



The Gorgeous Robe of Our King

Trying to Undress our School System

By Aref Hijawi



As I write about our educational system I find myself at a Y-shaped crossroads; I can hurl curses (an enjoyable task for both writer and reader), or daydream of some utopia of a system, or start from the time-honoured adage of Abu Hamid Al Ghazali: "You cannot improve on perfection."

I will take all three roads, starting with the latter.

Schools in England and Germany looked the other way and continued to teach two dead languages as the Industrial Revolution was in full swing. It took the little child of the fairy tale some two hundred years to shout: "The king is naked!" So why are we so ashamed that our schools keep teaching loads of pre-Islamic verses?

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Photo by Ayman Moqbel.

The British needed an extra century to discover that English grammar does not make you understand better or write better. It can't even prevent you from continuing to unconsciously split your infinitives. They abolished the grammar lesson. The myth that a good knowledge of Arabic grammar is essential for understanding the language is so deeply rooted that only a "the-king-is-naked" argument suits it.

Human beings teach their offspring all sorts of things, not only to make them more enlightened but also to discipline them and protect them from their own mischief. Conscripts in some Arab armies are ordered to dig trenches all day, only to have to fill them in the next day.

We spent 1,250 years, from the days of Seebawayh, unable to expose the folly.

A human mind is 5 percent intelligence, 95 percent basalt. Consider the case of a professional translator who must, in order to be a good translator, refrain from judging the original. The original text is holy, and the translator's task is to turn it, as honestly as humanly possible, into the other language. Our educational system, pointing its finger towards the horizon, tells our children: "See that point over there? See the end-of-school exam, the *tawjihī*? That's it. Now run." There is no room for thinking outside the curricula. The text is holy.

Teachers are like their pupils, like translators. The textbook says World

War II started in 1940, so the teacher looks upon the thousand-and-one books that state that the war actually started in 1939 as witchcraft relics that must be burned in public.

There is something good in that. Give the army of teachers in our educational system good textbooks and go to sleep. This army is very disciplined and takes things at face value. This is both good and bad, but it is a good starting point.

Whereas it is a little reassuring for us to know that the English and the Germans have also committed stupidities in the past, it is worth considering that the world rhythm now is much faster. We cannot afford two centuries to remove the dead wood from our system.

Fifty years ago, when I started school, something in the air, or maybe in the water, injected into my head the idea that gaining information is all that I needed to be an ok human being. Come

and see me now telling my students that the best thing they can do is read books. Come and see stupid me insisting that knowledge is all that we need. Even Pavlov's dog could change the code in its small, but innocent, mind. Human beings are slaves to dogma. They need to work hard to change their beliefs. My failures as a teacher continue to haunt me.

Let us move to the section of cursing. You should have seen our minister of education as he proudly announced that the number of new textbooks was slashed by nearly one third. That happened some two years ago. Several months later we heard an official in the same ministry victoriously breaking the "good" news that many units in the textbooks were chopped for the "benefit" of *tawjih* students. Well if they treat their own textbooks as buckets of scum, why don't they try to think "outside the bucket" altogether?

It will not be easy for me to jump to the constructive part of this article without expressing my sheer anger at a certain "National Education" element in the curriculum. These books were far worse than anything ever written by Ba'athi ideologues or Stalinist commissars. They are badly written, have no message, and are full of outdated dogmas.

Yet we need textbooks. The body of schoolteachers in our country cannot be trusted with a system of bookless teaching, by which a teacher aims to achieve a set of goals through using a variety of methods and texts. We also need a set of goals to start with. This brings us to the original question: Why schools?



Answer: To keep the kids off the streets and out of mischief, and to allow parents to go to work. Rousseau's *Emile* did not have to learn a foreign language or even an alphabet for many years. That was good for him there and then. But here and now, we need real learning. We also need to compel pupils to memorise certain things by heart. As the reader starts to feel a change of heart on my side, I have to give some explanation.

A baby learns his mother tongue not by his intellect but by memorising the words and phrases. We all learn our culture and food recipes by memory. A philosopher will not produce a decent falafel sandwich. The real force that makes people learn things is two-fold: need and zeal. You can easily introduce certain zeal into the heart of a child.

Ahmad Shawqi, the Amir of Poets, wrote hundreds of poems using old Abbasid Arabic. He spent his life imitating al-Buhturi and al-Mutanabbi, and was able to impress his contemporaries. But how come this man of non-Arab origins, who worked from age 17 as a French translator for the Khedive of Egypt, and who studied law in France, and spent his holidays later in Istanbul speaking the language of the empire, should be so passionate about old Arabic? It took me quite a bit of research to find out that at age four he was dumped at Sheikh Ali's *kuttab* in Cairo for some years, before moving on to the Tjhiziyya modern school. There, in the *kuttab*, he caught the virus. In the formative years a person gets programmed. That is zeal.

We stay with Shawqi. He went to Paris when he was 19. There he discovered Lamartine's fables. He thought Arab children "needed" something like that (this he wrote in prose in the introduction to the first edition of his *Diwan* – collection). He wrote many such poems in simple language that contained hidden messages.

Out of sheer curiosity I read a good translation of Lamartine's fables and,

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to my extreme shock of joy, discovered that our Ahmad Shawqi was not only more entertaining, far better at cracking a joke, and more able to convey the subtlest messages, but he also did not steal a single theme or tale from his French counterpart. Generations of children – from Mauritania (and I checked that) to Kuwait – read the fables of Shawqi at school. Al Aqqad, his arch-enemy, claimed that they were the only original poems that Shawqi had ever written. Possibly not the only, but they were, I believe, the most original.

When zeal and need work together, learning starts to make sense.

Teachers in my ideal school will be the story, the hands, and the fingers. Arabic, English, chemistry, history, planting tomatoes, making a table, doing crosswords puzzles, cooking, playing the lute, etc. will all be learned using the afore-mentioned teachers, while the teachers you have in mind will come in during the last three years of school. They will help students specialise in whatever branches they choose and help prepare them to sit for whatever exams they need for admittance to university. Most students will drop out before this specialisation

phase in order to focus on manual labour or to become geniuses.

Competition will be kept to a minimum. A school is not a war zone. Working together and enjoying learning is more effective and more fun than competition. While each invention of yesterday was attributed to a single person, today's inventions are created by teams. Can you tell me the name of the person who put the first man on the moon?

My leaving out religion was intentional. Schools can be good or bad at giving children an idea about life, but the afterlife should be left to the parents.

In my school there is a balance between the amount of knowledge and experience that students can absorb and the level of their appetite.

Palestinian society is more than ready for such an educational system. But Palestinian politicians and educators still talk about the old times when

education was "strong" and teachers made them memorise by heart all the rules of the past participle, and taught them Arabic grammar from thick books. Well, listen to them stutter in both languages now.

One last observation: After looking carefully at the way the new Palestinian textbooks teach Arabic grammar, I would say that the old thick books were much better.

But that's another story.

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