

Egregious Education versus Genuine Teaching and Learning

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Paul Engelbert, B.S.-Chemical Engineering, U.W.-Madison, 1983

“A Vastly Resourceful Tutor” is the section best read first.

Memberships:

Mensa International, American Civil Liberties Union,

Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International

For my brother Carl, 1950 - 2024

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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 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 except the first to remain nameless in this article. This 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.

A Slam Dunk for Spoiled Mediocrity

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 certification, 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 naïve 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 titled “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 one of the ghastliest cases 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 snoots 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 not 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’d made on some of the young women with his prior performance as an authorized role-playing outlaw.

Another Empty Suit (Sigh)

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 Paul,” the Group One queen bee coolly ordered when she noticed my unwillingness to return to her jurisdiction.

It was she who’d 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 a 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 the expertise of a multiple award-winning professor is no easy matter, especially when letters of recommendation are hers to grant or withhold in the certification mill. 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.

Flummoxed 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 highly progressive English lesson—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 troublemaker.)

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 Violation Of the First Amendment

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 on 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 torpedoed this reasonable expectation with another one of those blunders apparently symptomatic of youth in confusing environments. A young and mostly blonde 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 rolled my eyes 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 Call to Arms for African American Intellect

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. It carried the group.

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. As told by education professor Pedro Noguera:

Barbados has a higher adult literacy rate than the U.S. Recently, 300 students from Barbados signed up to take the S.A.T. and they averaged 1200.

(From “Why Johnny can read (he lives in Barbados),” *Commonfund News – CFQ Spring 2001*)

Similar claims are made by James Beard in the Fort Lauderdale *Sun Sentinel* in his 6/16/1997 article titled: “Traditional Teaching Vindicated. Students in Barbados outshine Americans.”

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 satisfy criteria for authentic assessment 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 authors 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 that *Prohibits ChatGPT, Etc.*

Much of what ails middle as well as high school education may someday be circumvented by means of a new generation of powerful online computers, lightning-fast in computer speed yet not impatient with human speed, free of clueless plans for people, free of debilitating socio-political obligations, firewalled against the many brain-rotting aspects of cyberspace, 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).

Please allow me to elaborate:

- It is inhumane to burden students with subjects for which they have no aptitude. I had a grandmother who told me once that she had wished that she could die in her sleep when she was a schoolchild because she couldn't understand her math assignments.
- It is also unfair to burden teachers with classes over-enrolled with students unable to handle the subjects being taught. It is counterproductive to serious teaching and learning because it generates enormous pressure to purge the subjects of their contents. It plays into the hands of the powerful anti-content factions of American education, as for example helicopter parents, over-entitled students and certain types of professional educationists.
- Teachers are often demoralized by students who are bored with the subjects being taught. It's naive to assume that you can interest just anybody with any subject whatsoever. On the one hand, for example, there was a classics professor, Paul Mackendrick, who was so fascinated by the ruins of ancient Greece that he wrote a book titled *The Greek Stones Speak*. On the other hand, I've been told of a lady who disparaged Athens Greece by saying "I don't care about Apollorox." And who was Apollorox? It turned out to be a southern drawl for "a pile of rocks."
- Since everyone is unique, the goal of teaching and learning needs to allow an individualized curriculum that constitutes a healthy challenge for each unique individual. Students, after all, deserve the right to focus on the subjects in which they are most likely to succeed. Computers may provide the latitude for students to find their own ways. For instance, the question needs to be asked: Who really needs algebra? Well, if you're planning to go into accounting, economics, engineering or computer science, then of course you need a lot of it and more. And if you get a charge out of the subject, then it's okay to study it even if you're never going to use it. But since the majority of high school graduates will never have to use it, let's let higher mathematics be optional. We can't afford the backlash that it generates when it's required. On the other hand, practical arithmetic needs to be required of every student capable of comprehending it. It is necessary, for example, for having a good business head. It is also necessary, for example, for pursuing a career as a cabinet maker who knows how to improvise.
- A verdict on the New Math: In his autobiographical work, "*Surely You're Joking, Mr. Feynman!*," the physics Nobel laureate Richard Feynman tells of how he once agreed to serve on

a committee for the California State Board of Education to evaluate the latest elementary texts in mathematics. He took it upon himself to read all 300 pounds of them in his downstairs home study, where he then went on to erupt in endless fits of anger over their conceptual incompetence. In one such instance, they treated temperature, always an intensive property, as if it were an extensive property by asking students to add up the “total temperature” of a number of different colored stars with different temperatures enumerated in the skies! His wife said it sounded like a “volcano” down there. *Nation at Risk* we are indeed.

