

Education Fads versus Individual Rights

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American pedagogy often fails to recognize its basic responsibilities and its proper limits.

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The Shabby Tolls of Big Ideas

“Let us remember that revolutions do not always establish freedom,” an otherwise unimpressive U.S. president sagely admonished in 1852. Lucid enough when applied to upheavals of entire societies, the advice might serve as a sobering thought as well for educators imbued with revolutionary teaching methodology. The methods in serious need of critical review include such turn-of-millennium trends as projects by groups, cooperative learning, active learning, skits and role playing, classroom fun and games and many a dubious combination of these socially presumptuous agendas.

Far from trivial are the failings of such activities—as when, for instance, demeaning behavior is suddenly made compulsory, or when, for instance, cooperative notions are travestied in torrents of thoughtless groupthink; or worst of all when educators drawing salaries to be in charge are not of sufficient smarts to intervene when lesson plans they instigated have plainly gone awry. Troubles of the sort can arise in various educational settings but most endemically in teacher-education courses—hardly a credible way for costly and time-devouring teacher-training regimes to claim to be a part of the solution to this nation’s other monumental education problems.

Ill-conceived teaching methods have blighted this author’s memories of not just one but three entirely mainstream institutions, all to remain nameless in this article. The first example occurred at a reputable university of which I happen to be an alumnus.

Explosion Tag

In a spirit of self-improvement upon my final semester preceding an engineering degree, I ventured into unfamiliar territory by choosing a course in voice training offered by the theater department.

Hardly had the first class begun when the eagerly smiling young teacher decreed that we were about to embark on an educational adventure entitled “explosion tag.” The rule of the game was this: whenever you were tagged by the person who was “it,” you had to erupt with a howl or a scream or some other wordless vocal explosion by means of which to initiate yourself in some kind of radically uninhibited new condition of mind and voice—a new dimension of self-liberation that earned you the role of “it.”

I took a dim view of this all too avant-garde inspiration. At the price of seeming a humorless person to some, I consider mandatory asinine behavior a violation of personal space. And yet at the onset of explosion tag I automatically succumbed along with everyone else to a mass display of social emergency

grins that signified our submission to the agenda (though soon I was not quite following instructions). I should have just walked out the door. A most embarrassed “*Nothing really!*” was the only vocal reaction that I was able to muster on failing to avoid being tagged. (A Bronx cheer would have served as the class act for that occasion had I thought of it in time.) And then in the course of the pseudo-spontaneous monotony, one confused young man attempted originality by slapping another guy in the face—not a terribly violent smack though still a bad enough one to arouse a groaning “*Ohhh!*” of wretchedly grinning objection from the rest of the crowd. Nevertheless our mentor allowed the show to proceed until most of the class had been duly exploded.

There followed after explosion tag a most egregious tongue-protrusion exercise, the story of which I spare the reader.

When the class was over at last I began to ponder those events with mounting disgust and bewilderment. One day later I dropped the ludicrous humanities course and fled to a math course I luckily found still open, the non-human grace of the latter affording a healthier break for humanity as far as I was concerned.

The Behavior Mod Players

Later in life I aspired to become a high school physics teacher—this in the freedom-respecting aim of teaching at the nicely never compulsory physics advanced-placement level—having often stood in awe of the mathematics inhering within the laws and the mysteries of the physical universe. I hoped this fascination might prove contagious with the kinds of students who would naturally choose the subject. In pursuit of a teaching certificate, and also in the hope of learning something worthwhile in the process, I enrolled in an evening course in classroom management at another school with a good reputation.

Far from offering a good introduction to the art of classroom management, the course itself became a prime example of the endless ways in which naive and cavalier educational innovations are liable to miscarry in the classroom social arena.

With no choice at all I was promptly tossed by means of random selection into a project entitled “Behavior Modification,” in which I and four others were assigned the future task of researching and then presenting to the class the model of classroom management based on the behaviorist theories of B.F. Skinner. “Group One” became our name and our fate on the schedule of group presentations on various models to be covered in the course. To this directive the professor added a role-playing exercise for which as her only guidance she urged us all to just “Relax! Enjoy!”

