

PRINCIPLES

FROM CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

Why In-Person Education Is Essential



MARY STANFORD

JUST A FEW DECADES AGO, ANY educational environment outside the context of a community of persons might be labeled a “correspondence course,” or an “online educational program.” If one’s educational experience were anything other than on-location, a qualifier would be required. Even with the more recent explosion of online graduate programs, it was not until the lockdowns of 2020 that we began to see education in the more traditional sense requiring its own qualifier: “in-person.”

While “in-person” has unfortunately become a necessary qualifier in recent times, the term has also come under suspicion. For if schools could reduce health risks through bypassing a “live” community, just how essential was that community in the first place? Almost at once, we witnessed parents of college students taking a closer look at how much money they were pouring into their children’s “in-person” educations. Many were left questioning the wisdom of such an expenditure simply for a student to enjoy the so-called “perks” of campus life. Why not cut the fat and instead pursue a leaner product? Why overpay when the desired goal—the “substance,” as it were, of an education—could seemingly be purchased for less by

About the Author



Mary Stanford earned a B.A. in philosophy from the University of Dallas and a Master of Theological Studies degree from the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C. Stanford is the author of *The Obedience Paradox: Finding True Freedom in Marriage*, forthcoming in summer 2022 by Our Sunday Visitor. She is an adjunct instructor in the Theology Department of Christendom College. Stanford is a popular speaker at conferences and dioceses across the country on topics including marriage, contraception, sexual differences, and the theology of the body. She lives in Front Royal, Virginia, with her husband and seven children.

bypassing the “real” in pursuit of the virtual?

These questions reveal some assumptions about the nature of education that merit consideration. Much is disclosed through the vocabulary we use—and many misunderstandings come to light when words like “product” and “purchase” are applied to education. This language typically refers to material objects, commodities designed for exchange and subject to evaluation according to standards of efficiency and instrumentality. Why not jump to the obvious conclusion? If my product doesn’t “work,” if it does not effectively accomplish that further goal that I seek, am I not entitled to a refund?

Those of us who promote authentic liberal arts education dismiss the notion that education is a kind of informational product to be purchased, a purely practical instrument, the sole purpose of which is to open doors to wealth or worldly position; it is not a stepping-stone, a hoop through which to jump, nor a box to check. *Though a person’s education may serve practically to assist him in pursuing temporal goals, we hold that education is not merely an instrumental good; it is a good “in itself,” a good that is worth pursuing for its own sake.* To know—to gain a depth of understanding of some facet of reality—is good! We should celebrate education and its role in bringing humans to realize their capacity as intelligent and moral beings.

In fact, even to refer to education as “a good,” as a kind of “thing,” is in itself deceiving—for it is not, strictly speaking, a “thing” at all. In grammatical terms, “education” is

less a noun and closer to an adjective, a quality inhering in another thing; to be an “educated” person is to be a being who has actualized his potential, whose distinctly human capabilities of knowing and choosing have developed more fully. To be “educated” is not simply to have memorized certain concepts or to have mastered a particular skill; it is, in fact, to be a person who knows *how* to think! It implies having developed a *general* habit of mind, which St. John Henry Newman articulates as someone “who has learned to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyze, who has refined his taste, and formed his judgment, and sharpened his mental vision.”¹ As opposed to the common notion that education is a mere “filling up” with facts, we should recall that the word itself stems from the Latin phrase “to lead out.” It is an unfolding of *potential*—which is another way of saying that education involves the development of certain *powers* within the person.

But in what context can such a “leading out,” such an unfolding of powers, occur? Only through personal encounter. Encounter with persons of the past is important, to be sure, as their thoughts are expressed in the great books we read, but just as important is encounter with persons of the present: teachers and fellow students. Just as God’s design indicates that human potential is intended to unfold in the context of a family, so also does true education only reach its full potential in a community: persons coming together to encounter the wisdom of ages past, to converse, to question, to listen, to respond. A true teacher

is not a facilitator of an information dump; a teacher is one who both exhibits and helps to cultivate those habits of mind to which Newman referred. Furthermore, fellow students, through their questions and insights, widen and enhance the perspectives of their peers. Such a process both requires and helps to develop virtues of discipline, intellectual humility, and courage. It is not easy to admit ignorance, to acknowledge the truth of another's perspective, to speak up in front of others who may disagree with us. The development of such dispositions is not possible without an "in-person" community.

