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## Who Wants the Truth If It's Boring?

Though the title of this article may well have roots elsewhere, I read it on the men's room wall in the Student Union Building at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Appearing with it were other "seventyisms" such as: "Incest is Relative," "Minnie Mouse wears stretch pants" and "Monday will be cancelled 'cause of lack of interest." They led me to believe that graffiti of this kind might be a key to the genre of the age? August Mau, in his epoch work, *Pompeii, Its Life and Art*, described a Pompeiian wall on which was inscribed, *Romula hic cum Staphylo moratur*, "Romula tarried here with Staphylus," and another, *Restitutus multas decepit saepe puellas*, "Restitutus has many times deceived many girls." Somehow, the Pompeiians appear more human when these remarks are added to the petrified remains of what was once an important society.

There is certainly something (I almost said some essence) to be gleaned from the walls of today's toilets. When I first read, "Who wants the truth if it's boring," I laughed. After serious reflection (I was at the time in an ideal setting for contemplation), I was left with the feeling that an historian some two thousand years hence might give his eye teeth for these quotes. Since the wall of the men's room will be long gone, I thought I'd better try to see them published. The rest of this article can be left out of the time capsule.

The boring truth is that many people today would rather be entertained than educated. Education has always had its negativists; but where once such people were classified as neurotics using defense mechanisms, they now appear as the norm. Today's student is not only freer with his criticism

than he is with his effort, he is many times in no position to judge because he has not known the experience intended. The argument here expressed is not aimed at repressing student criticism, but rather to pointing out the fallacy of a student criticising an experience he hasn't had. The dedicated student has undergone a different curriculum than has his counterpart the "neo-borderline" student.

The new freedom somehow makes great allowance for anti-thought of any kind and conversely has little time for students who become positively involved or excited about anything, particularly something as trivial as subject matter. "Don't knock it til you've tried it" somehow has relevance where sex and dope are involved but none when speaking of commitment. The committed student is now deemed "hung up" on something.

Many students decry all but those experiences which come without pain or effort. In less affluent times and in less affluent contemporary societies students arrive in class, not only willing to work but "hungry" to learn. Teachers in foreign service return home dismayed when faced with the "I dare you to break my apathy" syndrome present in so many North American students. It is a difficult transition from "anything will do" to "nothing will do." There must be an optimal middle ground somewhere.

## relevance

Certainly, traditional education is replete with weaknesses. Practices such as: "over-emphasis on grades," "personal ridicule as a motivational force," "intolerance of sincere self-initiated study" and "insistence on a single answer in instances where more than one answer is appropriate" are difficult to defend. These practices should be changed; but they don't automatically relegate a course or education to the realm of the irrelevant. Students are rarely in a position to know what will turn out to be relevant when they do get to wherever it is they eventually find the place is, toward which, they are preparing themselves. As a practicing professional, my evaluation constantly changes regarding the relevance of each of the courses in my own formal education. Teachers and administrators who place with students the responsibility for determining the worth or relevance of a course frequently find that students can no more agree than can the senior members of the academic community.

The great Canadian scholar, Northrup Frye, describes the feeling that relevance is inherent in certain subjects as an elementary fallacy. He speaks of relevance as "a quality which a student brings to what he studies."<sup>2</sup>

Two quick ways to gain a "relevant rating" are to: 1) include in assigned readings the works of Pierre Vallières, Malcolm "X" and Stokely Carmichael or; 2) allow the students to determine course objectives, course content, assignments and evaluation procedures. The thought that one must be radical to be relevant, though having its own ramifications in the "counter-culture," is so obviously spurious that it makes argument unnecessary. Perhaps B. F. Skinner best answered the proponents of the latter practice when he wrote, "to make the student solve the problem of learning is to refuse to solve the problem of teaching."<sup>3</sup> Though sometimes based on the purest of intentions, courses which are student directed often turn out to fall far short of being a cure-all and, ironically, are frequently unpopular. Directed study is most beneficial if the student has a broad based background and has mastered the rudiments of the subject he is attempting to study.

## **education toward thinking**

Another common fallacy concerning education in the 70's is that which claims a dichotomy between those who teach "thinking" and those who teach "subject matter." A course which would not merely provide "thinking" practice, but actually teach "how to think," would have to be ranked as the most important of all courses. Given that such a course is feasible or even given that such a course existed, it would still not negate the necessity of background courses which deal with "subject matter." I can think of no endeavor which requires either intellectual or neuro-motor preparation which does not first require a firm grasp of the fundamentals. This reasoning can be extended beyond the professions and trades to the areas of artistic efforts.

