

Back to school in a general climate of app-crazy anti-intellectualism and reality TV role models

Melissa Tandiwe Myambo

When I complimented one of the most intelligent students in my grad school on his super-size brain, he replied sardonically, “Well, if I were really all that clever, I wouldn’t be here, would I?”

I was confused. Isn’t graduate school the place where intelligent people come to hone their brains and sharpen their critical literacy skills into a lean mean thinking machine just as athletes head to the field to train their muscles and improve their reaction times?

Now he looked at me with profound pity. “You have it ass-backwards. Smart people don’t go to school. They drop out of school and become billionaires. Like Bill Gates.”

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Wikipedia – itself a symbol of the new democratic age in which expert knowledge is no longer the provenance of crusty intellectuals in their goofy caps and dusty gowns with their penchant for peer review and fact-checking – has a helpful entry, no doubt edited by one of its “real people” contributors:

List of college dropout billionaires
From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This list of college-dropout billionaires is based (where not otherwise noted) on an annual ranking of the world’s wealthiest people compiled and published by Forbes magazine on March 11, 2009.

Here we learn of the usual suspects: Mark “Facebook” Zuckerberg, Steve “Apple” Jobs, Bill “Microsoft” Gates, Michael “Dell” Dell. What do they have in common? Exactly! They all dropped out of college to found gazillion-dollar techie companies and rule the world.

My favorite line in this entry: “The average net worth of billionaires who dropped out of college, \$9.4 billion, is approximately triple that of billionaires with Ph.Ds., \$3.2 billion.”

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Ergo the really *really* smart dudes don’t waste valuable time in fuddy-duddy seminars learning about the Renaissance or the Russian Revolution. The type of skills associated with what is called critical thinking: diligence, concentration, the

slow accretion of insight based on painstaking exegesis – is nowhere reflected in these success stories. What is key to their success is short-circuiting education – the acquisition of knowledge – to find a way to apply knowledge in a tangible form that generates profit.

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There is a central assumption here. Real brains = big bucks.

Large swathes of this global world adhere to the (somewhat specious) logic that knowledge can and should be seamlessly translated into a dollar amount, a cash value, the big paycheck.

So the Would-be College Graduate (WBCG) surveys the present landscape and evaluates her options.

If she cannot star in a video clip that goes viral on YouTube, can she at least found a technology company? Okay, if not, perhaps she can do what second-tier dudes have done. She can maybe create something like Instagram or Whatsapp or a phone that can transform into a kite that generates solar energy to microwave popcorn. Then the first-tier dudes will eventually buy her out. Then she will be rich and the most important thing is to be rich.

Knowledge in and of itself is not desirable, and there are increasing numbers of arrogant people who increasingly deem which type of knowledge is useful, good for business, bank accounts and the bottom line. Thus, therefore, hence, only applied knowledge counts so the best plan of action for the WBCG (rather a cumbersome acronym. Let's call her Wanda) is to:

- a) invent an app or, failing that,
- b) become a reality TV star.

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First conversation with Wanda, random Tuesday, office hours, a lot of pressure

Professor, I have come to see you because I wanted to get your opinion on what I should do after college? I mean, I'm, like, accumulating so much debt, y'know, I don't know whether I should, like, try and rush through and finish early or...I don't know...maybe I shouldn't even finish at all...what do you think?

The professor (me) looks at Wanda in silent distress. Wanda is a very talented and promising liberal arts student. She is curious, motivated, diligent, startlingly insightful.

Well, Wanda, I think you should definitely finish your degree.

But what will I do with a liberal arts degree? I mean it seems kind of pointless, y' know. Basically people just come to college now to meet other people so they have connections. I mean it's good for networking because that's the only way to get, like, a job. It's who you know, y'know.

Whom you know. So not what you know?

Nah. I mean what kind of a job can I get with a liberal arts degree? Either I should switch to engineering or computer programming or some kind of science, a hard science, not some social science. They're almost as much of a waste of time as, like, the humanities. Something practical.

Practical is code for applied and of course my overdeveloped critical thinking skills cause me to question spurious binaries between "pure" and "applied" knowledge. Who can delimit the boundaries of one from the other? Surely by throwing out whole disciplines of learning, we circumscribe the possibilities of tomorrow's horizons, a tomorrow none of us can predict in these fast-changing times. How can we presume to know what forms of knowledge we will (or won't) need? But I just say:

Wanda, isn't the benefit of the liberal arts degree that you can explore all these disciplines and become a well-rounded person? That you don't just know stuff but know how to think about stuff?

How insincere these words. Inside my head, I am flailing, various sober facts screaming their dismal realities.

In the last three decades, there has been an utter devaluation of knowledge in the neoliberal university resulting in an untenable situation in which 75% of university teaching in the US is done by adjuncts. Adjuncts are not hired like full-time "tenure-track" professors who receive salaries, health benefits, pension plans, research funding and the other accoutrements of a middle-class, white-collar profession. Instead, adjuncts, bearers of higher degrees just like their tenure-track/tenured peers, are hired to teach courses and are paid per hour of student contact i.e. for their time in the classroom. This means they are not paid much and all the work they do to prepare for the time in the classroom, all the years they spent preparing to enter the classroom – researching texts, reading them, preparing lectures and power point slides, marking papers, answering student emails – is not compensated. This supposedly saves the university a lot of money but it has not translated into lower fees for students, most of whom are accruing more and more debt to pay for these degrees that in principle unlock the door to success. They are (blissfully?) unaware that their adjunct professors are often earning far less than their high school teachers.