- Fast-learning students could forge ahead on their computers without being labeled as teachers' pets, while slower-learning students wouldn't have to suffer the social embarrassment of not knowing the answer in front of the rest of the class.
- For that small percentage of students who are capable of skipping high school, they could earn, via computer, rigorous college degrees without ever having set foot on a college campus. (Incidentally: Does college education really need to be so expensive? Economies of scale might allow serious students to study college subjects via computer free of charge, if subsidized by philanthropists who possess more money than they know what to do with. It's common knowledge that heavy college debts have ruined lives and placed another one of many burdens on this nation's economy.)
- I'm hardly the first to say this country needs more highly skilled workers, not more effete college degrees in easy majors.
- As for the vocationally inclined: While there is no substitute for hands-on apprenticeships, students would be able to gain head starts by studying virtual representations of practical tasks. For instance, they could see a disorganized exploded diagram of a Lamborghini that challenges them to fit the parts all together completely. The sound of engine ignition could then be the reward for completing the task.
- What's the point of overbearing courses in multicultural education when cultures are all too often the enemies of legitimate human rights and individuality? When they all too often want us to swallow our pride and conform? Besides, we don't need to take a course in multiculturalism to help us learn to love soul food or Chinese cuisine. Far more germane would be an even-handed course on the history of crimes against humanity throughout the world.
- Having their own headsets, students could choose their own background sounds at whatever volumes they prefer. One student might choose silence, while another might choose the sounds of ocean waves meeting the shores, with the sounds of seagulls optional, while still another might prefer soothing minimalist music that is pleasing to the ear. Students could also choose their own rewards for having gotten the job done. One might choose the latest hit song by the latest pop diva, while another might choose the latest political cartoons, while still another might choose the latest spectacular moves in the athletic arena.
- Who really knows what grades really mean anymore? A far more illuminating system would be a list of questions that goes like this: Is the student able to solve one equation for one unknown? Yes or No? Is the student able to solve a word problem that calls for the student to find two independent equations to solve for two unknowns? Yes or No? Etcetera.
- Valedictorians, Honor Rolls and Honor Societies are inimical to egalitarian education. If you're a person of decent character, then you're a person of honor, and indeed a greater one than many college graduates. Furthermore, I'm hardly the first to note that academic elitism is one of the reasons the democratic party is losing the working class.
- Teachers in the performing arts often stop their students to explain what their students need to change to make it sound better. I heard a chorus director stop her chorus to tell them to be careful not to go sharp when reaching for the high notes. And I heard an orchestra conductor stop her orchestra and snap “Find the note! Find the note!” And then she indulged, hilariously, in voice mimicry of the sound she didn't want to hear anymore. On the other hand, at least in my experience, education professors do not intervene when something is going seriously wrong with role playing. They merely try to make it all better with silly teacher smiles on their faces.