Unanimous aversion for the role-playing chore was apparently the only thing I had in common with the rest of the group—all of them women of the undergraduate years, a critical mass of peers indeed, all of them would-be teachers of the middle or primary grades. Meetings accomplished nothing beyond the parceling out of research topic requirements. The young collegians chatted each other up in the manner of a natural sorority, one to which this middle-aged male stranger could hardly be expected to belong. (A smidgen of worldly wisdom could have predicted as much.) And not being one to intrude, I soon lapsed into a condition of minimal participation that remained nevertheless polite. Little did I know that my awkward social circumstance would soon be instrumental to their eleventh-hour scheme for handling our jointly neglected theatrical obligation.

Scheduled as I was to lead off the presentation with a required biography of B.F. Skinner, I should have grown suspicious when on the eve of the show the role-playing question was briefly addressed with a cryptic reference to something they chose to call “audience participation.” Nothing more was explained on the following night as the supercilious clique arrived equipped with a batch of cutesy stars designed to go on a poster chart on which appeared a number of names of their other pals in the class.

To my complete surprise the audience participation commenced as soon as I began my talk. Spurts of laughter, airborne objects and other distractions abounded in a general atmosphere of comic expectation—all of which I had no authorized way of addressing, the others having arranged the show and established a monopoly on the ostensible instruments of behavior modification. The tittering and

other disturbances continued at this merry pace for quite some time as I did my best to speak, and then one fellow stole the show by overturning in his chair on the floor with a crash.

Startled like everyone else, I tried to put a good face on this by smiling bravely and asking, “Was that in the script?”

The professor, our “guide on the side” as fanciful doctrine would have it, laughed along with my question as if all of us were marvelously engaged in a highly dynamic celebration of pro-socially cooperative interactive learning, or something as fashionable as all that, with a wonderful time being had by all.

The reality in my own case was that each and every word was now a struggle to enunciate in the ghastliest case of dried-up salivary glands that I can ever remember.

The furniture percussionist, flush no doubt with the triumph of his well-timed spill, now came forward, walked behind me and played behind my back some kind of role that drew astonished laughter from the class—impudence enough to leave this dutiful speaker feeling as demolished as that “Weekend Update” commentator who used to serve as the object of the stealthy scorn that Chevy Chase was famous for delivering on *Saturday Night Live*. It may have been something other than Chevy’s routine, but in any case I had been thoroughly upstaged in a way that others had found outrageously funny. I remained in dire need of a drink of water, not to mention a hunk of bubble gum or something to restore the normal ability to unglue one syllable of speech from another.

A story that I then went on to relate from Skinner’s memoir of his youth was in its own right funny, but the unremitting spasms of mirth remained in sync with other events in the room and not with this; few in the class were listening at all.

The world-renowned Faber College would ably serve as the flagship school for such an academic league as this. Aside from simply walking out on the whole affair (the best resort in retrospect), what was one to do about this game without a referee? This show without a gong? Retaliatory juvenility as an attempt at saving face would hardly have been the age-appropriate answer; it never even occurred to me as an option. The high road would have been to find some way to assert a scheduled speaker’s normal rights—a feat of non-cooperation far more easily said than done against this reign of what amounted to a flash mob facilitated by a magisterial school of education. A foiled attempt would only have made the bad scene worse, and something told me it would have been politically unwise. Choosing therefore to avoid disrupting the behavior-modification dramatization, I played the accepting good sport from beginning to end. Such is the occasional vulnerability of someone who defers to the airy-fairy theories and the slapdash group dynamics that all too often govern the training of America’s would-be teachers.

Throughout this activity my Group One colleagues were nonchalantly engaged in functions like sticking stars beside the names on the poster. The stars, I guess, were tokens awarded for cessation of misbehavior. Regardless of these and other charades, the distractions persisted for the duration of my talk—and then subsided rapidly when I was finished at last.

The role playing ended with that as everyone’s polite attention was then accorded the rest of Group One for the four remaining talks. In a masterstroke of inductive reasoning, one group member actually cited with a smile of precious innocence the nicely modified audience behavior as if this credibly demonstrated the efficacy of behavior modification.

