

Hacking your Education

Dale J Stephens

For the intelligent and motivated, a road map out of the morass of overpriced, less-than-useful university education

There are two great facts with which the educational establishment refuses to come to terms. The first is that the system, as it is structured, leaves a vast gap between what students achieve and what they could potentially achieve. The second is that potential achievement is distributed according to the pitiless bell curve.

Dale Stephens was an exceptionally talented fifth-grader when he researched unschooling and persuaded his parents, a schoolteacher and an engineer, to let him do it. He had to be exceptional not only in terms of intelligence, but in terms of drive and self-discipline. Simply put, most 11-year-old children are not in a position to take charge of their own education.

Although Stephens does not say so, his book is most appropriate for people in the upper ranges of the ability distribution, the people who lose the most when their abilities and interests are stifled by the educational bureaucracy. Though it is not his thesis, I add that these are the instances in which society damages itself the most by forcing bright kids into the straitjacket of conventional systems.

"Hacking your education" is about taking the concept of home schooling, or unschooling, to the University level. Several facts are beyond dispute. The cost of university education is rising much faster than the rate of inflation. It is driven by the availability of money, scholarships and student loans made to ensure that students of modest economic backgrounds can get a college education. The result is that the average college student graduates (or fails to graduate) with \$29,000 worth of student loans. Moreover, the lenders have finagled the law in such a way that it is the only debt which cannot be discharged by bankruptcy. Student loan debt will follow a person for his entire life. Stephens looks at this albatross as an anchor which greatly limits what a graduate can do with his life. His first obligation is to feed the beast - pay back the loans.

Stephens quotes Richard Arum to the effect that most people who are in college do not know why they are there. They look at college as an extension of adolescence, an opportunity to have fun on somebody else's money before they face the serious business of earning a living. His judgment is harsh: if you do not know why you are in college, get out. Do something with your life, and do not rack up debt.

Stephens does go to what is called the agency problem. The University is in business to make money. The professors are there to earn fame and fortune through their research. The other students are there to have a good time. Nobody is there to ensure that you learn. Once you realize that your future is in your own hands, that nobody else cares, the next logical question is whether or not you need the University. The book is dedicated to convincing you that not everybody does.

At an annual cost well above the salary what one can expect upon graduation, a university proposes to give a young person three things:

- * A body of useful knowledge
- * Contacts which will be useful in life
- * A certificate attesting to the perseverance and competence required to complete the degree.

Stephens' thesis is that the body of knowledge has been dumbed down, the potential contacts are mostly not focused on classwork, and developing a portfolio of references who can testify to your actual achievement in real work situations is more valuable than a diploma as far as certificates go. Richard Arum notes that there has been significant grade inflation. Good marks are no longer meaningful except in the hard sciences. Attracting and retaining a diverse student body is a higher goal than maintaining academic rigor. The book "Mismatch" describes how this hurts minority students. In fact, the push for diversity also dilutes the validity of the certificate: employers rely more on other criteria, such as recommendations from current employees, SAT scores, and outside references.

The book is full of self-awareness and self-improvement checklists. The self-improvement tips are generally fairly obvious, but nonetheless useful. Get up early in the morning. Keep a notebook - write things down. Keep a list of things to do. Keep a list of things to learn. Make a practice of returning calls. Stretch yourself. One list that I love is a challenge to ask questions that are certain to be answered with a "No." His examples include asking people on the street for \$100 and asking random girls for a date. His point is absolutely valid. A young person is vastly ahead of the

game once he has learned not to be afraid of being turned down, governed only by other people's opinions. Other people will surely lead you to mediocrity.

The book is tremendously rich in ideas on how to make things happen. Keep it by your bedside: if ever comes a morning that you don't know what to do, turn to a random page and you'll find some useful advice on how to improve your life. The only caveat is that it invariably takes some mixture of chutzpah and hard work. He has some great advice on how to hack the business of making contacts. How to crash conferences, college courses, and other gatherings of people who are likely to be helpful to you. He tells you how to hack emails - how to get in touch with people who can be useful to you, and how to write an email that will get an answer. He made me feel good. I sent him a cold email asking for a copy of this book to review, and this is the result. Useful for both of us, the way things should be.

