

What Education Is Actually For.

WISDOM ... RECOVERED · ISSUE 03

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In This Issue

There is a question that serious educators have never stopped asking, even when institutions stopped listening. It is not a technical question. It is not a policy question. It is the question that precedes every other: what is education actually for?

This edition of *Wisdom ... Forgotten* places two thinkers in conversation across seven decades. They wrote in different centuries, from different traditions, about different pressures. Yet they arrive at the same uneasy truth.

When we lose clarity about the purpose of education, we do not simply drift, we actively build systems that work against the very thing we claim to be doing.

John Dewey published *Experience and Education* in 1938, at a moment when progressive education had already begun to misread its own founding arguments. His warning was precise and still largely unheeded: not every experience educates. Some experiences narrow the learner. Some close down the capacity for further inquiry rather than opening it. Excellence in education is not a philosophy you choose. It is a design problem, and it demands intentionality, continuity, and a genuine understanding of how learning actually grows.

Dr. Christopher Washington recovers this insight and places it directly in front of the challenges universities face today, where artificial intelligence is accelerating access to information while the deeper work of cultivating judgment remains urgently, irreplaceably human.

Stefan Collini published *What Are Universities For?* in 2012, watching a generation of British higher education policy reduce the university to an economic instrument. His argument was not sentimental. It was structural: universities that justify themselves purely through utility have already conceded the most important ground.

The pursuit of understanding, particularly as carried on in the humanities, cannot be wholly measured, harnessed, or replaced. I read Collini today not as a British story but as a global warning, arriving just as the temptation to define education as efficient information transfer has never been stronger.

Two books. Seventy-four years apart. One question, still waiting for a better answer.

To those who dare to reimagine.



ARTICLE ONE

The Question That Indicts an Era

Re-reading Stefan Collini as Wisdom Reappearing · Prof. Bassem Khafagy

Every generation of university leaders eventually faces the question it least wants to answer. Ours may have been answering the wrong one. We have spent two decades perfecting our response to what universities produce, while quietly abandoning the prior question: what universities are fundamentally for.

Stefan Collini arrived at this question not as a polemicist looking for a fight, but as a historian watching a slow civilizational concession take place in real time. A Professor of Intellectual History and English Literature at the University of Cambridge, a Fellow of the British Academy, and one of Britain's most distinguished public intellectuals, Collini had spent nearly three decades watching successive governments reshape the language of higher education, and with it, the self-understanding of universities.

By the time he published *What Are Universities For?* in 2012, the vocabulary of transformation had already done most of its damage. Universities had accepted the terms of the debate. That was the surrender.

The first claim Collini makes is the most necessary. Universities are not businesses, and the moment they accept that framing as their primary reality, they lose the capacity to argue for what distinguishes them. The pressure to demonstrate economic value, to justify funding through measurable outcomes, to speak

the language of return on investment, rests on an assumption that Collini refuses: that usefulness is the only legitimate justification for an institution's existence.

“Attempting to extend human understanding, which is at the heart of disciplined intellectual enquiry, can never be wholly harnessed to immediate social purposes.”

He does not deny that universities produce useful outcomes. He insists that the point of the university is not those outcomes. There is a distinction, precise and consequential, between an institution that is useful and one whose sole justification is its usefulness. The first can pursue truth at inconvenient angles. The second cannot afford to.

This distinction is not nostalgic. It is structural. When universities adopt the logic of economic justification, they do not merely shift their public narrative. They reshape their internal priorities, their hiring decisions, their curriculum, their understanding of what counts as success.

The humanities become vulnerable not because they are weak, but because the metric designed to evaluate them was designed for something else entirely. Collini argues, with precision and barely restrained fury, that we should not measure performance where judgment is required. Measurement collapses the qualitative into the quantifiable. Judgment preserves the difference.