A powerful illustration of why "in-person" education is so essential is found by observing nearly two decades of people "interacting" over the internet. It is not difficult to see that discussion and debate removed from bodily encounter tend to devolve into one of two extremes. On the one hand, we witness the phenomenon of the internet "troll," characterized by the selective engagement and straw-man dismissals of the cruel and faceless "comment box." Without having to engage another person face-to-face, people commenting on online articles often "shoot from the hip," conveniently ignoring legitimate points authors might make, and too often completely disregarding the comments of anonymous "others" (whose own possible wisdom and experience remain unconsidered). Recall that in days past, one could only communicate such responses in a letter to the editor. Knowing that one's thoughts would have to be submitted *before another* was



St. John Henry Newman

daunting, because letters containing mere emotional venting tended not to be published. Submission of a letter meant just that: submission. One had to be vulnerable before another, knowing that only the most well-reasoned responses had a chance of being published. Today, one is free to press a key and have his thoughts stand right alongside those of others with no effort, humility, or engagement required—as the resulting deterioration of online critical discourse bears daily witness.

The flip side of this non-engagement is found in self-affirming "online echo chambers." When it is easy to block or "cancel" opposing views, people online find it quite comfortable to relate only with those whose thoughts do not challenge their own in any way. What so often happens, however, is that people's intellectual capacities deteriorate. Unless we actually encounter others and work to develop the skills of listening, reasoning, and articulating, we are at risk of substituting others'

thoughts for our own. The term “groupthink” attempts to describe just that situation in which individuals have forfeited their own intellectual powers through a lack of development—through a lack of authentic *education*.

True education can only occur where there is bodily encounter. Only face-to-face encounter *forces us to be vulnerable*—to let down that all-too-convenient buffer that enables us to dodge difficult questions and to avoid thinking for ourselves “on our feet.” Only live encounter presents the opportunity for courage—to take a risk and find our voice even when we fear others may disagree or misunderstand. Like all virtues, intellectual discipline and courage only develop with practice and such practice requires the presence of others. When we meet face-to-face, there is nowhere to hide! Such an experience tests our abilities and challenges us to improve. Many today are shying away from such direct contact because they find it daunting, without considering how much they are poised to gain.

To see others in the flesh, to look them in the eye, also enables us to recognize them as *whole* persons. As St. John Paul II wrote, “the body reveals man.”² When our primary mode of relating to others is through technology rather than through the body, we run the risk of perceiving them in a one-dimensional way, as less than persons. When we relate in the flesh, it is much more difficult to dismiss them (or to be dismissed!) with a convenient label. Instead, we are compelled not only to consider what they have to say, but to respond with reason and charity.