Stunned at this development, I soon began to contemplate the none too sporting use that had just been made of me as a socially expendable outsider. Were these the proverbial college undergraduate types who rated their social standing on the number of people they could afford to cut? And had their sense of fair play been mangled somehow in the rites of passage of sorority-fraternity row? Or did they despise science “nerds” or hold a grudge against science teachers? Perhaps they considered this easily vanquished elder of theirs a legitimate casualty of the ever so creative exuberance of liberally empowered youth. Whatever the case, none of those future educators ever expressed the slightest regret (although I do acknowledge that one group member who was not as comfortable as the rest showed wisdom greater than mine by dumping the course after that).

“The first ones are always the guinea pigs,” the professor said in her smiling way as she expressed to the class a measure of regret that a solitary student had taken the brunt of the bush-league events of the

evening. Damage control ensued as she generously then awarded me a grade of A for services rendered to her arduous cause, her written evaluation of my presentation even culminating with the grateful exclamation, “Going first takes courage! Thanks!” How sweet. And carefully to be overlooked by virtue of this device was a rather conspicuous issue regarding professional responsibility for a mismanaged class in classroom management, a topic apparently not in the scope of the course.

One week later, Group Two struggled through a skit supposedly demonstrating Lee Canter’s assertive discipline model. They drew a politely smiling and embarrassed silence from the rest of us, their diligence amounting to a painful exhibition of their lack of acting talent. Assuming they were mostly innocent of the cheap-shot fest of the previous week, I viewed them as additional casualties under the professor’s heavy-handed experimental ambitions for the class—ambitions in which the ivory-towered professor would have had no competence to lead or participate herself. Acting and the coaching of acting, at levels that speak to the reasonably discerning, are after all no everyone’s everyday abilities. (This awareness I incidentally submit as part of the multifarious case against one-size-fits-all education. Equation-heavy math and science are hardly the only things not suited for everyone.)

Role playing was given a rest after that, its recent malfunctions having illuminated nothing about how to manage a class. Most of the rest of the groups either ignored that part of the assignment or paid their dues with a number of minimal gestures. The clown who had used me as the designated straight man went on to enjoy the luxury of giving his talk without distractions, as did everyone else in the class for the rest of the semester. The young man delivered a bland summation of material out of the course-required reading, enhancing this achievement with perfunctory glances up from his notes—quite a surprising anticlimax in light of the smashing impression he had made on some of the young women with his prior performance as an authorized role-playing outlaw.

Disservice as a Gracious Art

As the course wore on I began to relax, enjoying in particular, with our project now out of the way, my emancipation from Group One. I would have allowed the episode to pass if it hadn’t been for Group Five, who nimbly skipped the role-playing duties by summoning up the gall to dictate role-playing assignments to the rest of the groups. We mostly ignored that medicine, but I was perhaps the only one in the class who made it a further point of honor to quietly stay away from his respective group. The topic for the evening was ironically the non-authoritarian model expounded by Haim Ginott, the teacher and psychologist who believed in respecting autonomy by allowing reasonable choices for students. Group Five duly recited this concept, sounding as though they favored it by never once disputing it, even as their methods were obviously trashing it.

Critical thinking beyond the rote-learned sort was apparently too outside the box for such a finely versed crowd as this. And then, moreover:

“Get over here [Z],” the Group One queen bee coolly ordered when she noticed my unwillingness to return to her jurisdiction.

It was she who had served as the brains behind the Behavior Mod theatrics. Her lofty social status had apparently given her a sense of entitlement to this high-handed conduct. The stud who had fallen out of his chair to such resounding effect was one of her chums.

Only to avoid a scene when faced with a weakly smiling reminder from the professor herself did I then submit to this latest impertinence.

To question a professor’s expertise is no easy matter, especially when letters of recommendation are hers to grant or withhold in the certification labyrinth. But apprehension of more unpleasant surprises compelled me to venture, in the subsequent written assignment, a tactfully deferential plea explaining my dissatisfaction with role playing as we knew it in her class.

She thanked me for my candor and then saw fit to conduct an out-of-class chat with me, this with a flourish of gracious listening manners, communication skill I suppose, while proving quite adroit in the art of addressing as little as possible. Bothered though she was by the rigged behavior-modification proceedings, she avoided all cognition of the part that her own authority had played in the chain of events.

And as for my dissatisfaction with an obviously disenfranchised role she offered the facile non sequitur, “You’re being too hard on yourself,” and then went on to rationalize that I would be teaching my heart out some day when similar misconduct would suddenly erupt in the classroom.

