The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Dangers of Specialization

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December 04, 2013




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In 1604, King Philip III of Spain suffered a burn while sleeping near the fireplace because no nobleman could be found with the authority to move his chair. That is a good example of the dangers of excessive specialization.

The problem is that Russia's educational reforms aim for extremely narrow specialization to prune away the study of "unnecessary" information and subjects, and to free students from being "overburdened"

The new approach to education focuses on developing specific "competencies" to respond to the changing demands of the labor market, even though common sense indicates that a person with a wide knowledge base will more successfully navigate the shifting tides of demand than someone given highly specific training based on educators' list of "absolutely essential" skills. The result of all this "progress" is that the high school curriculum has already been shorn of astronomy, and officials are arbitrarily cutting the required reading list or paring it down without reference to accumulated experience.

What authorities are calling a "new approach" is actually a return to the medieval notions that unnecessary knowledge will cause a person grief and that the learning process should focus on thoroughly mastering one specific craft.

Classical education emerged as a response to changing and increasingly complex market conditions that called for employees to make autonomous decisions and develop their abilities. It aimed to prepare effective, "self-correcting" individuals. Everyone should continually study and improve throughout their lives, but those who receive a good basic education typically do so more successfully. Reform advocates who speak of the "outdated Soviet legacy" pretend they do not know that the system they purport to dismantle was developed not by the Soviet Union but by Western Europe in response to society's transition from a feudal to a market system. During the period of industrialization, the Soviet Union borrowed that fully formed educational system and developed it to its own understanding of perfection. The 19th century that modern reformers find so repugnant was actually the period in which the modern concept of middle and high school education took shape. This was also the high point of the free market system and the golden age of capitalism.

Although the Soviet curriculum took classical education and tacked on such ideological subjects as "The History of the Communist Party" and "Scientific Communism," even those disciplines provided some knowledge of politics and society and were not totally useless.

Those who graduated from Soviet schools and universities received top-notch educations and excelled when they moved to the West in the 1990s. In fact, those who stayed behind also managed brilliantly in adjusting to a market economy, especially considering the tremendous upheavals that Russia endured and the challenges of the reforms instituted by economist and former Deputy Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the current generation. Today's masses of "competent" workers with narrow specialties could become an army of the unemployed overnight if economic conditions shift, technologies change or management is restructured, which would render their skills and competencies useless and force them to restart from scratch.

In effect, the current reforms put the majority of the population out of sync with the market. They will force people to repeatedly pay for compartmentalized packets of knowledge that will soon become obsolete in a rapidly changing economy.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/12/04/the-dangers-of-specialization-a30206