Business and Education: The Ever-Growing Chasm

M. R. Lupul

On the surface, the above subject might appear a very strange – perhaps even ridiculous – one to write about at this time. Certainly the cooperation between business and the schools has never been closer than it is at present. Business education, for example, is firmly established in all high schools and schools of business administration or commerce abound on North American campuses. The enormous growth in the 1960s of vocational education programs to accommodate the needs of business (euphemistically termed "society") also illustrates the close relationship which exists between business and the schools. And, of course, the equally close relationship between business and higher education, which observant university students have noted in recent years, is now conventional wisdom. Perhaps less well known is the relationship which has been shown to exist between the techniques of management and the symbols of success in business and the techniques of administration and pupil reward in the schools. One of the earliest scholars to delineate the relationship, in terms which are remarkably contemporary, was Ellwood P. Cubberley who wrote in 1916:

> Our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacuring come from the demands of twentieth century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down. This demands good tools, specialized machinery, continuous measurement of production to see if it is according to specifications, the elimination of waste in manufacture, and a large variety in the output.[1]

In recent years we have merely carried this relationship to its most sophisticated level, and thanks to the efforts of enterprising school administrators, terms common in the world of business management such as "input-output," "public relations," "hardware," "feasibility," "cost benefit," "systems analysis," "strategies," even "futurology" (i.e. long-range planning!) have entered the jargon of professional education. Even so, the struggle of managers of school plants to hold their own with managers of industrial plants has not been without its frustrations. As one writer (to whom I am also indebted for some of the above terms) has recently put it:

> Out of World War II, the engineering schools, the space race, the mass-production factories, the think tanks and the advertising budgets of the computer companies came the several concepts of: operations analysis, automation-cybernation, communication theory, systems engineering, and a vast further infusion of the information technology that has grown up with, and around, the computer.[2]

Nor have social and behavioural scientists helped to ease the burden of the up-to-date student of school management with concepts such as "motivational research," "depth interviews" and "personality testing."

> A recent addition to this battery of manipulatory devices is 'sensitivity training,' a sort of secular, emotional revival meeting where the participants are encouraged to shed their benevolent human masks and show their diabolical innermost selfs, not to God but to the Organization.

And fittingly enough, "This witch-hunt of the psyche has already been recommended for all those coming into teaching."[3]

It should be clear, then, that at every level of the educational system, it is the business community which not only calls the tune, but through obliging school administrators ensures that its techniques and ethos permeate the entire enterprise.[4] But if this is so, how then can one speak of a chasm between business and education? Everything hinges on one's understanding of the term "education." Once one accepts business "education" as trade training pure and simple, schools of business administration, and various vocational studies (including *all* specialized programs, however suffused with so-called broadening subjects – history, literature, philos-

ophy, etc. – which have mainly professional or commercial goals), the gap between business and education becomes painfully evident. And, conversely, once one appreciates that education is essentially an inquiry into the meaning of life or a study of the purpose of existence on a twirling ball suspended in space with a life-sustaining atmosphere, some ninety-three million miles away from an indispensable but not always benevolent sun, the gap widens into a positive chasm.

This is so because business is fundamentally not interested in metaphysics. Subjects like the purpose of life, God, evil, the afterlife, the origins of the universe and life itself, the source of values, the just society, the status of minority rights are all controversial and everyone knows that controversy is bad for business. Men in the factory or office who ask fundamental questions about why things are the way they are, men who seek justification for society's customs, including the ways of business, soon gain a reputation of being "hard-to-get-along-with types," even negative thinkers, in a business world which draws its inspiration from the positive thinking of apologists like President Nixon's favourite, the Rev. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. Naturally, the "difficult types" become promotion problems, when they are retained at all. They are too unpredictable to be trusted; and since business success, according to the sacred canons of that other oracle of modern business, Dale Carnegie, depends upon winning friends and influencing people, it is not good business practice to employ thoughtful people who on any given day might undo the hard-won gains of costly public relations personnel.

As a result, with all the blame which the educational establishment itself must shoulder for allowing the business segment of the community to set the major direction of schooling in the 1960s,[5] the main responsibility for the predominance of job training in today's schools must still rest with the business establishment. For it is the latter which sets the dominant values of our society and thus the main tone and direction of such institutions as the school. Of these values, one of the most important is that the extent of public expenditure should either be minimal to discourage socialism or socialistic thinking, or that the burden of any public enterprise on the taxpayer be as light as possible. As a result, the costs of education are regular front-page headlines yet, paradoxically, busi-

ness is more than willing to absorb the far greater costs of job training in the schools with nary a murmur. For it is well-known that job training not only requires equipment which is far more expensive than the most extravagant of literary and audio-visual resources for a good liberal education, but job training is conducted with daily teacher-pupil ratios which seldom exceed one hundred as compared to the two hundred-odd pupils which the non-vocational teacher will teach in an average day. The cynic might be tempted to conclude that any enterprise supported out of public funds or, in the simple ideology of the Chamber of Commerce and the Canadian Manufacturers' Association, "socialism," is quite acceptable as long as it is socialism which aids the business community!

