

The General or the Special - Which?

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This subject is one of great importance and one that is receiving much discussion and comment at the present day, not merely for the sake of argument, as with some other much-discussed subjects, but, because there is much depends upon the course which we choose for pursuit through life.

One of the most important questions that comes to us, sooner or later, in life, is: "What can I best do to use my talents." This question many never answer, but, go through life wondering what their talents are.

Sometimes we hear this subject discussed by people who set forth in glowing language, the many advantages of specialism, never referring to the fact that there are disadvantages as well; and sometimes by people who are in favor of a general education for everyone and can see no good to be gained by specialism, but, my plan is to treat the subject without any partiality for either side, after a fair look at both.

We have seen that as civilization advances the tendency toward specialism grows greater.

As far back as we can go, into the history of the uncivilized tribes, we find them all hunting, all fishing, all cooking, and, in fact, all doing everything, but, as they gradually become civilized there is a tendency toward specialization. Among the most highly civilized people, in the oldest communities, we find more clearly defined the different parts of labor, with a higher interest shown for some things than for others. And so, in the future, as civilization still advances, we shall look for a greater number of specialists with likewise a greater number of fields in which to work.

At the beginning of this century the science of Natural things was divided into physics and natural history, but, these divisions have since spread, until now Natural history has more than a dozen branches and in physics the numbers are almost as great.

There are now, at least thirty named and bounded sciences, each name designating a particular limited field, in which there are able men who work their days out in labor that does not consider

the rest of Nature as having any relation to their work.

It has ever been an open question, whether this is advantageous to the best interest of learning. But, the world has come to believe that it needs this kind of work and is now willing to pay more for the smallest bit of special and peculiar knowledge than for the widest command of varied language. It says to its students: "Know the least thing that can be known, as no one else knows it, and leave the universe to look after itself."

~~The~~ theory is, since no man can command all science, he should learn that which he can know in the utmost detail, and if many individual men know some small part, man in general may be acquainted with it all.

We take the sciences only as an example, there is specialization in a number of other things and in some to a greater extent than in this.

One of the greatest advantages to be gained by the specialist is that it takes him less time to gain the required skill in any one thing,

for the reason that he can use his undivided time and attention to accomplish the one desired end, instead of spreading it out over a great field of learning. And his cause for extraordinary skill is greater.

The oft repeated saying "There is always room at the top," is a true one, and especially, does it apply to the specialist. In his position there is much less chance for competition; anyone may compete for day-labor, but, it takes tact & skill for the higher positions in life, and it is in view of this fact that specialties are being worked up.

And since there is but little or no competition, higher wages may be demanded, by the capable one. Statistics show that when there is a vacancy in any institution, corporation, or the like, it is invariably at the head, because there are fewer persons prepared to compete for this office than for those that require little or no responsibility.

But, one of the greatest disadvantages that the specialist has to contend with is narrow mindedness. He confines his

thoughts and himself so closely to the study of one thing, never giving himself time or opportunity to think of anything else, that he finally forgets that there is a beautiful world about him, outside of his own little sphere.

The man with the general education, has had such an interest awakened in him, by the wide scope of his early education and training, that he is very observant and is always ready to receive whatever may be of interest or benefit to him.

In company he converses freely while the specialist is somewhat at a loss to keep up a conversation of any length, without talking on his "hobby" which isn't always of the highest interest to other people, who are very likely not to be so interested in it as he.

Another disadvantage of the specialist is that he lacks ability to turn to anything else. We notice this more in case of official men than anywhere else.

If after holding a certain office, for several years, he loses his place, he seems wholly

unable to turn to anything else. Every day his work has been only a repetition of yesterday's, until his habits have become rigid. The facts in the case are that he has not prepared himself for anything else and so when he leaves his office he does nothing, but sit still and look for another, which sometimes comes, but, not always. But the man with the general education, realizes but little friction in turning from one thing to another.

In closing, what shall I say? - to specialist or be generalist? - no; It would be unreasonable to say either, for the world is greatly in need of both, and both have done much for which the world is proud to boast of.

In science, history, art, and literature there are many lines that must be worked out by the specialist before the generalist is needed - to perform his work - that of compiling.

In Botany one man makes a specialty of grasses, another of mosses, another of fungi, another of smut, another of rusts + so on

until all the different divisions are finished satisfactorily - probably taking the whole life-time of one man or several in each case - and then the generalist comes along and brings them all together in such a manner that they may readily be used in obtaining a general knowledge of the whole subject.

In History, one man writes a history of England, another of America, another of the U.S. and so on until a history of all the different parts of the world is written and then the work of the generalist is to put them all together and compose a history of the world. In Art and Literature the parts are studied up in the same manner & at last brought together.

And so we will say in conclusion, that both the generalist and the specialist are in great demand & our work would never be complete without both.

Kate Oldham.