

Entertaining is Easy, Educating is Harder

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My wife says I'm obsessed. I don't really agree, but I am enthralled. Since *Hamilton* was released on Disney Plus, I have watched or listened to it four times (and I've already started it again). Yet, I'm also dismayed at the reaction to *Hamilton*. No, I don't mean at the outrage mob seeking to "cancel" the production because of some of the historical figure's less savory actions or views. I'm dismayed when folks say something like, "If history had been taught like this when I was in school, I might have gotten more out of it."

If George Washington was here (the *Hamilton* version), what would he say to that? I imagine it would echo this musical refrain, "Entertaining is easy, young man. Educating is harder."

I do not mean from the perspective of the entertainer. It reportedly took Lin Manuel Miranda six years to write *Hamilton*. No, I mean from the perspective of the one being entertained or educated. Being entertained is passive. It requires us to sit, relax, and enjoy. The entertainers do all of the hard work. Education is not this way. You cannot passively become educated; indoctrinated maybe, but not educated.

Take *Hamilton* for instance.

Hamilton was made to entertain, and it has been wildly successful at that. And though you can learn some things from the production, if you consume this entertainment as if you were receiving an education you will unknowingly walk away with some falsities.

For instance, after viewing *Hamilton*, one might get the impression that the creation of a central bank was a stroke of genius that even Thomas Jefferson and

James Madison grew to appreciate. This take downplays the significant debate that Hamilton and Jefferson were taking part in and that rages to this day—the limits of constitutional authority. In his rhetorical rhyming during the first cabinet meeting of the production, Jefferson’s arguments against the bank all seem self-serving and parochial. He opposes a national bank because the slave state Virginia doesn’t have debt and he sees a national bank as a way to situate power in New York City. Never once does the *Hamilton* Jefferson bring up his strict interpretation of the limits of constitutional power.

Secondly, *Hamilton* would let the viewer believe that Hamilton’s national bank was ultimately widely accepted. In fact, Congress failed to renew the bank’s twenty year charter in 1811. Vice President George Clinton, a long-time Hamilton foe and former governor of New York, cast the deciding vote against the bank. In the end, Hamilton’s machinations in New York politics may have undermined the existence of the very thing he is credited with creating.

To the uneducated, these may seem like minor nuances that can easily be explained away by the artistic license given to entertainers. Yet, these are not minor points. The questions of constitutional interpretation and national finance policies they debated affect us today. Moreover, understanding nuance is a hallmark of the educated!

The more fundamental problem here is our natural tendency to pursue entertainment as education. Indeed, this is one of the great travesties of our time. We eschew the hard work of digging deeply into a subject for the immediate gratification we can receive from entertainment: “Here we are now. Entertain us.”

This mindset has transformed the news from reporting on the facts to talking heads that tell us what we want to hear. It has led us to root for political figures like sports stars. And, it has precipitated the spread of science by meme. Is it any wonder that conspiracy theories seem to be cropping up today at an alarming rate? People are so easily drawn into what they see on social media that they fail to actually research anything of import (And no, watching more YouTube videos does not count as research).

Education requires us to question. It requires us to contemplate. It requires us to value the mental labor and anguish that we are so quick to dismiss and avoid. We have developed a culture that constantly seeks entertainment, spurns education, and laments the outcomes.

Shockingly, this move away from education to entertainment starts, of all places, in our schools. Educators have continually shunned the very practices that equip individuals with the skills to become educated. Rather than push students to read hard texts, we encourage them to read whatever they enjoy. The

fundamental goal of most elementary educators is to ensure that students have the ability to read, not that they have the mental tenacity to read anything of real substance. Should reading be boring? No. But students should learn that reading to learn is as important (and can be as enjoyable) as reading for pleasure.

Similarly, educators are reluctant to have students remember any facts. We can still hear a version of Arthur Bestor's 1953 lament from his book *Educational Wastelands*, "It is commonly said that men do not need to carry information in their minds, because they can look it up in reference books." We now have more than half a century of this mindset pervading education. We've all heard the familiar refrain that "kids can just google it!" Yet without facts and knowledge to cling to, how can a student process new information? All it takes is a few edits to Wikipedia and history can be altered for the person devoid of knowledge.

Higher education is no better. Each year, we see an erosion of core courses and content that once were the hallmarks of a well-rounded liberal education. These courses are replaced with options that align to current student interests. We are more interested in attracting students than we are in actually educating them once they are on campus. What else could explain the luxurious student amenities and concierge services cropping up on college campuses?

If we want to curb the rising discord, misinformation, and malaise we see today, we must begin to do the hard things. We must seek education. Entertainment like *Hamilton* can pique our interest in something. It can give us motivation. Motivation, however, is not enough. As Bestor also noted, "Motivation is important, but it may be likened to a fuse. It burns to no purpose unless at last it touches off something more powerful than itself." Entertainment must lead us to read, to study, to contemplate, and to listen to those with opposing points of views.

So watch *Hamilton* and enjoy it as entertainment. I hope that it sparks in you a curiosity to understand the founding of our nation better and that it will lead you on a path of further education. But don't tell me that education should be more like *Hamilton*.

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