The second claim is about what universities actually hold. They are, Collini argues, custodians. Custodians of accumulated understanding, of forms of inquiry that extend across generations, of the intellectual inheritance that a society needs not to be consumed by its own present moment. He returns, in this context, to a phrase drawn from Thorstein Veblen: the university understood as a corporation for the cultivation and care of the community's highest aspirations and ideals.

“A corporation for the cultivation and care of the community's highest aspirations and ideals.”

That formulation, already a century old when Collini invokes it, is more radical today than it was then, because the forces that diminish it are now institutional rather than merely political. The pressure comes not from outside the university but from within it, from administrators who have internalized the language of their own subordination.

This is the moment in Collini's argument where the reading becomes uncomfortable for those of us who hold institutional leadership. He is not describing a problem created by governments alone. He is describing a problem enabled by universities, by the willingness of academic leaders to accept accountability frameworks built on premises that hollow out the institution from within. To read Collini carefully is to ask not only what our governments have done to universities, but what we have allowed to happen under our own stewardship.

“The drive towards understanding can never accept an arbitrary stopping point.”

The third claim concerns the humanities in particular, and is the book's most demanding. Collini does not treat the humanities as a special interest to be defended on sentimental grounds. He treats them as the hardest case, the one that reveals most clearly whether any serious argument for the university is possible.

If we can justify the sciences by their contribution to innovation, the professional schools by their preparation of practitioners, the social sciences by their policy relevance, what is the justification for the study of history, literature, philosophy, and the arts? Collini's answer is that the question, framed this way, is already a capitulation.

The attempt to extend human understanding has an intrinsic value that cannot be wholly harnessed to immediate social purposes. That is not a weakness of the humanities. It is their most important characteristic. An institution that can only justify what it already knows to be useful cannot by definition expand the boundaries of what is understood.

The argument lands with particular force today, when artificial intelligence is accelerating the production of information at a scale no institution can match, and when the temptation to define education as efficient information transfer has never been stronger. Collini wrote this book before the current transformation began.

He was already warning against the logic that makes that transformation most dangerous. If the purpose of a university is to transmit knowledge that can be assessed, measured, and monetized, then the university has already agreed to be replaced. The question is not whether AI will change higher education. The question is whether universities know, with enough clarity and conviction, what they are for, clearly enough to know what cannot be replaced.

That question is the one Collini returned to us in 2012. We answered it poorly then. We are running out of time to answer it better. The university that cannot articulate its own irreducible purpose has already begun to disappear, not in enrollment numbers, but in meaning.

To those who dare to reimagine.

Bassem Khafagy

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ABOUT THE BOOK

TITLE	What Are Universities For?
AUTHOR	Stefan Collini
PUBLISHER	Penguin, London
YEAR	2012
PAGES	240
ISBN	978-1-846-14482-0
CORE INSIGHT	Universities cannot justify their existence through economic utility alone. When they accept that framing, they abandon the very capacity that makes them irreplaceable: the pursuit of understanding for its own sake, across generations, at inconvenient angles to the present.

#WisdomForgotten #UniversityPurpose #TheHumanities #IntellectualInquiry #FutureOfTheUniversity



ARTICLE TWO

Dewey's Forgotten Insight About Educational Excellence

Christopher Washington, Ph.D.

Debates about educational excellence often seem trapped between familiar poles. On one side are those who argue that universities must preserve rigorous disciplinary knowledge and intellectual depth. On the other are those who insist that learning must become more experiential, flexible, and connected to real-world problems.

These debates feel distinctly modern. Yet nearly a century ago, John Dewey, one of the twentieth century's most influential philosophers of education and a leading figure in American pragmatism, recognized that this tension reflected a deeper misunderstanding about how learning occurs.

I often return to Dewey's work when thinking about experiential learning and the challenge of translating theory into practice. For many educators, Dewey remains a foundational thinker in the design of learning environments that connect experience, inquiry, and intellectual growth.

“The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning.”

In *Experience and Education*, published in 1938, Dewey addressed the growing conflict between what he described as traditional education and the progressive education movement. His conclusion was striking: neither side had fully understood the nature of educational experience.

