

Education as a “Buying” Process: Contrasting with the Conventional, “Selling” View of Education

Nobo Komagata

PA7H.org

October 8, 2016 (First written: January 10, 2014)

A lot of discussion on education focus on *what* and *how* to teach. To “sell” their teaching materials and methods, teachers often become salespeople. But unless the buyer is interested in their products, salespeople are simply ineffective. This seems exactly what is happening in education. What can we do? Actually, various alternative approaches had already been proposed by early education pioneers (e.g., Dennison, 1969; Holt, 1976; Neill, 1960). I am also deeply moved by the approach of Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1961). The essence can be captured in the following quote from Harrison (2002): “Can education shift from its current model of shaping children into components of economic production, into an active experiment in optimizing the creativity of the whole child?” In contrast to the selling mode of education, this essay echoes those progressive educators’ message in some specific way and introduces a new metaphor of education (from the educator’s view point) as a “buying” process.

Before proceeding, here is a caveat. This metaphor of education as buying is not about students “purchasing” education; it’s not at all about that kind of corporate education. In addition, I am neither interested in discussing the pros and the cons of seeing education (from the student’s view point) as a purchase or as an investment. My point here is to see the process of *providing* education as the process of purchasing something priceless in each student’s mind and heart. That is, the focus here is on the attitude and action of the teacher. Note that in order to avoid the conventional meaning associated with the word *teacher*, I use the word *facilitator* to refer to education providers. In the end, though, the facilitators’ attitude and action can be reflected by the children’s attitude and action. Then, what is cultivated by all the involved parties can be quite mutual.

Let us first contrast the selling and the buying actions. When we sell a product, we already have a product and basically, the strategy would be how to mold the potential customer into that product. On the other hand, when we buy a product, we are often not fixated on a product. Starting with some criteria, we will examine various options and try to find the most suitable product. Both of these are active processes, in contrast to doing nothing. So, the buying metaphor still incorporates active involvement of the facilitator, albeit in a manner quite different from that in the selling metaphor. In this regard, both of these approaches are completely different from *laissez faire* approaches, where the students are left alone.

Probably the biggest difference of the buying metaphor from the selling one is that when we buy, we don't push a certain product. Instead, we need to find the most appropriate product "sold" by the children. This means that the facilitators do not start with presumed materials and methods; instead they need to find the best qualities of their children so that they can "buy" them. This can be a challenge, especially for those who were trained in a conventional teaching context, where the main action is selling. To be able to buy, the facilitators need to be extremely sensitive and open-minded. In many cases, what the children can offer is not at all obvious to the facilitators.

Some people may wonder whether the buying approaches could *provide* the "same" kind of learning delivered by the selling approaches. But let's face the fact. We know that the performance of the selling approaches is far from ideal. Most grownups do not remember the things taught in classes; most of materials are irrelevant anyway. Most of us go through the education system mainly to get "tickets" for a good job/future. So, with respect to real learning, there is actually very little to lose if we shift from the selling mode.

When we buy a product, we need to pay. In a sense, this also applies to the buying metaphor of education. In order to find the best in our children, we need to "pay" the corresponding amount. We need to pay attention, consume a lot of energy, and tap into various resources. It's not free; the best products will not conjure up by themselves. Unlike the selling metaphor, our goal is not the profit. Nevertheless, just like when we make the right purchase, the process of educational purchase can be truly rewarding.

Between the selling and buying metaphors, the focus of the facilitators would be very different. When the facilitators are in the selling mode, their effort would be more synthetic and static. When the facilitators are in the buying mode, their effort would be more analytic and dynamic. For some facilitators, the ability to adapt to their children may appear challenging. However, we have to say that the challenge of the children facing prescribed and inflexible materials can be daunting. By shifting the attitude, the facilitators could actually avoid daily struggles associated with selling unwanted products.

Although the buying process does not need to have a product in mind, we still need to start with some criteria. In this regard, the buying process is still principle-based. In the end, a good purchase is possible only when we have a good set of criteria. This also applies to the buying metaphor of education. That is, it is not that we buy everything our children can offer. We prepare in advance so that we can find the qualities that would help the children, help the facilitators, and in the end, help the entire community. Once the facilitators are aware of what is necessary to live successfully in the community, they should be aware of how to buy good qualities in our children.

