

Opening speech for Soka Education Conference by Bryan Penprase, Dean of Faculty, Soka University of America, Feb. 17, 2018

Education is intangible, individual, social, and constructed. Complex. Personal. Everyone has a story of their own education - and stories of how they grew as students and as educators. These stories will come together during this meeting and together we will experience our own form of education within this conference. I am very grateful to be here - and thank all of you for the honor of coming to this Soka Education Conference and providing some opening words.

After being Dean of Faculty at SUA for many months I took it upon myself to read the translation of Makiguchi's work *Education for Creative Living*. From the preface onwards I was struck by the novelty of Makiguchi's approach, which organically blended a strong sense of social constructivism and logical positivism, all marching towards a conviction of the need for more justice in education. In modern academia at many institutions, these three ways of knowing the world - science, social sciences, and humanities are often in conflict, but Makiguchi brought the sensibilities of all three together to bear on his project which was to create "a new empirical science of education, intimately and integrally related to the realities of the life of learning." Makiguchi's formulation was dedicated to find greater economy and efficiency, and to abandon "blind" "whatever-comes" teaching methods for clear-sighted and coordinated education. He also had the vision to include real-life work activities, a balance of mental and physical training, and the idea of a school as a Miniature Participatory Society whereby students would embody larger societal practices and gain a moral education. These principles could be described as "holistic" education today - but at the time they were proposed were revolutionary.

Theories of education abound but ultimately need to be rooted in practice. Makiguchi wanted to develop a "science" of education, based on practice and based on studying real people and their needs. This effort today would perhaps be called "design thinking" - a very popular and seemingly modern concept, and the type of learning would be called by educational theorists "an authentic learning environment." Yet back in the first decades of the 20th century - 100 years ago - Makiguchi was less about terminology and instead was living closely with his students and their families, and watching carefully how people lived to guide development of an education that can advance people's happiness. This happiness was not based on arbitrary or abstract concepts but based on a real consideration of the needs of people. His first principle was to determine the "purpose" in education. As Makiguchi put it, "instead of allowing scholars "high up" to pronounce upon what goes on "below" in the schools.. educational practitioners, grounded in their own everyday experience must inductively abstract principles that they bring back to their practice in the form of concrete improvements." This form of inquiry and reflection follows many of the "best practices" of educational research - and allows for continuous improvement within a school, and enables the faculty and the students to both grow and improve during the education. This what modern author might call a "Learning Organization" or what other modern theorists might call a "networked improvement community"

The goal or purpose of education is to create, in the words of Daisaku Ikeda, "a kind of humanistic world order that will ensure lasting peace and allow each individual to live as meaningful a life as possible." The Soka approach to education is often described as one that cultivates "happiness" - a concept much mis-understood and rarely realized, even in the affluent suburbs of Orange County

in the wealthiest country in the world, the USA. The form of happiness that Makiguchi was hoping to develop in students was a very different kind of happiness than what you might see on the “housewives of the OC.” Makiguchi’s conception of happiness has been described as arising from the uniting of private and public good, which only comes from “full commitment to the life of the society.. through sharing in the trials and successes of other persons and of our community.” Happiness is less a hedonistic quest for gratification but rather the development of a “social consciousness” that is rooted in appreciation and gratitude for the society one lives in and for the contributions everyone makes toward interdependence within that society. This happiness comes with the process of “creating value” which is the rough translation of the word Soka according to our catalog. The creation of this value is inseparable from happiness - in fact happiness arises from this process in which individuals can enhance their personal life and the interdependence of the society in which one lives.

As a scientist, and knowing that in a few years Soka University will have a new Life Sciences concentration, I especially enjoyed the analogy that Makiguchi made between medication and education. As Makiguchi put it, “medicine and education ought to rightfully be brothers in applied science - the one administering to the body, the other actively and constructively to the mind.” Within Makiguchi’s description is also a conception of medicine (and education) less one of fixing problems and more one of promoting health and wellness. Makiguchi wanted to find “answers to the questions of how to improve methods in the future and how to promote ever greater efficiency in education” This same analogy connecting medicine and education, incidentally, was used recently by Nobel laureate Carl Wieman who rejected traditional lecturing and has been working to bring science education to a point where educational research is applied to classrooms. According to Carl Wieman, the practice of lecturing in STEM subjects today is much like “bloodletting” - and just as Medicine has moved on, data from educational research is showing that lecturing is ineffective. Wieman, as well as Makiguchi, advocates what today is called “active learning.” - which to Makiguchi required students to take charge of their learning, with faculty involved in “guiding the learning process” but most importantly triggering students’ natural interests and curiosity.

The work that began with Makiguchi, has been reinforced, extended and validated by other educational theorists and researchers in the 20th and 21st century. The work of Dewey, of Paulo Freire, of many newer authors and scholars all have reinforced and extended the ideas that Makiguchi developed in rural Japan before 1930. The power of our Soka University education is that it builds on the educational philosophies of all of these scholars, and combines these approaches with multiple intellectual traditions from across the world - as embodied in our students, our faculty and our curriculum. Just as a keystone of Makiguchi’s philosophy of education was built upon appreciation and gratitude - we here at this conference can be grateful for the work of the many speakers and presenters here, who in their talks and ideas will create a miniature participatory society within the weekend that together will allow us to add to our value as educators and as students. Ultimately this purpose we seek is to create as Daisaku Ikeda puts it - “the kind of humanistic education that enables people to sense the reality of interconnectedness, to appreciate the infinite potential in each person’s life, and to cultivate that dormant human potential to the fullest.” In the spirit of gratitude that infuses Soka education, I thank you for your attention and look forward to a wonderful conference.

References

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