Foiled by that smiling obfuscation of the issues, I decided to voice the obvious objections indirectly, this by way of a brief allusion to my previously submitted written conception of a worthy version of classroom-management role playing. This would call for the leadership of a capable drama coach or two, under which there would be given equal opportunities for everyone to develop and thoroughly rehearse appropriate poised responses to common class disruptions. (And not to be confused with a skit or a play, the skill rehearsal would guarantee a time-out option for any individual who felt the need for one.) Careful attention would be given to choice of words, tone of voice, body language and facial expression. Video recordings would enable insightful reviews of mistakes and progress made throughout a follow-up series of quite a few sessions.

“We don’t have the resources for that here,” the professor admitted complacently, possibly missing the point, apparently unabashed, though swiftly changing the subject, and seeking to buy off my thoughts with a number of flattering remarks.

The kindly side of the wasteland. Our meeting soon played out with simpering niceties, our conversation merely following, as one might expect by now, the path of the professor’s own convenience.

I remained in politic mode for the rest of the term, a courtly and cautious bull entrapped in a worse than useless China shop, even deigning to grant a carefully positive assessment on the course evaluation form, having known how easily surmised the source of the written remarks would be, and having felt obliged to mitigate my critique in light of the lavish grades and praise conferred on me throughout the semester.

Smarm is a lousy bargain as compared with better courses wielding tougher grades.

Not Exactly Hummingbirds

In quest of a change of scene I later switched to yet another school to finish the courses required for certification. But this proved no escape from socially overbearing authority. In what is perhaps an occupational disease of those who preside over captive audiences, educators are perversely inclined sometimes to choreograph students in gestures only too well designed for tritely conforming teacher pleasers.

One such instance occurred in a role-playing session for a course in educational methods. One of the students, already an in-service teacher herself at the time, stood in front of the class and led us in the activities of standing in the aisles and energetically pumping our arms back and forth, followed by jumping up and down a few times. Physical education? No. This was a far-out English lesson—a highly progressive one in which the kinesthetic experience was supposed to assist one’s comprehension of some grammatical point involving verbs. (I don’t remember what.)

Almost wondering at first if this could be a practical joke or a hazing procedure, I decided to rebel by way of non-participation, but soon relented when the teacher corrected me in this. At the end of this active-learning experience she asked me if I could furnish the answer to a question that she posed about the syntax thus impressed upon us.

“Not off hand” I replied, quite annoyed but feigning a casual tone as best I could.

Then there was the in-service middle-school biology teacher who led us in the activity of standing in the aisles and flapping our forelimbs up and down as if we possessed the wings of birds. The object was to count the number of wing-flap cycles per minute for the sake of comparison with the extraordinary frequency of hummingbird wing oscillations, as if contemplation of the latter phenomenon would overtax middle school minds if it weren’t for this pedagogical advance.

Perhaps it was out of respect for the birds in general that none of us went so far as to voice the old expression that comes to mind. One fellow did go so far as to remark discreetly that the exercise was “obnoxious.” He restricted his participation to a fluttering motion of his hands alone—a form of cheating but just enough kinesthesia to stay in compliance with the teacher’s demand. I, however, chose the path of

civil disobedience again, but soon gave in when the teacher scolded me for my non-compliance. Another self-assured progressivist, she was bent on a mission to straighten out her backward pupil. I should have just told her where she got off, although doing so would have constituted a violation of the rules established by the eminent Dr. Big, the quietly observing professor, the one I had to reckon with. (I was not the designated role-playing trouble maker.)

Uncontested academic freedom, that hallowed notion that apparently has its ways of going to the heads of some who scarcely deserve the privilege, is now the source of an irony wherein respectably accomplished people occasionally pay tuition only to find themselves putting up with instances of domination that few would ever tolerate for their paychecks in the normal working world. Cases here in point, so flagrant in their wackiness, their worthlessness, their ignorance of decent social limits, the English grammar calisthenics and the flapping science lesson were excellent ways of driving self-respecting souls away from the teaching profession.