Let us now turn to the mechanism underlying the educational buying process. We learn things when we are genuinely interested in the materials (i.e., intrinsic motivation, e.g., see Kohn, 1993; Deci, 1995). In order to facilitate genuine learning, the facilitators need to know what the

children are interested in and guide them in a way learning actually takes place. In addition, to buy the best and possibly subtle qualities, the facilitators need to make the learning environment free from fear so that the children can express their ideas freely (Krishnamurti, 1953). This is how the facilitator would “buy” the ability of a child.

Let us now go over a few more scenarios. For whatever topics where experts exist, they tend to design, implement, and/or deliver some sort of curriculum in which (part of) their expertise is (hopefully) transferred to their students. In this case, the experts are the salespeople. Often, teachers compete one another to sell their own expertise at the cost of others’. But this kind of conflict is completely foreign to the children. In the buying metaphor of education, the facilitators do not have the prescribed set of topics that they need to “cover.” The materials are in their children and those must be found by the facilitators.

Modern educators are becoming more and more knowledgeable, meticulous, and well-prepared. They develop grand initiatives, such as Common Core State Standards, which attempts to cultivate deep thinking in the children. However, how much effort they put in these initiatives, they are still based on the selling model and will suffer from the same issues associated with any other selling approaches. In this connection, it is fairly obvious that standardized tests fit only within the selling model. If we pursue a buying model, standardized tests are not only irrelevant but also harmful.

One problem that is increasingly prevalent is cheating in various educational contexts. The problem is strongly tied to the selling mode of education, most notably associated with standardized tests. With the buying metaphor, cheating simply does not exist. In this mode, the children can simply be themselves and do not need to copy or steal other children’s ideas or properties.

There are many attempts to enhance education, still within the selling model. For example, to overcome the problem with fragmented teaching materials, teachers might develop an interdisciplinary program across multiple subject areas. Such an approach surely has some advantages over more isolated ones. However, as long as the teachers prescribe the materials, it is still within the selling model. One way to confirm this point is that multiple interdisciplinary programs can compete among themselves; that is, they have to sell.

Next, more and more teachers incorporate technology to improve their teaching. However, the use of technology may or may not improve teaching. In my opinion, it is actually orthogonal to the heart of education. High-tech selling approaches would still have the same issues associated with low-tech selling approaches, while low-tech buying approaches would be free from such problems.

In order to transfer a certain set of knowledge, many teachers make some materials more “fun,” e.g., in the form of a game. Again, this would not escape the problems of selling approaches. The children don’t really learn the material simply because it is sugar-coated. Note that not all

games are actually just sugar coating. For example, John Hunter's (2013) *World Peace Game* would be an excellent platform for the buying approach. In fact, the true success of *World Peace Game* must be coming from John Hunter's buying attitude. That is, simply copying the format of the game and trying to sell some agenda would not culminate the excellence achieved by John Hunter.

Regarding the buying metaphor, some teachers might say that this is what they want to do but they cannot do so because of the regulations and requirements. I certainly understand this type of concern; the current educational environment must be extremely challenging for many educators. However, once we know what real education would be, we cannot stay in the dark; we need to change the current condition little by little. Otherwise, the deficit is accumulating rapidly. Every moment, the selling mode of education is killing the intrinsic motivation of our children. For example, Dennison (1969) reports a case of a young child. Even though the child was reading letters from his family even *before* going to school, he regressed and lost the ability to read *after* going to school. In an analogous manner, the intrinsic motivation of many adults may have already been killed by years of selling education.

I hope more and more people are aware of the contrast between the selling and buying metaphors of education. And even if more and more people are awakened to the point addressed in this essay, the situation will not change overnight, unfortunately. However, if people gradually move toward the buying-metaphor of education, that is, making a doable, tiny steps, we will be able to balance the current adult-centered education with islands of truly-child-centered education.

References

- Deci, Edward L., & Flaste, Richard. (1995). *Why we do what we do: the dynamics of personal autonomy*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Dennison, George. 1969. *The lives of children: the story of the First Street School*. New York: Random House.
- Harrison, Steven. 2002. *The happy child: changing the heart of education*. Boulder, CO: Sentient Publications.
- Holt, John Caldwell. 1976. *Instead of education: ways to help people do things better*. New York: Dutton.
- Hunter, John. 2013. *World peace and other 4th-grade achievements*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Kohn, Alfie. 1993. *Punished by rewards: the trouble with gold stars, incentive plans, A's, praise, and other bribes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.
- Krishnamurti, J. 1953. *Education and the significance of life*. New York: Harper.

Neill, Alexander Sutherland. 1960. *Summerhill: a radical approach to child rearing*. New York: Hart Pub. Co.

Rogers, Carl R. 1961. *On becoming a person: a therapist's view of psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.