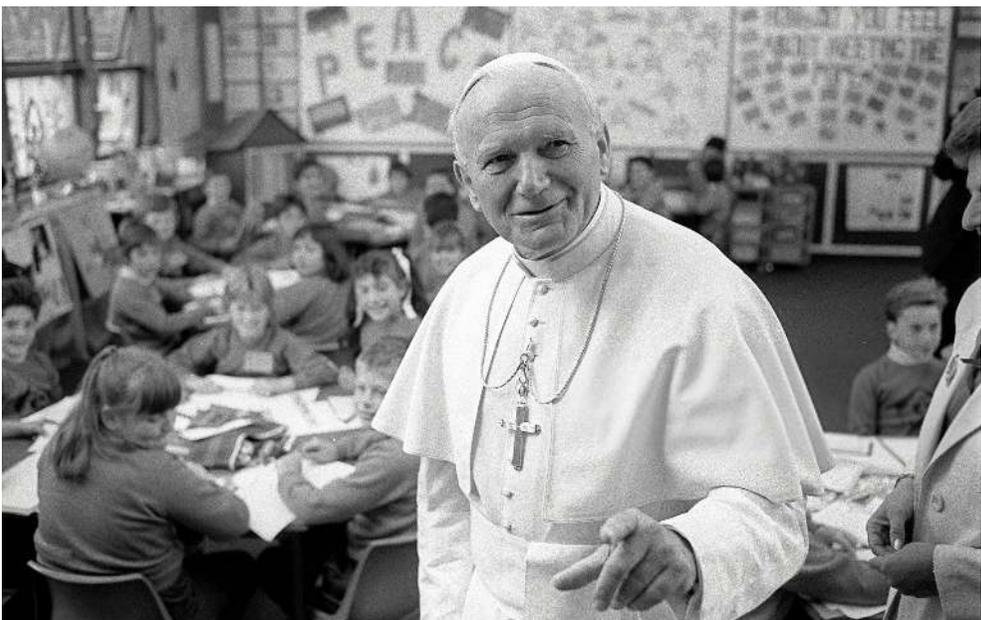
There is a reason that charity is so little practiced online, for shamelessness reigns where there are no bodies. St. John Paul II taught that the experience of shame, though deeply misunderstood today, is, in fact, to be regarded as a kind of mutually protective response in human relations.³ To “feel” a sense of shame is just that: to *physically* sense when oneself or another is in danger of “crossing a line,” of mistreating another person. It is a physical awareness of an invisible threat to one’s dignity. To blush, to break out into a sweat, to avoid one’s gaze, to cover up—these simple examples from everyday life reveal that the warning signs of shame only manifest themselves in the context of physical encounter. When we avoid persons physically, such instinctive responses are rarely manifest, and it becomes all too easy to view others as mere objects rather than as persons worthy of respect. Insulting, dismissive, and degrading treatment of others is an unavoidable consequence of taking the body out of the equation. It is only in facing others that we can begin to grow. For to face others paradoxically means facing ourselves—acknowledging “before another” what we believe and what we have done. Facing others requires being honest about ourselves. There can be no growth without such humbling experiences.

There is a reason why many students grew disengaged during lockdown. Whether we intend it or not, education cannot help being “reduced” to a product when we strive to become educated *outside of community*. Schooling without encounter requires no vulnerability,

no courage, no real consideration of others' thoughts. "What do we need to know for the test?" quickly becomes the pressing concern. The temptation to cheat—to essentially substitute others' thoughts for one's own—is only a logical consequence when the very essence of education, a personal encounter, is truncated through technology. Without the ongoing challenge presented by learning with and from others around us, "education" begins to resemble more and more only a stepping-stone, an instrumental means valued solely for its power to help one "get on" with life.

Perhaps one reason that so many parents are questioning the worth of "in-person" education today is that so much of what has come to pass as education in our culture is not, in fact, authentic. There is career training, to be sure; college freshmen begin specializing in their respective fields from day one at so many colleges and universities. But such narrow instruction is often

purely instrumental and is not valued for its own sake, but only as a path to some future career. Should the need for such skills shift, or should the student discover that he is no longer interested in the field, such schooling is deemed a waste. Our culture has embraced what Joseph Pieper called the "training of functionaries" as "education" for nearly a century now.⁴ If education is only about training workers and not about cultivating humanity in general, why not choose the most efficient path? But if education is more than merely instrumental, and in fact possesses a value "in itself" as a quality of human intellectual and moral development, we must reexamine how we educate our young. To assert this truth is not to deny the importance of the practical. A liberal arts education may in fact "result" in the best kind of practical effects in society, but it does so indirectly by refusing to bypass the whole in order to focus on the part. Modern "training of functionaries"



Pope St. John Paul II visits a classroom in Australia (1986).

ABOUT PRINCIPLES Animated by the joyful, lived experience of the faith, *Principles* draws on the fruits of an authentically Catholic liberal arts education to explore the ideas necessary to live a fully integrated Catholic life: one that upholds the value of human dignity, the role of virtue in private and public spheres, and the centrality of charity in both thought and action. We envision a Church—and a watching world—that embraces sound reason rooted in a robust faith.

approaches the person himself in a partial way, seeing no need to develop any perspective beyond its particular aim. In doing so, however, this modern approach ignores the fullness of man's identity, treating him as simply a means rather than as an end. Such a "student" is perhaps least prepared to bring about genuinely beneficial practical contributions to society. A true education is instrumental; but it is not merely instrumental, and this one word makes all the difference.