- To encourage students to avoid being quitters, they need to learn that mental athletes need to live with a certain amount of mental fatigue, just as physical athletes live with a certain amount of physical fatigue. Then, paradoxically, when we let our minds relax temporarily, a solution to a problem that temporarily had us stumped may spontaneously appear.
- You can't paint a competent picture of reality with a paint roller. But that's what too many ideologues are always trying to do. Leftwing radicals all too often resemble Bryce Canyon dwellers who think that everything above the rim is wrong. And rightwing radicals all too often resemble Grand Canyon dwellers who think that everything above the rim is wrong. Teachers have no right to indoctrinate, much less grade, students on the basis of severely biased political views. Students need to hear opposing opinions because, as the old saying goes, there is room for disagreement between reasonable individuals. This could be facilitated by means of the jousting friendships that occasionally exist between opinionated liberals versus their conservative counterparts.
- Though I don't remember his name, I've read somewhere of a teacher who challenged students to think by arguing the opposites of their points of view. When a student recited a liberal opinion, the teacher would counter with the conservative position, and vice versa. The students admired him for this. This brilliant teaching method could be furthered by means of A.I.
- Students need to learn that *selective* "concern" for human rights, as practiced by partisan hacks, is a habit of small-minded people. Let me offer a basketball analogy: I once attended a college basketball game with a friend who'd played some high school basketball. When I saw a home player handling the ball in a way that I thought was superb and said "Hey wow, that guy's pretty good," my friend shook his head and replied: "He's all right hand," meaning, of course, that ambidexterity would have made him a better player. People with genuine credibility on human rights issues will always be willing and able to drive the ball with either hand without suffering an identity crisis.
- Incidentally, although I couldn't resist his terrific line, I had misgivings about invoking the words of Millard Fillmore in the opening paragraph. Calling him "unimpressive" was far too euphemistic. Having signed the Fugitive Slave Act into law, he was obviously a rotten president, as were others of his era.
- Teachers are known to ridicule excessively kooky pedagogy. I once overheard a teacher say she needed a project for "Macbeth." Another teacher replied, in slow and measured tones of mock profundity, that the tactile learners need to work on...crowns....etcetera, so as to deepen their comprehension of the play.
- I once had a general science teacher who claimed that "smoke is a gas." Well, some of the products of combustion are gaseous of course, as in carbon dioxide, monoxide and dihydrogen oxide, but the sooty stuff we call "smoke" is hardly a gas. This misconception might occur among education majors, but not among science majors.
- One of the best ways to learn how to write, of course, is to read. And how to motivate students to read? Give them a series of suspense thrillers. Before each new episode, however, give them a number of definitions of unfamiliar words used in simple sentences (along with voice-overs) that will appear in the impending episode. Students should also be encouraged to improve their writing skills by making mental notes of the maneuvers that competent writers are able to get away with. This calls for slower reading as well as re-reading. (I've known college graduates who can't even write intelligible paragraphs. They never seem to ask themselves whether their words convey what the reader needs to know.) Study carrels might contain side screens that define unfamiliar words instantaneously at a student's request. (Why instantaneously? It doesn't take long for an idle boy to get into mischief. I know because I used to be one.) ChatGPT, as well as outright plagiarism, could be combatted by having students compose their essays at their computers during school time. They could be allowed to take the entire school day if need be. The best essays would probably come from the students who take the longest time revising them.

After having been graded, amateur adolescent prose could be submitted for rewrite by retired professionals or perhaps by artificial intelligence.

