

Are Schools Making Us ‘Intellectually Dependent’?

Not long ago, I [wrote](#) about a brief essay called [A Message to Garcia](#). The essay, written in 1899 by Elbert Hubbard, explained how President McKinley instructed a gentleman named Rowan to deliver a letter to General Garcia in Cuba during the Spanish American War.

As Hubbard explains, the unique thing about this incident was that Rowan did not stop to ask questions of where he was to find General Garcia and how to get there. Instead, he took initiative and successfully delivered the message, all while relying on his own ingenuity and intellect to accomplish his mission.

I thought of this recently while reading [Dumbing Us Down](#) by John Taylor Gatto. A former teacher, Gatto explains several lessons which public school students are being taught – perhaps subconsciously in some cases, perhaps not in others. One of these lessons is intellectual dependency:

“Good students wait for a teacher to tell them what to do. This is the most important lesson of them all: we must wait for other people, better trained than ourselves, to make the meanings of our lives.”

The “good students” who wait for instruction, Gatto explains, eventually turn into the individuals who populate the functioning world of adulthood:

“Good people wait for an expert to tell them what to do. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that our entire economy depends upon this lesson being learned. Think of what might fall apart if children weren’t trained to be dependent: the social services could hardly survive – they would vanish, I

think, into the recent historical limbo out of which they arose. Counselors and therapists would look on in horror as the supply of psychic invalids vanished. Commercial entertainment of all sorts, including television, would wither as people learned again how to make their own fun. Restaurants, the prepared food industry, and a whole host of other assorted food services would be drastically down-sized if people returned to making their own meals rather than depending on strangers to plant, pick, chop, and cook for them. Much of modern law, medicine, and engineering would go too, as well as the clothing business and schoolteaching, unless a guaranteed supply of helpless people continued to pour out of our schools each year."

We've all noticed the decline in [home-cooking](#), the rise in [psychological disorders](#), and the increasing demand for [instant entertainment](#) through our phones and devices. Is it possible that, as Gatto opines, such trends are stemming from how the education system has conditioned its students to be intellectually dependent? If so, is there any way to break free from this intellectual dependency and restore initiative and ingenuity in the next generation?

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