A Cultural Adventure in Prayer

While strongly opposed to public school-sponsored prayer on the ground that the imposition of collective prayer is coercive and therefore in conflict with the principle of freedom of conscience, I do of course respect the right of individual prayer and other non-aggressive expression of religious belief in public schools, in this case on the ground that such expression is entirely consistent with the principle of freedom of conscience. And though an agnostic myself, weary of implausible creed, weary of organized religious presumption, that standard family value that made a charade of this freethinker's formative years, I am not opposed to religious clubs in public schools as long as such associations are extracurricular, as long as such associations agree to respect the civil liberties of those in school who do not share their beliefs. (Just the same should apply to secular humanist clubs.)

The question of prayer in school incurred an astonishing twist when I found myself in a course in multicultural education. While hardly a radical cultural relativist, I must acknowledge that the course in multiculturalism was often right in its illumination of the wrongs of ethnocentric arrogance and other forms of bigotry. But once again there were misunderstandings arising out of trendy methodology, that apparently unrelenting preoccupation of schools of education.

We broke into groups to research various minority cultures for later presentations to the class. While choices among the groups and topics were kindly allowed this time, there were certain bothersome requirements appearing in the syllabus—one of which was an emphasis on something that goes under the name of “creativity.” There is, to be sure, magnificent creativity in this world. But riding on its coattails there is something of a lesser sort that F. Scott Fitzgerald has aptly disparaged as “that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of the ‘creative temperament.’” Grades on creativity are invitations to hackneyed versions of the latter. The course in question weighted the group-creativity score with points enough to tweak a close call on a student's final course grade from that of a *B* to an *A*. Wearisome versions of group creativity should well be expected in the face of such an incentive.

I had the good fortune to get off with a light sentence this time. Despite my objections to the artificialities involved, the group determined that a television quiz-show format would be just the thing with which to enliven our presentation, one on which with all their wondrous Love of Learning soaring high they conferred the title “Know Your Culture.” Another performing-seal routine, this was the essence of their bid for the creativity grade. They lectured me on the importance of working as a *team* for this—and made short work of my dissent by pointing out that I offered no alternative suggestion as to how to collect the allotted points. (My only potential ally was unfortunately absent from the crucial meeting.) I don't know for sure if creativity by committee is an absolute oxymoron, but I've never encountered any evidence to indicate otherwise in the ways and means of academic ingratiation. The silliness was bearable this time, however, and so I decided to resign myself to the will of the group majority, having been satisfied that the remainder of the plan would allow us to be serious about our chosen topic: Vietnamese Americans. My own presentation addressed the Vietnamese refugee experience, most notably the story of

onetime National Liberation Front enthusiast Doan Van Toai—his shocked disillusionment with communism after the fall of Saigon. Our presentation turned out well enough on balance.

The course outline also directed each group to “immerse the class in the totality of the culture” chosen for presentation. As a member of the audience one night for a group presentation on Saudi Arabians (this incidentally several years prior to 9/11/01), I was quietly enjoying what I naturally assumed to be “the right to be let alone”—that famous Justice Brandeis phrase—when suddenly someone derailed this modest hope with another one of those blunders apparently symptomatic of youth in confusing environments. A young American woman, certainly not a Muslim herself, took it upon herself to try to lead the class in the physical motions of Muslim prayer. Yes—she kneeled upon a mat for prayer, something that her husband had acquired on a stint in Saudi Arabia, and then explained that she intended this to be an “interactive” class activity. Choreographic presumption had found itself a new frontier. She hoped the rest of us would join her in this active-learning exercise to broaden our multicultural horizons.

Quite surprised I would be if actual Muslims would have appreciated the sight of such an imposture. Somewhat less surprising on the other hand was the spinelessness of a number of students—in-service teachers among them—who, in kindly discomfort, or perhaps with their grades in mind, slid from their chairs and planted their knees on the floor: a picture if ever there was one fit to grace the cover of that well-named treatise on that sad condition the authors aptly termed “other-directedness,” *The Lonely Crowd*.