The Forgotten Insight

Dewey's most enduring insight was deceptively simple: not all experiences are educative. Some experiences expand a learner's capacity for future learning; others narrow it.

So, what makes an educational experience genuinely educative? Excellence in education, Dewey argued, does not arise from the rigid transmission of knowledge, nor from unstructured activity guided only by student interest. It emerges when educators design experiences in which intellectual challenge, lived meaning, and disciplined inquiry *reinforce* one another.

“Any movement that thinks and acts in terms of an ’ism becomes so involved in reaction against other ’isms that it unwittingly becomes controlled by them.”

For Dewey, an experience becomes genuinely educative when two conditions are present.

- **Continuity:** the experience builds upon prior learning and opens pathways for further inquiry.
- **Interaction:** the learner engages meaningfully with both the subject matter and the surrounding environment.

This insight placed a demanding responsibility on educators. Dewey did not reject disciplinary knowledge, nor did he romanticize student freedom. Instead, he argued that effective education requires intentional design of learning environments where experiences accumulate into growing intellectual capacity.

Educational excellence, in this sense, depends less on choosing between competing philosophies and more on the careful design of experiences that cultivate understanding over time.

How the Insight Was Misunderstood

Despite Dewey’s influence, the subtlety of his argument was often lost. His ideas were frequently interpreted as an endorsement of unstructured learning or the belief that student interests alone should guide the curriculum. Critics responded by emphasizing standardization, testing regimes, and tightly controlled curricula designed to safeguard academic rigor. The debate hardened into familiar oppositions: rigor versus engagement, structure versus freedom, tradition versus innovation.

Dewey had warned precisely against this dynamic. His argument was not about choosing sides. It was about reframing the problem. The challenge of education was to design learning experiences where freedom becomes disciplined inquiry.

“The principle of continuity of experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after.”

That nuance proved difficult to sustain in public debates that often reward simpler narratives.

Why It Matters Now

Universities today face pressures Dewey could scarcely have imagined: digital transformation, economic scrutiny, and growing skepticism about the value of higher education. Yet the tension he identified remains strikingly familiar. We continue to ask versions of the same questions.

- Should education prioritize content mastery or skills and competencies?
- Should universities focus on intellectual depth or career preparation?
- Should classrooms be structured or unstructured?

Dewey’s insight suggests that these questions are often framed incorrectly. Educational excellence does not emerge from choosing one pole or the other. It emerges from designing learning environments where intellectual depth, practical relevance, and reflective inquiry *reinforce* one another.

Such work requires intentional curriculum design, faculty collaboration, and learning experiences that allow students to apply knowledge, reflect upon it, and extend it.

Dewey in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

The rise of artificial intelligence makes Dewey’s insight even more relevant. AI systems increasingly automate forms of technical expertise once associated with advanced education: information retrieval, coding assistance, pattern recognition, and elements of professional analysis. As these capabilities expand, the distinctive contribution of education cannot simply be the search for and transfer of technical knowledge.

Dewey’s framework points toward a different emphasis.

“An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment.”

Education becomes less about the accumulation of information and more about cultivating the human capacities required to interpret, question, and responsibly apply knowledge in complex situations. Ethical reasoning, interdisciplinary thinking, judgment under uncertainty, and the ability to navigate ambiguity become central.

These capacities develop not through passive exposure to information through activities such as readings and lectures, but through carefully designed experiences, precisely the conditions Dewey described through continuity and interaction.

Artificial intelligence may accelerate access to knowledge, but at this time, it cannot replace learning environments that help students develop the intellectual habits needed to use knowledge wisely.

The Unfinished Question

Dewey's *Experience and Education* reads less like a manifesto of final answers than an invitation to inquiry. He understood that educational systems evolve within social, political, and economic pressures that no philosophy of education can fully resolve. Yet his insight remains instructive.

