

Philosopher Roger Scruton on 'The Virtue of Irrelevance'

Have you ever glanced through your child's homework and noticed... well... just how focused it is on the present? Whether it be a reading assignment, or a math problem, or even a science experiment, much of today's curriculum seems to tie into some modern, social justice-minded issue.

Meanwhile, the more classic elements of education, such as spelling homework, cursive writing, and especially history seem to have been conveniently sidelined. What gives?

Philosopher Roger Scruton has an interesting answer to that question. In a [recent essay](#) for the Future Symphony Institute, Scruton declares that our quest to put the child first and let him direct his own education has led us toward a misguided quest for "relevancy":

"From the educational philosophy of Dewey sprang the 'relevance revolution' in schooling. The old curriculum, with its emphasis on hard mathematics, dead languages, ancient history, and books that are too long to read, is portrayed as an offence to modern children, a way of belittling their world and their hopes for the future. To teach them to spell correctly, to speak grammatically, to adopt the manners and values of their parents and grandparents is to cut them off from their only available sphere of action. And in the place of all that so-called knowledge, which is nothing in itself save a residue of the interests of the dead, they should be given, we are told, their own curriculum, addressed to the life that is theirs."

But as Scruton goes on to explain, this fixation on relevancy is creating a serious dearth of knowledge in today's students:

“The immediate effect of the relevance revolution was to introduce into the classroom topics relevant to the interests of their teachers – topics like social justice, gender equality, nuclear disarmament, third-world poverty, gay rights. Whole subjects were concocted to replace the old curriculum in history, geography, and English: ‘peace studies,’ ‘world studies,’ ‘gender studies,’ and so on. The teaching of dead languages virtually ceased, and today in Britain, and doubtless in America too, it is a rare school that offers lessons in German, indeed in any modern language other than French or Spanish. Of course, it could be that less and less teachers are available with the knowledge required by the old curriculum. But it is a sad day for education when the loss of knowledge is described, instead, as a gain – when the old curriculum, based on subjects that had proved their worth over many decades, is replaced by a curriculum based purely on the causes and effects of the day. At any rate, to think that relevance, so understood, shows a respect for children that was absent from the old knowledge-based curriculum is to suffer from a singular deficiency in sympathy.”

Such practices, Scruton declares, are not building respect for children like they intended, but are instead a disrespect to their very being. According to Scruton, an education which truly respects a child will instill him with the values which have today become *irrelevant*, including:

- Old-fashioned “social graces” or [manners](#)
- Languages such as [Latin](#) and Greek
- [Skills](#) which he will need as an adult
- [Knowledge of the past](#) with which to analyze present problems
- Ability to discern between [fact and opinion](#)

Do you think Scruton is correct? Have we focused so much on making education relevant to today’s child that we have

overlooked the very principles which will enable him to transition into adult society with ease? Do we, as Scruton opines, need to recognize that there is virtue in irrelevancy?

[Image Credit: Flickr-Gavin Whitner [CC BY 2.0](#)]