The dangers to a democratic way of life of the ever-growing chasm between business and education are practically self-evident. First, there is the question of an ignorant electorate, or at best an electorate which, when it is not indifferent or just plain cynical towards politics, sees the latter as a form of entertainment, sometimes as an absorbing drama in which the final outcome is an emotional elevation of a Big Brother-like figure — a political saviour, vague on specific policies but strong on charisma, on whom one can unload the country's troubles and go fishing. The last federal election in Canada was a good example of the latter.[6] The phoniness of democratic politics, however, does not bother the business community, for most members pride themselves in being realists and as such have long ago written off political democracy as a form of government to be taken seriously. Not that any businessman would admit as much publicly. In business, it is best not to tamper with the sacred, except to praise it. Social democracy, on the other hand, may openly be criticized and resisted. It could lead to democracy in the factory – the surest road to communism, and one on which our society has already travelled, pretty far, thanks to teachers (and their "pliable young minds"[7]) under the misguided influence of CCF-NDP propaganda!

The fact that ignorant consumers are also the result of the school's failure to educate does not bother the business community either, for who needs consumers who can see through commercials, who understand the true cost of buying on credit, and who appreciate the ways in which tax laws subsidize the living standards of

the very businessmen who inveigh against the welfare payments made to the many categories of unfortunate non-businessmen?

The above are long-standing dangers which the business community has cleverly turned into assets. Political and economic illiterates are, in fact, essential if business pressure groups are to succeed at the centres of political power. However, of late at least a few high school students have refused to follow in the meek footsteps of their fathers. They have come to realize that they are not getting an education in the schools.[8] Some drop out, but most realize that there is no place for them in a business society which has decreed that without a Grade XII diploma (or better), there is little work. So they stay in school and "raise cain." That is, they listen to their seniors in the New Left movement at the universities, become half-educated about the world around them, and ask their embarrassed teachers impertinent questions, which are, of course, quite irrelevant to the main business at hand, namely, the acquisition of attitudes, skills, and paper qualifications needed to get a job.

All this is most unfortunate, for if there is any one thing which emerges from current student unrest, it is that students (particularly at the senior high school level) want to be taken seriously. That is, they want to know why men must continue to hate each other; why war seems interminable; why men cannot trust each other; and all the other "whys" associated with such peculiarly human institutions as marriage, law and order, social class, and the whole range of customs, morals, and taboos. In short, what they want is a liberal education, even if it begins and ends with the twentieth century, or even just the post-World War II world. They are particularly interested in and appalled by the gap which exists between democracy as an ideal and the "democracy" they see about them. And they want to know why the gap has to be so wide.[9]

The world of business had best be forewarned, therefore, that the weaknesses of today's public schools are readily detectable and that some high school students are becoming increasingly impatient with the manipulative techniques of school management. They also realize that they are being cheated out of a right as important as liberty itself, namely, the right to an education which justifies the ways of man to man and not merely sanctimoniously sanctions them. And when the dike does finally break (as it already has at

the universities), businessmen should know that the main responsibility will be theirs, for it is their values and techniques which the schools largely reflect and the narrow needs of their enterprises which the schools mainly serve at present.

Notes and References

1. E. P. Cubberley, *Public School Administration*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916, pp. 337-38, quoted in R. G. Corwin, *A Sociology of Education*, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965, p. 80.
2. H. Hay, "How Is The Teacher To Do His Own Thing, Baked In This Structured Togetherness?" *Monday Morning*, Vol. III, 9, (May 1969), p. 31.
3. *Ibid.* For a more balanced, critical assessment of 'sensitivity training,' see T. Borton, "Reach, Touch, and Teach," *Saturday Review*, January 18, 1969, pp. 56-58+.
4. This point is well-developed in Corwin, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-81.
5. The writer has discussed this aspect of the question in "Commercialism and Vocationalism in Contemporary Canadian Education — A Criticism and A Plea," *Canadian Education and Research Digest*, Vol. VI, 4 (December 1966), pp. 331-41.
6. See D. Peacock, *Journey to Power: The Story of a Canadian Election*, Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1968, especially pp. 333-47.
7. Editorial headline in *The Edmonton Journal*, January 16, 1970, carrying in full the reply of *The Vancouver Sun's* editor to a mother's request for information on "How the United States is exploiting the resources and industries of Canada," assigned by a Port Alberni Grade XII teacher with an "apparent bias," an "assumption (which) is the stock-in-trade of the ultra left-wing Watkins faction in the New Democratic Party." After providing the usual defence of U.S. investment in Canada, the *Sun's* editor concluded: "Without that kind of exploitation, the Port Alberni school district would be hard put to pay the salary of the teacher who assigned the essay topic." The moral is as clear as it is old: "Do not bite the hand that feeds you."
8. On this subject, see almost any issue of *This Magazine Is About Schools*, published since April 1966 by the Everdale Place, a free school near Toronto. Valuable also is the 16 mm., half-hour movie, "No Reason To Stay," produced by the National Film Board of Canada from a script written originally by a high school student.
9. Based on the writer's participation in "The Forum Club," Strathcona Composite High School, Edmonton, Alberta, November 12, 1969. See also P. Goodman, *Compulsory Mis-education*, New York: Horizon Press, 1964, especially pp. 84-97 for an able analysis of the many questions and behavioural dilemmas which face today's youth.