I found the self-awareness checklists to be harder. He asks "What Is the Purpose of Life?" This is a difficult question for any person of any age. Stephens is relentlessly secular. He offers only one answer, essentially that of the Enlightenment philosophers. We are here to maximize our human potential, our personal satisfaction, or our happiness depending on which philosophe you choose. I think the list needs more options. Religious people believe we are here to serve God and to raise the next generation of believers. Traditionalists, often religious, believe that we have a responsibility to pass on the culture which we have inherited, again usually through our children. Conversely, Charles Murray is right when he writes about the Europe Syndrome in "Coming Apart." Many moderns' attitude is that "The purpose of life is to while away the time between birth and death as pleasantly as possible." In the end, I believe that most kids won't have an answer to this most basic question which Stephens poses.

The book proceeds by a series of anecdotes chronicling the success of a number of bright, driven people whom the author has known in his life. By being willing to reach out, to make contact with people who might be able to help him, he has developed an extensive network of extremely competent people. They have fascinating stories to tell. However, these are far from ordinary people. They would not have come to Stephens' attention if they were. The message of the book is cast as "You might be able to do this." Let's not kid ourselves; very few readers will be able to emulate the success of his examples. Every reader, even those who will find no role in Stephens' universe can, however, benefit by applying the lessons of self-discipline which he advocates.

Two examples come to mind. The first was the viral Youtube of Doctor Ben Carson lecturing President Obama at the National Prayer Breakfast in February of 2013. The message was that Carson had overcome the handicap of poverty, a bad attitude, and a single-parent home to become the head of pediatric oncology at Johns Hopkins. Therefore, he implies, there is hope for everybody. Joanne Calderwood writing in "The Self-Propelled Advantage" describes how her homeschooling regime produced four kids in a row who attended college on scholarships, including one who aced the SATs with a 1600. In both cases, rather like Stephens, determination and self discipline were essential. In all cases, however, the kids could not have succeeded without native intelligence, any more than my native talent would get me into the NBA. The genetic stuff just isn't there. To pretend otherwise is simply naïve, inclined to raise false hope in kids without the right stuff. On the other hand, we all can improve. One of Stephens' better examples is a study that shows how much more successful it is to praise children for work rather than high intelligence. Hard work is something they know how to reproduce; intelligence is a fragile judgment that they may be scared to defend. The value of his book, then, is more in the instruction which anybody can follow than the examples which very few could emulate.

Interesting for a man who got involved in a gubernatorial campaign as a teenager, Stephens assiduously avoids any political discussion. Cynics say that student loans result from collusion between Wall Street and Washington: financial institutions are able to profit from guaranteed loans, and the government is able to keep young people off of the unemployment rolls and at the same time buy their votes with the appearance of doing something to help them. Another reason to avoid the traditional path is that a modern college education amounts to a four-year brainwashing in contemporary progressive thought - read David Gelernter's "America Lite." College is absolutely not the place to learn how to think independently. Stephens does go so far as to call the student loan game a "bubble" but doesn't find it necessary to name any villains. He is an optimist; much as he certainly appreciates why these things have come to be, he keeps relentlessly focused on the positive - what to do with your own life.

Stephens' bibliography, though well-chosen, is rather thin. He is young and has been doing other things with his life than read. He references "Academically Adrift" by Richard Arum, "Teach Your Own" by John Holt, and "The Underground History of American Education" by John Gatto, all of which I review favorably.

I'll close this review by taking advantage of the fact that I have your attention to push my own agenda. I got divorced and moved to Kiev to start a new life five years ago, about the time I started Social Security. I have learned Russian, gotten married, fathered a son, built a house and almost completed a book on my plans to homeschool him.

Life should change dramatically when we moved to the new place. I had already resolved to follow one piece of Stephens' advice: start a salon. I am adding four to do's to my list after having read this book. First, as I write speeches in Russian to present at Toastmasters, I will think of other places that I might deliver them and work hard to get on the agenda of conferences and to speak at universities. Secondly, I will pepper Kiev with emails, looking for more information about homeschooling and looking for contact with other parents who are interested. I have already written that collaborative teaching and learning will be an essential part of my son's homeschooling experience. This book gave me some concrete ideas about how to make it happen. Third, I will volunteer my skills as a writer, translator, editor and programmer to people who are doing interesting work on education in Kiev. Lastly, I'll make a point of making coffee dates to get myself out of the house and involved. Please write me if any of you readers have suggestions to contribute in the way of homeschooling my son, or other books you would recommend that I read.