Education is about developing fully human persons who are prepared to face the problems of their time. By focusing on the person "as a whole" and without an expectation of a particular application of his skills, an authentic education indirectly provides a foundation for an unlimited array of practical applications. But if this is so—if education is about developing the ability to see the big picture and to make moral choices that build a culture in which future generations will flourish—we are foolish not to consider the context in which it occurs. For a person to become "educated" in the deepest sense, community is not optional, but rather essential.

Consider how many colleges fail to provide a true community at all:

how many are designed according to a humane scale whereby persons are *actually* affected by the presence of others? With behemoth class sizes, many students find themselves strangers to fellow classmates, and even more so to their professors. One parent I know was disturbed to find that one of his daughter's class sections was so large that it was *already* being offered optionally online for students to watch in their dorm rooms—well before the lockdowns sent everyone home! The option existed not because of a virus, but because it was plain that one's bodily presence in class did not make a difference! True community *requires* bodily encounter, conversations, and shared experiences among its students and faculty; massive class sizes (designed for practical efficiency, no doubt) fail to consider this truth and so often fail to create the conditions in which education in the deepest sense is even possible. In other words, the reason so many are finding themselves eschewing the cost of "in-person" community after the lockdown is because they were not, in fact, experiencing true community in the first place.

Does this imply that there is no place for schooling that imparts employable skills? Certainly not.

But we in our culture are deceiving ourselves if we think that mere job training will provide for all our needs. Pieper reminds us that

Training is distinguished by its orientation toward something partial, and specialized, in the human being, and toward some one section of the world... Education concerns the whole human being insofar as he is *capax universi*, “capable of the whole,” able to comprehend the sum total of existing things.⁵

In a society where current debate questions the very existence of sexual difference, the value of human life, and the role of the family, we are in desperate need of human beings who are educated in the fullest sense. The future of our culture will depend upon whether

we are willing to avoid letting training in particular skills come at the cost of the liberal arts education that provides the building blocks of our culture itself. We need future leaders who ask “why?” and not just “how?” and we need citizens capable of considering before complying.

Only the educated person is prepared to evaluate and to direct technological achievements; for “the way of mere technical skill, the way of sheer power,” as Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) wrote, is not the ...expression of one’s being made in the image and likeness of God. What characterizes man as man is not that he asks about the “can” but about the “should” and that he opens himself to the voice and demands of truth.⁶

Only an education for its own sake can cultivate those habits of reasoning and judgment so desperately lacking in our world today—and only through living in community can students nurture those virtues that dispose them to reach their human potential. 

PRINCIPLES

FROM CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

PRODUCTION MANAGER

Adam Wilson

ART DIRECTOR

Niall O’Donnell

© 2022 Christendom College

The opinions expressed in PRINCIPLES are not necessarily the views of Christendom College.

For copying and reprinting permission, see getprinciples.com/about.

SUBSCRIPTION FREE UPON REQUEST.

GETPRINCIPLES.COM



CHRISTENDOM
COLLEGE

FOOTNOTES

1. John Henry Cardinal Newman, “Discourse 7: Knowledge Viewed in Relation to Professional Skill,” in *The Idea of a University* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 166-167.
2. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 9: 4.
3. *Ibid.*, 12: 1.
4. Josef Pieper, *Leisure, The Basis of Culture*, trans. Gerald Malsbary (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine’s Press, 1998), 43.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Joseph Ratzinger, “Conscience and Truth,” presented at the 10th Workshop for Bishops, February, 1991, Dallas, Texas.

Get free, weekly videos to help you uphold your Catholic faith!

As Catholics today, we face a culture seeking to sweep away the roots and reasons for our beliefs. That's why Christendom is offering short, helpful videos giving you access to some of the greatest thinkers and spiritual insights from our Catholic tradition. Join thousands of fellow Catholics each week by signing up for the Principles for Your Week video series.

Access and sign up for your free videos today!



PRINCIPLESFORYOURWEEK.COM



PRAYER INTENTION

FROM COLLEGE
PRESIDENT
DR. TIMOTHY
O'DONNELL

We pray for Catholic parents everywhere to give their children an education rooted in the truths of faith and reason. Through their dedication to Jesus Christ, who is Truth Himself, may Catholic families flourish amidst the challenges of our modern world.

Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us.
Immaculate Heart of Mary, pray for us.

NONPROFIT
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
Huntington, IN
Permit # 832



**CHRISTENDOM
COLLEGE**

Front Royal, Virginia