving pictures with a view to writing a “test” on them the next day? The point which I am trying to make is, that there are once and for all certain studies which cannot be subjected to examination without being destroyed.

Would it not be at least conceivable that the work of a college might include certain studies for which ample time was provided for lectures and for discussion, and which did not provide for “tests,” or count as a qualification for doing something else? Do we think so poorly of ourselves as to call that impossible? Do our students *never* study? Is there no such thing left as learning’s sake, as art for art, as literature and reading for their own absorbing enchantment? Perhaps not. It may be that for such a thing we go outside the colleges, to the people who have had no “opportunities,” who read because they want to, who discover for themselves the entry to the kingdom of letters and the gateway to the by-gone world of the past. Such people, save the mark! are generally filled with a vague regret at what they have missed by never going to college. Life is filled with such little ironies as that.

## COLLEGE AND PROFESSIONAL REQUIREMENTS

What has been said incidentally leads me at once to another topic of this discussion. I refer to the fact that our modern college education has developed into being very largely a qualification for entrance into something else,—not immediately connected with it. It has taken on, in the evolution of four centuries, the form of a statutory, legal qualification for entry into a profession. It thus becomes one of the necessary steps towards earning money, making one's living. This is all very well where the thing studied and the thing practiced are one and the same. It is clear that to be a lawyer one must study law, that to be a doctor one must learn anatomy, and that to be a clergyman one must read the Bible, and to be a teacher one should study teaching. But it is a little harder to see why a dentist has to study algebra, or a veterinary surgeon read Shakespeare,—except, perhaps, the play of Richard III—“a horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!”

In the college where I teach there are young men studying political economy because they want to be surgeons, studying poetry in order to qualify for the navy, and trigonometry in order to get into the Church. Only by resort to the artistic valuation of background can such studies seemingly be justified.

These statements are not intended facetiously. They merely convey the facts. The whole area of our college study is shadowed and darkened with the gloom of this dull atmosphere of musty traditional prerequisites. A large percentage of our study is not a labor of love, of choice, or even of obvious utility. It is merely undertaken through the indirect compulsion of our traditional social organization. We have to live. We have to earn money to live. We have to enter a profession to earn money to live. We have to take a degree to enter a profession to earn money to live. We have to take algebra to get a degree to enter a profession to get the money to live. This is the house that Jacques built,—Jean Jacques Rousseau: or rather which he didn't mean to. No one seems able to show why certain subjects must be attached as a preparation for professional skill.

One asks what are we going to do about it: The answer is,—nothing. There is no evident way of rearranging all this without sacrificing the main outline of organized education, and leaving it a mere chaos of caprice. There is, therefore, no suggestion here of legislative change, but only a change of spirit, of thought, of attitude. In all the problems of human life the step towards a solution is the recognition that there is something that needs solving, even though it seems insolvable. In the brutal days of John Hawkins there was no problem of slavery. But in time the tears that fell upon the fetters on the slave broke through the chain.

So it is with education. The idea must come first: its translation into action will find a way. All through this discussion I have sought to lay stress on the idea that education must carry with it, for its own sake, a certain element of external compulsion: but that it is equally vital that it should have as its animating spirit *inner compulsion*, the prompting of free will, of the desire to know. It would seem that in our education of to-day the emphasis has grown too heavy on the aspect of compulsion from without. The balance dips at one end. The compulsion implied is not, or not chiefly, the direct compulsion of command and obedience. It is rather the form of compulsion represented by the fixity of the organization, the stabilization of the studies, the grading of units and credits and promotion, the application of mechanical

tests as a means of computing knowledge. The sum total of these things lies heavily upon us. Under such circumstances the enchantment of knowledge is rudely dispelled by the need to live.

The remedy, such as there is, is purely intangible,—a quickening of the spirit, a recapture of the soul, a revival of the childhood of man. Perhaps an educational prophet will arise with the vision of a college education directed by teachers so inspiring that young people, athirst for adventure in worlds illuminated by research, will be enchanted by the truths and ideas therein revealed, and therefore above the present needs of administrative compulsion.

[End of *The Pursuit of Knowledge* by Stephen Leacock]