Those who push non-relevance frequently accuse the "traditional" system of squelching creativity. Unfeeling practices such as expecting assignments to be turned in on time and periodically checking to see if content is fleetingly remembered are cited as examples of practices which produce robot-like products instead of free-thinking individuals. Research can be cited showing a comparative lack of creativity in ele-

mentary school students who have not been given ample freedom during class time.

The research, for the most part, is both valid and reliable. The argument here expressed is not with the findings of this research, but rather with the conclusions. To create is, by definition, to produce, to form, or to cause to exist. A synonym for creation might be invention. Inventions take an infinite number of forms, each with its own distinctions. The values of each of these inventions if placed along a continuum would range from meaningless contrivances to such things as the steam engine or the light bulb. Creativity, by its very nature, takes on a like quality of diverse forms; and it too can be placed on a continuum of worth, with each creation taking its place relative to all other creations.

The creations which are not coming to fruition because of the "traditional methods" belong, for the most part, on the lower end of the theoretical value scale. The conclusions drawn from many of the contemporary studies infer that these students will never be creative. If this is the truth, then by all means teachers should revamp all of education and put a stop to this sterilization of our young, potentially creative minds. If, however, this is not the case, perhaps education is moving too fast too soon in directions it should not be moving.

If the areas of creativity which society seems to deem most sophisticated are studied, perhaps conclusions can be drawn from a more solid foundation. The broad areas of art and music present example after example of truly creative individuals. Behind each such person is a background of staunch discipline and training. They are usually individuals whose backgrounds indicate a self-imposed discipline which goes well beyond that demanded by the normal school situation. It is interesting to note that Peggy Fleming, proclaimed by many as the most graceful and creative figure skater in history, was also the best competitor in the obligatory figures in the 1968 Olympics. Her background is replete with thousands of grueling hours of both self-imposed and teacher-imposed discipline. Vera Caslavka; who was the winner of four gold medals in the women's gymnastic competition in Mexico, has a similar background. Her ability to create beauty in movement cannot be questioned by anyone who had the privilege of watching her perform.

The best of musicians, composers, choreographers, painters, sculptors, dancers, athletes, writers, poets, and innovators of

all types are the products of similar disciplined experiences. Examples in each of the arts could be given to the point of redundancy. Their backgrounds negate the unfounded supposition that early discipline "murders" the creative mind. It is much more probable that these "artists" are products of their environment rather than the antithesis of it. The probable situation is that not one of them could have produced high quality creativity without first developing the necessary tools. Certainly, there are aspirants who never get beyond the technical phase of their arts. The creation is much more than the skills which produced it; but, paradoxically, the sophisticated creation is not possible without the highly developed skill abilities.

Where then does the answer lie? Should education strive for militarism? Should everything be done by the numbers? The answer to these questions is an emphatic NO! A neo-gestapo philosophy is anything but the answer to the dilemmas of education, but neither is a system which short-changes a student to the point where no learning takes place at all.

The divergent personality does not always indicate a creative mind. No third grader is going to lose creative potential because he is taught manners or forced to show respect for his elders. Consistency of response in formal situations does not demand a robot-like mind and does not produce rigidity of personality.

In essence, education includes more than trial and error. Emile would no longer be considered well-educated. Subject matter is important. A student who does not learn the rudimentary beginnings spends the rest of his life trying to learn them. This expenditure has a deleterious effect on creativity because it is time that could be spent on the creative process. It is an expense not accrued by the potential creator who has received the educational background needed for his personally selected aims and objectives. There is a time for experimentation and play. It comes immediately after the acquisition of the fundamentals. The job of educating toward creativity therefore demands, first, a transferal of subject matter. Equipped with that which went before, each student can make his mistakes on the frontier. Teacher direction can save him unnecessary floundering and take him to the brink sooner. It is in this wilderness that the beauty of discovery becomes perceptible.

It's interesting that when students are asked to list the qual-

ities of a good teacher, the list can invariably be used to describe a good student. It would be better for all if the discerning eye at all levels of the academic community would be cast first in the mirror.

## **references**

1. August Mau, *Pompeii, Its Life and Art*, New York: The MacMillan Company, 1904, p. 496.
2. Speech delivered at Mount Saint Vincent's Academy, Halifax, Nova Scotia, on October 29, 1971.
3. Nova Scotia Department of Education, *Education Nova Scotia*, Vol. 1 (January, 1971), p. 8.