

SEDA and AISHE Conference - keynote address

The Unbearable Lightness of Education

Presenter(s): Professor Robert Stake

Institution(s): University of Illinois

Time: 4.15pm on Thursday 11th

Abstract:

The title of our session this afternoon is a play upon the title of Milan Kundera's anti-totalitarian novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Kundera found the life of each of us greatly shaped by chance, largely indeterminate, noting our resistance to rules and customs, yet constrained by comfort, fear, and habit. He spoke of lives as events occurring but once, each moment unique in important ways and too weak a guide to events still to come. "Everything occurs but once," he said.

I am not going to talk today primarily about teaching and learning, the processes of Education. I am going to talk about the product of Education, the resulting education that each person holds inside his or her being, and refines, and re-forms in part each day. I ask you to concentrate for half an hour upon us as educated.

As professional educators, it is our business, yours and mine, to build institutions and guide educators who will educate them the way their parents and our patrons want them educated. We would perpetuate our privileges for them, and multiply their opportunities. But the students' business and ours collide. Our directions splay.

Oh, they coincide when it leads to quest for material appetites, the car payment and rent on the apartment. But a stronger appetite in our students is for the heavy education of their curiosities. We, on the other hand, want them heavy with the education of our syllabi. And the two heavinesses are infiltrated, honeycombed with the insinuations of personal indifference, appetite for social standing, obstinacy, and creative zest. The individual mind will not settle for the intended generosity of the curriculum.

Personal education, and the collective education of our people, exist largely without registry in diaries, test scores, grade books and job applications. Our indicators fail to indicate (Shavelson & Stern, 1981). Each education is so vast, so idiosyncratic and context-bound, so electric-with each mind drawn to a variety of social causes. Education as a product defies our efforts to represent it.

Yet it is felt important to know how much we know, important to repair each education's fissures, and so necessary to justify the social investment in Education. It is unbearable that we cannot display knowledge and ignorance on our spreadsheets. Our need to do so and inability to do so leads us often to pretense and deceit. We professionals especially are often ashamed to acknowledge the lightness of Education.