

A correspondence with Peter Drucker



Hamburg, 15th June

Dear Peter,

Today I left Hamburg for your home town. I recently graduated from law school, and, as the train crawled south over the Elbe, trying to catch a glimpse of the glimmering concert hall, I saw my reflection in the window. Immediately, I was taken down memory lane: I remembered the very first time I sat on that train; looking out over those bridges, being mesmerized by the back then still unfinished concert hall, the buzzing yet stoic atmosphere that seemed to hang over this port city, and, last but not least, excited for everything that lied ahead of me. Next up: my very first lecture. It was more so a commencement speech traditionally held for the first years. As you can imagine, it was full of different kinds of advice. Most of them, I have long forgotten. Though one in particular stuck with me: If you are ever asked in an interview “What do you want to be?”, tell them you want to be an “*Autonomer Weltbürger*”. In case you have gotten wary of your German: “Autonomous citizen of the world”.

The speech went on: What is an “*Autonomer Weltbürger*”? A term coined by Wilhem v. Humboldt, it is a one phrase summary of his concept of academic education. His idea was to constantly broaden one’s horizon by integrating arts and sciences: to achieve self-determination and responsibility through the use of reason while creating a collective “intellectual bond” between all those who share the same ideal.¹

Part of this endeavor certainly is to keep learning even after one’s formal education has ended.² After six years of law school, I understand that even though an important part of my education lies behind me, the lion’s share of it is yet to come: As I become a knowledge worker – a term you coined and is certainly fitting to the work of a lawyer – I need to be a good lawyer. But as you know, a good lawyer – or a good knowledge worker – has to master more than just the field he or she works in.

In addition to that, I also need to manage myself and further down the road, I also need to manage the team around me.³ I realize that this means that I need to draw inspiration and knowledge from many different fields – some I already know, some I still need to learn: Just like the masters in Florence in the time of the Renaissance, I need to constantly need to broaden my horizon and refine my craft through it. So maybe now, almost six years later, I think I finally

¹ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humboldtian_model_of_higher_education.

² *Ducker*, Management Challenges for the 21st Century (2001).

³ See for example *Drucker*, The Effective Executive (1966), Chapter III.

found a translation for the term that impressed me so much on my first day of law school. One, that is maybe not as clumsy: *Renaissance Man*.

Vienna, 18th June

Dear Peter,

While in your hometown, my mind mumbled over the question you raised in your answer to my last letter about the future of education: Given the variety of possible learning and teaching approaches, what should be the main focus in developing tomorrow's leaders, as learners go from kindergarten all the way to business school and beyond?

First of all, I assume we can agree that while a person progresses through the institutionalized education system towards more independent learning, he or she constantly gains more freedom regarding learning content and learning time but he or she also has to deal with increased responsibilities in this regard. If we embrace this premise, then I think the answer to your question is to tackle this challenge: Ensuring that these increased responsibilities are dealt with while realizing the maximal potential of this increased liberty. But how do we do this?

Since we have to cover different fields over a long period of time, the main focus in developing tomorrow's leaders must lie on creating a sustainable learning momentum through fueling ceaseless curiosity in understanding the "nature of things" – almost in a Faustian fashion.⁴ Of course, we cannot stop here. Now that we established the inner drive, we need to provide a tool kit for the learner to harvest his or her full learning potential. It could comprise classic competences as the likes of (self-)organization systems, communication and cooperation styles, divergent and convergent thinking, different learning techniques, research skills, structured as well as critical thinking approaches, etc. As you can see from this list, a future manager requires a vast broadband of knowing-doing capacities. Thus, it would be utopic to believe that a standard one-size-fits-all approach will reap any significant results. Instead, when we think about education, we might need to draw inspiration from ancient education styles and use a

⁴ See *Goethe*, *Faust*: First Part of the tragedy, Chapter 1.

combination modern technology (as well as other tools) and a human first approach to be able to apply it to mass scale. What do I mean by that?

Back in ancient times, it was common that future leaders enjoyed the benefits of one-on-one tutoring; for example, Alexander the Great was (partly) educated by Aristotle. Like this, he not only was taught by one of the brightest people in human history according to his own needs, he also had the opportunity to form a mentor relationship with him. Alas, not everybody is Alexander the Great, and doesn't it seem wasteful to focus so many resources – after all, polymaths like Aristotle are rare in our day and age – on a single individual and thus denying others the opportunity to be educated by a genius too?

