

Students Today: Minds without 'Furniture'

In my reading on past education philosophy, I have repeatedly encountered the phrase "furniture of the mind."

Perhaps the first instance of it is found in one of the most famous educational documents in history—["The Yale Report of 1828"](#)—where the faculty of Yale College (now University) said the following:

"The two great points to be gained in intellectual culture, are the discipline and the furniture of the mind; expanding its powers, and storing it with knowledge."

As the Yale Report points out, students' minds need to be "disciplined." They need to learn how to read maturely, write clearly, listen attentively, thoroughly investigate a topic, construct an argument, and identify logical fallacies. If you feel compelled to use the modern buzz term for it, students should be taught to "think critically."

But as with any sophisticated room, you need not only proper dimensions, well-constructed walls, and a smart paint color; you also need "furniture."

As you can probably surmise from the Report's quote, the phrase "furniture of the mind" refers to the *content* of education—the knowledge with which it is filled. It includes the facts, books, and ideas that a society deems important to preserving its intellectual culture and way of life.

Unfortunately, America's education system today is focused almost exclusively on the discipline of the mind (and plenty will even argue with that) while neglecting its furniture. It fixates on the construction of the room while ignoring the

need to fill it.

Professor Patrick Deneen of the University of Notre Dame—considered one of the top universities in the country—testified to this in a piece he wrote in February for [Minding the Campus](#):

“But ask them some basic questions about the civilization they will be inheriting, and be prepared for averted eyes and somewhat panicked looks. Who fought in the Peloponnesian War? Who taught Plato, and whom did Plato teach? How did Socrates die? Raise your hand if you have read both the Iliad and the Odyssey. The Canterbury Tales? Paradise Lost? The Inferno?

Who was Saul of Tarsus? What were the 95 theses, who wrote them, and what was their effect? Why does the Magna Carta matter? How and where did Thomas Becket die? Who was Guy Fawkes, and why is there a day named after him? What did Lincoln say in his Second Inaugural? His first Inaugural? How about his third Inaugural? What are the Federalist Papers?

[...]

It is not their ‘fault’ for pervasive ignorance of western and American history, civilization, politics, art and literature. They have learned exactly what we have asked of them – to be like mayflies, alive by happenstance in a fleeting present.”

In *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis famously derided today’s schools for producing “Men without Chests”—students lacking the virtue and “generous emotion” that marked the great persons of the past. Deneen warns us that schools today are producing “Minds without Furniture”—students who may be considered “smart” but are devoid of any substantial, shared knowledge about the great works on which their civilization and culture was built.

Moreover, I fear that without such a shared knowledge you end up not only with “Minds without Furniture,” but a “People without Unity”... a “Nation without Identity.”

I think we’re long overdue for a national conversation (vs. a forced implementation) about what should constitute the furniture (vs. only the “standards”) of American students’ minds—what books they should read, what facts they should know, what ideas they should be able to define and explain by the time they leave school.

The problem is, after so many years of lacking a common furniture of the mind, I worry that the intellectual ground on which to have that conversation no longer exists.