Should I tell Wanda that she is paying large amounts of money to earn a degree to attain a middle-class lifestyle and a level of job security from a person who has that degree, from a clever boff who has ascended to the very pinnacle of the academic knowledge mountain only to discover that there is a landslide in progress and now she is on food stamps? Over 30,000 PhDs in the US require government assistance to eat...

Wanda stares out my office window. I have lost her. I am lost. I search through my bookshelves.

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In the mid-1980s, Chinua Achebe, gave a lecture entitled “What has literature got to do with it?”, the it being Nigeria’s economic and social development. The Nigerian government was obsessed with developing the country’s technological modernity and wanted to change the curriculum to “more science and less humanities.” Achebe is so stalwart in his defense of the liberal arts, I envy him his certainty: “Education is a complex creative process and the more rounded it is the more productive it will become. It is not a machine into which you feed raw materials at one end and pick up packaged materials at the other. It is, indeed, like creativity itself, ‘a many-splendored thing’.”

Achebe turns the conventional narrative inside out when he attributes Nigeria’s pockmarked route towards modernization, not to a lack of scientific expertise, but to a “failure of the imagination.” Pivotaly, the imagination is necessary to “create stories [that] create people” that spark the imagination that can animate social change, exceed what has come before, tell the new stories that are necessary to make a new and better world.

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Second conversation with Wanda, following Tuesday, office hours, a different tack

Wanda returns the Achebe book and says she liked it. Food for thought. It’s wonderful that she can still muster the concentration to read a whole book in this era of short, sharp bursts of text speak on various platforms and apps.

Since our last conversation, Wanda has been thinking. She is not so sure about Plan A, developing an app. A girl in her dorm thinks Plan B, becoming a reality TV star is even better than Plan A and besides, she knows a Hollywood dude who is thinking of doing something on college kids.

In Plan B, Wanda won’t have to know much at all as the banalities of her everyday life will be broadcast to the world. She won’t even have to act (except as herself) and the more puerile and petty she can be the better. Higher ratings, higher income.

Under no account should she ever be filmed reading/studying/thinking/contemplating/reflecting/learning/evolving as a human being because that would obviously make for very boring television. She won't be able to really keep up with her classes as she acts the part of herself going to college...but it will mean a lot of money.

What do you think, Professor?

I turn to a slim white volume on my desk.

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Renowned author, David Foster Wallace went to Kenyon College to speak to the graduating class of 2005. This has always confused me but he was there to give the commencement speech because even though graduation marks the end of college, I think it's supposed to be the commencement of your "real life."

DFW boldly told the students that he knew he was there to "explain why the [liberal arts] degree...has actual human value instead of just a material payoff." However, he claimed that he would not do that in his speech entitled: "This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life." But then later, he said, "If you worship money and things – if they are where you tap real meaning in life – then you will never have enough."

The value of education, instead, lies in what DFW calls "real freedom" which is the "really important kind of freedom [that] involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people." It's not about knowing stuff, it's about knowing what stuff is the most important, and some of the most vital things in life are almost intangible: water, love, compassion, understanding, empathy (the traits every employee hopes their boss has in spades).

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Third conversation with Wanda, following Tuesday, office hours, decisions, decisions...

Wow, that DFW, is such a romantic. He's so...idealistic, y'know. I think, he, totally, predates the 2008 global economic meltdown.

Should I tell Wanda that DFW took his own life just a few days before the global meltdown began in earnest in September, 2008, aged 46 and a half? Should I tell her that despite his belief that the benefits of real education could transform one's existence positively to live a better life - "It is about making it to thirty, or maybe even fifty, without wanting to shoot yourself in the head" – he had somehow lost that battle? Won't that dissuade her further from pursuing her degree?

Should I tell her that Bill Gates is partnering with an Australian professor to revamp the way history is taught in high schools and colleges to make it more about connecting the dots in a very liberal arts kind of way? Since 2008, Gates has retired as head of Microsoft and is a full-time philanthropist, spending the billions he does not pay in taxes on causes of his own choice. If he were living in socialist France, for example, the tax revenue from his billions might be used by the democratically elected government to make education policy and fund curriculum development but luckily for him, he lives in the USA. The privatization of public policy is part and parcel of this current climate of neoliberalism but never mind, Bill Gates' Big History Project is a lot more digital and interactive and fun and this is supposedly the most important thing about learning now. It should be fun.

What can I say to Wanda?...Ahh, but no matter.

Professor, I'm exploring my TV options. I might go on a date in the buff, or get married at first sight or possibly become a real housewife, maybe like, in Oklahoma, or it might go, like, totally international, and be filmed in, like, Osaka...What do you think? Is that, like, a good idea?

What do I think?

I smile. That way she will earn way more money than I ever will with all my degrees and so-called knowledge which can't be important because it is not validated by tons of money and yes, society pays for what it values - fun, entertainment, apps. The job market is beyond precarious. She doesn't want to live with her parents until she is thirty-five. Yes, why not become a real housewife? And at the end of the day, we all need money, right, and the more of it the better no matter how we earn it...right?

I nod. Yes, didn't I just read an article about the kinds of skills Google looks for when hiring? Something about how college grads were not their top priority because people who forego college are more exceptional?

I agree. Wanda, that's, like, a totally awesome idea.

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