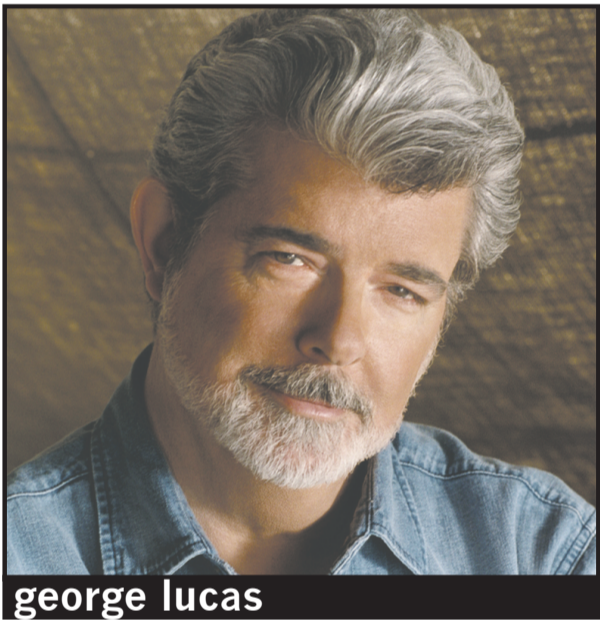


WORLD BUSINESS FORUM

How can people make sense of the world’s ever-growing — and quickly-outdated — mountains of information? Filmmaker George Lucas believes the answers can be found in education practices common many centuries ago.

George Lucas wants more “Greek philosophers and cobblers”



By Joe Mullich

Joe Mullich has received more than two dozen awards for writing about education, technology and other topics for publications including the Los Angeles Times, The Scientist, Men’s Health and Reader’s Digest.

“Over the years, the oldest forms of learning seem to be the most effective forms of learning,” says Lucas. He divides those forms into two parts that are equally important in shaping how people think and act. The first part is “the philosophical-intellectual side,” in the Aristotle/Plato mold, where a teacher engages and encourages a small group of students with questions and discussions. The second part is the hands-on “artisan school of learning,” where, say, a cobbler takes on a couple of apprentices and shows them how to make shoes.

“Once we got into the Industrial Revolution, those two forms of learning got swept aside and education became an exercise in pumping as much information as possible into kids,” Lucas says. “It’s like an assembly line, and at the end of the assembly line, the students spit back the information and get a diploma. That doesn’t work.”

Through the George Lucas Educational Foundation, he’s applying his storytelling and technical prowess to engage students and turn out sharper thinkers who can thrive in an age of information overload. He believes our future success depends on these century-old practices — an appropriate idea coming from a man who made the futuristic *Star Wars* and yet set it “a long, long time ago.”

Teach “Emotional Intelligence”

At edutopia.org, Lucas’s foundation catalogs the best practices in education. The organization identifies innovative programs that have inspired students and lowered dropout rates that should be replicated but are often lost after a grant runs out or a teacher retires. “The key to education is to help students find information, evaluate that information to test its accuracy and use information in creative ways,” he says.

As a student, Lucas often found classes pointlessly abstract and felt he should “have had more responsibility at least by the sixth grade.” Today, he advocates for interdisciplinary learning — “combine science, history, geology and mathematics together in one class and call it an engineering class” — and project-based learning. Students could, for example, build a house that must sell for a particular price, withstand a tornado or remain cool when the outside temperature rises to 105 degrees.

Working in groups rather than in isolation would also teach students “emotional intelligence.” In the house-building project, students would be graded not only on their individual contributions, but also on the group’s success, the project’s intellectual quality and how well team members got along.

“Project-based learning teaches civility and emotional intelligence, which we don’t seem to value until it’s too late,” Lucas says. “People don’t get fired for being stupid. They get fired for not being able to work with other people.”

Storytellers Are Teachers

This type of education system, Lucas believes, would significantly improve the character of the people who emerged from it. “They would be more indepen-

dent thinkers, more critical thinkers, more logical thinkers. And they would be better equipped for a world that is completely overwhelmed with information.”

Another crucial aspect — and what originally drew Lucas into education — is the need to leverage the digital revolution. He says highly educated people like engineers, lawyers or doctors would make better presentations if their schooling had emphasized the need to communicate as effectively with graphics and sound as with words.

Lucas says using multimedia technology in the classroom for “the hard, drone work frees teachers to be what they should be — great mentoring human beings who know you, care about you, challenge you and point you in the right direction.”

That description sounds like Jedi-mentor Yoda — one of the memorable teacher characters Lucas has created. As a storyteller, do teachers like Yoda and Professor Indiana Jones inherently intrigue Lucas? “Inherently, storytellers are teachers,” he replies. “Homer was more of a teacher than a storyteller. Our real profession is to teach, but in an entertaining way. That gets lost in the commerce of modern life, but ultimately good storytelling is based on certain truths, insights and observations people can learn from.”

Test Old Information

Lucas’s ideas have been most quickly embraced at charter schools and innovative regular public schools, as well, “which are not bogged down with the antiquity of education. The problem with education in the United States is people aren’t rational about it. They twist themselves into funny circles to get around their own personal prejudices and they’re afraid to change things that are proven, time and time again, not to be effective.”

Change is particularly needed in an era that moves at Internet speed. “I went to school forty years ago, and at least a third of everything I learned is obsolete now,” Lucas says. “In practical terms, it isn’t real anymore.” Today, when information becomes obsolete even faster, “You have to constantly look for new information and accept the old information you had may be false. You have to make your own critical decision on what’s true and false, and then base your actions on facts, not rumors or idolatry.”

The education system Lucas promotes would also produce the kind of people he looks to hire. “We have both a Greek philosopher and a cobbler side to it,” he says. “If we need a computer programmer, he has to know technically how to do it, and that’s a craft you learn. At the same time, we need people who are intellectually sophisticated enough to make creative decisions, observe life and do things without being told how.”

He points to a recent college graduate who was asked to create an alien landscape. “So many students who come out of the current education system say ‘Give me the instruction book that shows me how to do that,’ ” Lucas remarks. “We tell them, ‘There is no book. You need to think on your own and then you have to write the book.’ ”

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