That's where we can make use of modern technology. Recently, I stumbled across the concept of the Digital Aristotle: “a tutor personalised to [the student], teaching them what they need to learn when they're best ready for it (...)”.⁵ The idea is that an artificial intelligence will curate learning content created by the brightest minds and best teachers from a vast library tailored to the student's individual needs.⁶ Thus, creating a highly individualized curriculum that is inexpensive and available to everyone worldwide. Like this, it can not only help students to specialize in their preferred field, but it can also encourage cross-disciplinary thinking and help students to develop or optimize their problem-solving toolkit. Also, by design, the Digital Aristotle can be a tutor for an entire lifetime.

⁵ C.G.P. Grey, Digital Aristotle: Thoughts on the Future of Education; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vsCAM17O-M>; also see <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/features/how-to-explain-absolutely-anything-academics-pick-apart-mysteries-of-the-cosmos-on-youtube-8473826.html>.

⁶ Ibid.



Cross-disciplinary thinking in Vienna: The museum of Art History directly facing the museum of Natural History, Vienna. The pictures were taken by the author himself.

While this concept seemed compelling to me at first glance, I think it is missing a key component to good education: the human side. Teachers are more than simple “knowledge transmitters”. Instead, they take multiple roles as they manage the education as well as personal growth of their students in the position where they best succeed.⁷

After all, there are countless personal traits and social skills which are required today to lead organizations successfully as, by definition, humans are social and businesses are living organisms. What use is the brightest mind when nobody listens to him or her since he does not have any empathy for his or her colleagues? What use is the best manager when he or she does not have the respect of his or her team members on a human level? What about the answers, a machine will never have and can never give us?⁸ Thus, only if those social skills are taught too,

⁷ See *Drucker*, *Manage yourself, and then your company* (1966).

⁸ See *Marthino-Trustwell*, *The answer a machine will never have* (winner of the Drucker Challenge Essay Award 2018).

as well as those crucial personal traits are developed, will there be people who are well-rounded, broadly knowledgeable and capable across the arts and the sciences, and able to approach problems holistically. Hence, the concept of the Digital Aristotle needs to be amended: Teachers still have to take the main role as they are also mentors for their students. Through the help of the Digital Aristotle, the human side of education can be emphasized as the teacher can focus more on it. After the formal education has ended, the former students can keep using the Digital Aristotle for the rest of their lives in order to expand their knowledge and connect with like-minded people.

Florence, 19th June

Dear Peter,

today I arrived in the capital of the Renaissance: Florence. It seemed fitting to come here as our correspondence circled around this theme so much. I wanted to feel the atmosphere the Renaissance men created and that inspired so many different people as you mentioned in your last letter.

After I arrived, I headed straight to the landmark of Florence, the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore. Upon seeing the church, I immediately understood Leonardo da Vinci's saying "Everything connects to everything else." While studying the artwork on the façade or the iconic dome of the cathedral, you can clearly see how the Renaissance masters were inspired by different fields; how they connected artistic expression with the beauty of mathematical precision and perfect proportions.



The dome (left) and the front view (right) of the Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence. The pictures were taken by the author himself.

While different Renaissance masters specialized in one field or another – like art, architecture, sciences, philosophy, etc. – they were all coined by a cross-disciplinary atmosphere and drew inspiration for their own work from different fields. In my opinion, it is exactly this approach that challenged the Renaissance masters to constantly learn and refine their craft.

Furthermore, this demonstrates the relationship between polymaths and specialist: All of the men in the courtyard were polymaths; yet they were all specialists: Polymaths and specialists are not exclusive to each other. Instead I think the Renaissance men clearly demonstrate that true mastery of a field is only completed by knowing multiple disciplines and drawing inspiration from them.



The courtyard of the Uffizi Gallery lined with Renaissance masters of different fields vis-à-vis to each other, Florence. The pictures were taken by the author himself.

Wouldn't you agree with me, when I say that what you can see here was only possible because of the Renaissance that challenge outdated assumptions and conventions of thought and behavior? Because of its masters who explored and discovered new realms of artistic, physical, and intellectual achievement? And that those polymath's developed different and broader visions of themselves? Wouldn't you agree with me, when I say that great organizations and their people combine both art and science? Wouldn't you agree with me, when I say that a well-managed business or team radiates a similar feeling as the dome of Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore?

Yours,

An old friend.

Word count: 1811