If artificial intelligence increasingly performs tasks once associated with technical expertise, the enduring work of education may lie elsewhere. Universities may need to focus less on transmitting stable knowledge and more on designing learning experiences that cultivate judgment, ethical reasoning, and the ability to navigate complexity.

Dewey's unfinished question therefore returns to us today.

Are we creating educational experiences that expand the learner's capacity to think, inquire, and act wisely in a changing world?

Christopher Washington

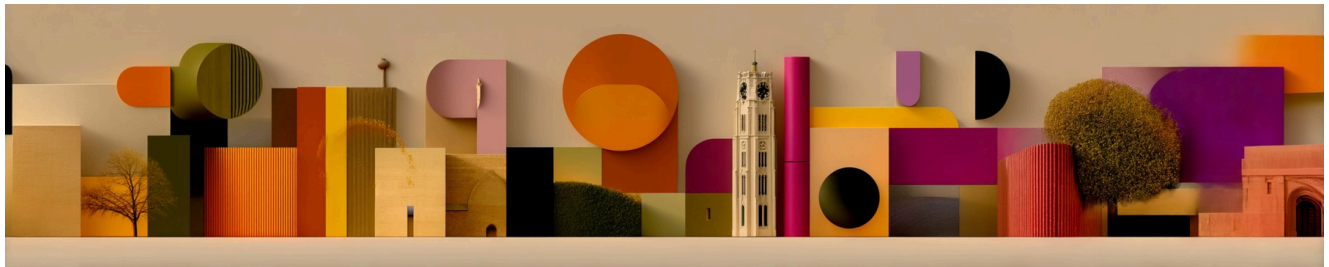
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ABOUT THE BOOK

TITLE	Experience and Education
AUTHOR	John Dewey
PUBLISHER	Kappa Delta Pi (original); Simon and Schuster, New York (1997 reprint)
YEAR	1938
PAGES	96
ISBN	978-0-684-83828-1
CORE INSIGHT	Neither the transmission of inherited knowledge nor the unstructured freedom of progressive experimentation constitutes a genuine education. What endures is only what grows, and growth requires experience designed with intention, continuity, and a clear understanding of where the learner stands and where the learning is meant to lead.

#WisdomForgotten #HigherEducation #AcademicFreedom #UniversityLeadership #ReimagineUniversity #WUF



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About this newsletter • *Wisdom ... Forgotten* is a weekly newsletter by Prof. Bassem Khafagy and Dr. Christopher Washington. Together, they bring six decades of combined experience spanning global higher education strategy, institutional leadership, governance, workforce innovation, and organizational transformation across multiple continents. Each week, this newsletter surfaces ideas from two classic academic works that were often written for moments very much like the one higher education is navigating today, and asks what becomes possible when those insights are brought back into active practice. This newsletter is not a book review. It is a conversation between two thought leaders and a growing community of academics, university leaders, and practitioners who believe the future of the university is strengthened when we reconnect with the intellectual foundations that shaped the field and reinterpret them for today's realities. Many scholars and leaders have carried these ideas forward. Our goal is to help reconnect them to everyday leadership, policy, and institutional design decisions.

Dr. Christopher Washington • Provost Emeritus of Franklin University, is the Founder and CEO of ResiliencePlus Advisors LLC, an executive coaching and advisory firm focused on equipping leaders to navigate complexity, disruption, and rapid organizational change. He also serves as President of the ILI Think Tank at the Innovative Leadership Institute, leading a global network of scholars and senior practitioners advancing the theory and practice of innovative leadership. A contributing author to Forbes Nonprofit Council, Dr. Washington publishes on leadership innovation, organizational culture and performance, and learning ecosystem design.

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The visual compositions • throughout this newsletter and the series are original works by Prof. Bassem K. Khafagy. They are crafted using advanced technological tools, including artificial intelligence, guided entirely by the author's artistic vision and design sensibility. In a series about reimagining the university, it felt only right that the art itself reflect that spirit of creative possibility.

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