A number of others and I refused to budge from our seats—and now comes a moment in the story where memory is incomplete for the lack of calm observation. On finding the scene unbearable I turned my gaze toward the ceiling and stayed that way in a look of total exasperation. (I do assume the professor, beyond my field of vision, remained a non-participant, though later he left me speechless when he stated that he had no problem with the invitation to such an activity as that in his class.) A fleeting recollection from the fringe of my upset view informs me that she discontinued her worship service, this perhaps a concession to my silent but unmistakable protest. Whatever the case, she herself now seemed upset with what I suppose she considered my attitude problem, because a few minutes later she gave me a dirty look of her own that was also an injured look. I regret this incident between us because she seemed in some ways a well-meaning person. The fact remains that I was beginning to feel overrun by chronically inappropriate expectations in the classroom—avalanches of muddy thinking that sometimes seemed oblivious to, or perhaps even intent on denying, the legitimate need that some people actually have for the preservation of individual integrity. (And I trust that one can see that her agenda was neither a fair nor a balanced way of respecting diversity.)

A Faraway Light

One evening in a course on stages of human development, I noticed a classmate briefly wincing and groaning at the spectacle of somebody’s foolish and talentless imitation of the state of human infancy in a group performance in front of the class—a performance nobody seemed to find entertaining. The vexed observer and I were part of an upcoming group presentation. In a meeting to plan for this, he urged that we merely take our separate five-minute turns presenting our chosen topics and leave it as sensibly simple as that.

His words exactly: “Five minutes up and down. Nobody gets hurt.”

A voice of reason at last.

Our general group topic was the phase that is known as “late adolescence.” A relevant subtopic would have been that gang of party-school royalty who’d managed to gain the upper hand at the other school by living up to the platitude about the value of knowing how to work in a group. However, I chose for my topic the high school dropout phenomenon, but then took the liberty of digressing briefly on something far beyond our shores and very upbeat—namely, the remarkable rate of high achievement on the SAT in the Caribbean island of Barbados, a black-majority nation with a rate outstanding in literacy obtained from straightforward education. Scores above 1200 out of a possible 1600 were typical among their college-bound students more than a decade ago; spectacular scores are also not uncommon. Comparison

with U.S. educational outcome is frankly intended here as further discredit to much in American education that is undeservedly considered progressive. (This however is not intended to imply uncritical enthusiasm for the controversial SAT I.)

A faraway place exists where descendants of slaves are now surpassing achievement norms of American whites. As well they should. This counts as justice at its most poetic, rebellion at its most profound, the SAT at its most ironic. Something new on the face of the earth. Strange that it mostly goes overlooked.

Pursuit of excellence as an act of deep rebellion is a thought that I, a white American, would like to offer to African Americans for its value as a means of telling off the closet bigots and the white supremacists who still inhabit our society.

End of Caribbean digression. To the messy American issues previously raised we must return.

The Rights of Disentanglement

Messy demoralization almost seems at times as if it were a progressivist educational principle—a way of life, a regimen, a crucible, a sanctimonious growing pain, a group-life skill of a sort, the high-flown rationales of which resound with arcane refrains, pat abstractions, oft-recited buzzwords at their emptiest, as in such wonderments as learning how to learn constructivistically as merrily thematically reflectively discovery-oriented learning-now-made-whole-inspired meaning makers learning how to carry on with roles designed to serve the greater good of a learning group experiencing various interrelations between the cognitive and psychomotor as well as affective learning domains, the better to facilitate attainment of self-efficacy of course. Educationspeak. The English language could use a break from it. Empty is the word “education” itself when people are taken for granted as toys of confused educational fads, when human individuals are taken for granted as plastic raw material to be injected into the latest pseudo-humanist molds. A smidgen of humane intuition alone would go a long way to avoid inflicting the unlovely distortions of human relations of the kind recounted herein. Yet those were not the only such events. They seem to have their ways of being unapologetically rationalized as part of the price of human progress in advanced thinkers’ classroom social-engineering fancies cheerily carrying on as apparently they must with their cultures of cutesy shows, hapless roles, dippy songs, throwaway kitsch, frivolous fun and games and other pretensions in the name of whatever, good for occupying class time until the bell rings and little if anything else in actuality.

Pedagogical theories have too often glibly suffocated personal rights that should have been guaranteed in a free society. Even when nothing is obviously amiss, the starry-eyed overvaluation of togetherness entails a subtle suppression of the rights of individuals to be genuine persons of their own. The unperceptive instigation of less-than-honest social behavior amounts to a hidden curriculum that promotes acquiescence to life as a sham activity—a hopeless virtue of becoming all manner of the hokiest things for the ever so greater good of nobody ever proves what.

