

Just the other day, I overheard a conversation between two English majors. One was denouncing her brother's choice to take two years off between high school and college to travel internationally, saying it was "the stupid thing to do" and that he'll "regret it later". Her friend was nodding along in complete agreement. **It has become common today to dismiss** those students that choose to take a year or two off between high school graduation and their freshman year of college as "wasting their time", that it's an almost unforgivably foolish thing to do. But is it really? Both Shorris and Chekhov explore the implications of gaining life experience before pursuing a higher education, as well as the opposite situation.

The class that Shorris taught was targeted at people between the ages of 18 and 35 living at less than 150 percent of the Census Bureau's Official Poverty Threshold (52). He ended up teaching people from all backgrounds: refugees, felons, the homeless, pregnant women, abused drug addicts, and people dying from AIDS. **In other words**, these people had some serious life experience under their belts. He was teaching the class in the evenings in the middle of the hustle and bustle of New York, and he had to focus on ways to keep the learning relevant to his students, so he had to constantly come up with ways to meaningfully connect the material with their lives.

The student in Anton Chekhov's short story (named Ivan Velikopolsky) comes from the other side of the spectrum—he is a twenty-two-year-old seminary student, presumably decently well off, and certainly better off than the two widows to whom he tells the story of Peter's denial of Jesus. Unlike Shorris' students, Velikopolsky is taught in a vacuum, and he has to walk quite a distance before reaching the nearest village from his seminary school. His education doesn't have the experience coming before it, like Shorris' students does, but rather he learns things and has to go out into the world and make that application of his learning in a way that is most useful to him.

Both Chekhov and Shorris would agree that making that link between the past and the present

is absolutely crucial for the best kind of learning to occur. Ivan Velikopolsky wouldn't have had such a strong emotional response to telling the widows about Peter's story if he hadn't seen that "the past [...] is connected with the present in an unbroken chain of events" (266), realizing that only because the widows were so impacted by the story. Shorris' students wouldn't have really understood why Aristotle mattered had Aristotle not "given them a way to analyze the actions of their antagonists" (58) and gained some insight about why they're in the position that they're in.

However, one difference between the types of education that the students in each of the stories receive is the perspective through which it is taught. Shorris had the problem of trying to keep his students engaged and showing them that maybe they *should* care about "fourteenth-century Italian painting or truth tables or the death of Socrates" (55). One way that he had to solve this problem was by presenting the material in the context of how it's relevant to the student. For example, in Shorris' conversation with Abel Lomas about selling drugs to keep a family from starving, Shorris introduces the philosopher Immanuel Kant and his idea of "not do[ing] anything unless you want it to become a universal law" (55), and also introduces the idea of what does the greatest harm to the greatest number within the context of selling drugs and starvation. After being presented with both ideas, Abel Lomas thinks about it and decides that both selling drugs and letting a family starve are bad, and he can't say which one is worse. Just to clarify, Shorris asks him if he is a Kantian, and Lomas says he is, to which Shorris responds with, "'You know who Kant is?'" and Lomas says, "'I think so'" (55).

The problem here, Chekhov might say, is that Shorris only introduced Kant through one of his ideas and not the whole of his philosophy. After only presenting that one piece of information about Kant, Shorris asks the student if he knows who Kant is. The student only knows Kant through that one idea, so he puts Kant in a box and says that he thinks he really does know Kant, even though he only

knows so little about him and his philosophy. Chekhov might say that this would propose a problem to education—the student isn't the one that's making the relevant connection, the teacher is, and it's de-academizing education because Shorris is presenting the philosopher in such a narrow way.

Ivan Velikopolsky is taught in a seminary, in that vacuum where he is presented with all of the information and he has to go out and apply it himself, however he can best do that. Even though the student came to a conclusion that was maybe different than what was expected in telling Peter's story, he realized that he had just "seen both ends of that chain" (266) that connects the past to the present, and he made that realization all by himself, which is arguably a more real application of learning than the way that Shorris demonstrated. After all, the student has quite a bit of knowledge about the subject (Peter's denial of Jesus), and he is able to use it to bring some enlightenment to his own life and change his view of the world.

But I believe that Shorris would counter it by saying that maybe the purpose of an education isn't to further your understanding of yourself and your own circumstances, like the student did. His students are learning how to see the world around them and analyze it with regards to how it relates to the past, something that Ivan Velikopolsky completely failed to do. While the student saw the intense suffering that his story caused, he took away a positive message from it, filling himself with "an inexpressibly sweet anticipation of happiness" (266). This could be the result of the student being taught in the vacuum: he has no life experience, can only very narrowly relate the lesson that he learned in school to something that he encounters in the real world, and as a result he takes away a message that isn't necessarily the one that he should have taken away. Shorris' students, on the other hand, are able to learn about things that are centuries old, much like the student does, but they apply it much differently. They used Aristotle's teachings "to analyze the actions of their antagonists" (58). Even though Shorris' students were all "inheritors of wounds caused by the incontinence of educated men",

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Conversation between Shorris and Chekhov

they're using their education to understand the viewpoints of other people; namely, their oppressors.

They are using their education to see the perspective of others, helping to broaden their own understanding, and they are able to do that because they have something to connect it to and that "something" was very real and personal to them. This perhaps makes the connection that they formed more useful than the one that Ivan Velikopolsky made.

This issue is much bigger than just the people, both real and fictional, contained in these stories.

Although this idea of gaining life experience before pursuing a higher education may seem of concern to only a small group of people, such as graduating high school seniors, and perhaps their parents, **it should in fact concern anyone who cares about** the quality of education of the generations that follow them, which should be most people. If the younger people really are the future of their country, as many people say they are, then the quality of their education should be of the utmost importance. After all, it would be frightening to think that the future leaders of the country received an education that wasn't as good as it could have been. Perhaps it could be best for students to take some time off before starting college. **This interpretation challenges the thought of those people who have long assumed that** the traditional path to college (starting around age eighteen) is best and that it's considered traditional for a reason. That relationship between life experience and higher education is a complicated one because **ultimately, what is at stake here is** how students can gain the best education. It's a question that can't be answered very easily.

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Works Cited

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