The encroachment on legitimate individuality is at its most insidious in the tone-deaf call for cooperative creativity. Granted, creativity is often a cooperative enterprise. But counterfeit creativity is worse by far than a forthright lack thereof, and indiscriminate cooperation imperatives can easily be destructive to the real phenomenon. To the latter point I ask the reader to consider a hypothetical society ruled by a rigid ideology of cooperation—one perhaps in which all the people are expected to play well together and kiss up in groups to a clueless Ministry of Culture that blithely goes assuming, say, that a team composed of Messrs. Updike, Mailer, Wolfe and Irving should have been able to thrive at the task of writing a novel together, or better yet that a very obliging Miles Davis should have been able to thrive, say, by happily trumpeting away in accord with the needs of a Dixieland group. A wretched state of affairs indeed. And yet assumptions no less naive are all too easily imposed in the name of educational group-creativity agendas.

Reasons abound for a merciful reinstatement of modest objectives. Disingenuous entanglements would best be dropped and replaced with review, at the remedial level for some, of the elements of common courtesy—aspects of decent cooperation to begin with, but also of decent plural society, in

which non-kindred spirits are able to live and let live by simply respecting each other's basic rights and avoiding unwarranted interference with each other. It bears observing that truly inspired collaboration is often the freely chosen kind that such a society permits. It also bears observing that many a classroom folly in socially unbecoming socialization has no resemblance at all to cooperation as practical endeavor in the real world where things are actually accomplished.

The Wrongs of Grand Curricula

Pedagogical fads are not without their socio-political motivations. Here it becomes germane to note in furtherance of disentanglement that also better abandoned would be the overwhelming incongruities of grandiose curricular designs upon the many—as in overreaching core requirements further adorned sometimes with ostensibly college-prep McHonors courses vastly overenrolled with students devoid of any real affinity for the nominally honored subject matter. Students thus miscast wield no small power to frustrate the efforts of a content-oriented educator. The misunderstandings are therefore the misery of teachers and students alike. Fatuous class activity entailing precious-little content sometimes then becomes a teacher's political survival expedient. Student-subject incongruity hence is wind in the sails of pedagogical fads. Educational policy makers and other major powers in the education wars should ask themselves how ethical it is to bait and switch a serious would-be teacher into this bitterly disappointing circumstance.

Pursuit of a subject beyond modest claims is best reserved for students with hearts and minds inclined in that direction. An upfront system fair to all concerned would hold this tenet as one that justly averts the dilemma that now too often occurs between harsh requirements as the one dysfunction, phony entitlements as the other. A system of this understanding would generate fewer class disruptions, fewer fads as coping devices, far less teaching to an ill-fitting test, far less politics, far less cheating, far less resentment all around. (While this accords with the often-seen phenomenon of talent-specific intelligence, it does not quite address the politics of grade-inflated socialites commonly headed for the none too rigorous versions of higher education as a class-conscious claim to higher educational pedigree. We met a number of suspects in this regard a number of pages ago. Subject matter that stands any higher than a doormat is liable to incur their formidable disapproval. Despite the current surge in remarkably high achievers in this nation's not entirely healthy college admissions frenzy, crypto anti-cerebral types remain a deeply embedded sociological fact of life within the college-bound crowd and are the principal reason this writer wants no further part of teaching. The unpretentious working class abounds with people far more accomplished than they.)

A Vastly Resourceful Tutor

Much of what ails education may someday be circumvented by means of a new generation of cheap yet powerful computers, lightning-fast in computer speed yet not impatient with human speed, free of clueless plans for people, free of debilitating socio-political obligations, rich in thoughtfully designed instructional software engaging enough to eclipse the common distractions, vast with sensibly challenging options to meet individual needs and abilities (a solution far less troubling than are those involving tracking, labeling, skipping of grades or failing of grades)—a separate computer effectively made one's own for each and every student in school (while not losing sight of the need for thoughtful adult supervision).

In the meantime, if anywhere at all exists a decent philosophy of education, it might do well to find its voice against a stale and self-deluded culture of pseudo-progressive educational mediocrity indulging in thoughtless disregard for legitimate individual rights.