- Functional literacy needs to be expected of anyone capable of achieving it. But let's let poetry, as well as Shakespeare, be optional. And students who study Shakespeare need to be allowed to be true to themselves by letting them know they don't have to pretend that every line that Shakespeare penned was great. His brilliance notwithstanding, Shakespearean dialogue is occasionally far too stagy and garrulous for the modern ear.
- It might be helpful to set more poetry to music. I've always been enthralled by the Blake/Parry English hymn "Jerusalem," even though I've never believed its premises.
- Talented artistry, assisted perhaps by A.I., could impart stunning visuals to computer screens. Let's imagine how A.I. could animate the rippling waves in Vincent Van Gogh's brilliant "Starry Night over the Rhône." This might appeal to students who need a break from the harshness of the photographic image.
- Students need free time just like all the rest of us. They should be encouraged just to get the job done during school time. This would help to avert procrastination by the daydreamers. (Unfinished homework on Monday morning was one of the most depressing aspects of my youth.) Homework could then be optional for students with inborn passions for certain subjects.
- As public libraries were funded by Andrew Carnegie, after-school and weekend learning centers could be funded by multi-billionaires who possess more money than any one human could ever deserve. This would benefit students whose noisy and chaotic home lives are obstacles to performance of homework. Security officers would be essential, as would late buses, especially in tough neighborhoods.
- A computer could teach a subject at ten different levels of difficulty so as to accommodate ten different levels of aptitude. Level one, for example, could be elementary. But level ten could be so difficult that even the likes of Albert Einstein wouldn't be able to ace it every time. For the sake of genuine freedom, students would need to be allowed to *try* a subject at the highest level before settling for a fittingly challenging level. Tests and lessons could be made cheat-proof by means of random selections from large pools of problems designated for particular levels.
- A computer could learn to recognize a student's handwritten work on a touch screen so as to convert it into font, especially for equations which are difficult to type.
- Computers could provide a variety of different voice-overs to suit various aptitudes and temperaments. One student might choose a husky baritone, while another might choose a Marilyn Monroe. (Or better yet, a cute lisp.) A student with marginal aptitude might prefer a warm supportive voice. But a student with high ability might prefer a more provocative type that ruffles the student's pride: "Now Mr. Einstein, if you want to fool me into thinking you're intelligent, this is what you need to learn how to do today..."
- Let's see if progressive educators who believe in "discovery learning" are able to rediscover that $E=Mc^2$ without looking up the proof.
- I know from experience that you can learn calculus just as well from a correspondence course as you can from a lecture course. Which means that you can learn it just as well from a computer. Or even better. Transcribing lectures into notes actually *interferes* with comprehension. (And it's redundantly absurd to go scribbling down what's already in the text!) The best time to learn the subject is right then and there. And for most of us, this means immediate review of what has just been presented before moving on. Once the student has fully understood, only then is it time for the student to attempt to write it down without peeking back again. Students should also be encouraged to pick up mathematical ingenuity by studying the proofs of theorems before merely memorizing the results.
- Filling board after board with complex equations may someday become a waste of the talents of math professors. Unless they are blazing new trails in mathematics, they would do far better to be employed as engineers.

- “Spaced repetition,” a concept introduced by education professors, is a help in reducing fatigue while enhancing a student’s learning curve. There is little point in forcing a student to complete ten long-division problems if the student has already understood their logic after having completed the first two or three. Brief reviews could then be scheduled later in the semester.
- I also need to acknowledge that “hidden curriculum” is a worthy insight that I’ve borrowed from education professors. And so yes, there is good in the best of education professors. But the ones I knew were mostly vapid types who’d “only got the tune of the time,” as Hamlet said of a certain pretentious character in the play of that name.
- Students deserve a measure of personal space by means of sturdy, capacious study carrels totally detached from neighboring ones. There they could pursue their individualized education plans that spare them from being categorized and herded into separate rooms. Students in neighboring careers might be pals on the soccer team, this despite the fact that one is a fluent reader while the other is struggling with dyslexia. Moreover, I’ve heard that students who are segregated into “gifted” classes are in danger of becoming misfits, this for the lack of experience mingling with regular folks. Students with intellectual disabilities and students on the autism spectrum, if capable of self-supervision, might also be allowed to spend some time in this setting. Study carrels could also be subject to occasional rearrangement. Rooms could be acoustically and lighting-engineered for the sake of a decent learning environment. Scheduled breaks, along with refreshments, would offer students opportunities to socialize. (The foregoing argument for the need for enhanced personal space is supported by an article that I read somewhere about computer programmers whose productivity shot up when they were given individual offices with doors to be closed.)
- If they wish, students could schedule their least favorite subjects early on, so as to have something to look forward to later in the day.
- If trained in counseling, adult supervisors could circulate throughout the learning center to spot students looking depressed, as with chins resting on palms of hands and elbows resting on desks: “Is there something you feel the need to talk about?”
- Students could also take a break from solitude by joining face-to-face discussions on various subjects, with an emphasis on learning the art of civil disagreement. Beforehand, they would need to pass quizzes on the subjects to avoid becoming wallflowers. There could then be video recordings that allow students to be their own most perceptive critics. (And students have no business grading each other, as hard feelings would be inevitable.)
- Live and let live: A course in ethics must be mandatory. A sense of fair play is the first prerequisite for all group work. And the former needs to be taught in a rigorous way. Potentially toxic in-groups need to learn, along with everyone else, Bertrand Russell’s favorite proverb: “Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil.” Words to the wise on how to avoid being victimized in the social jungle could also be provided. Furthermore, “no contact” rules are better at keeping the peace than is that stale cliché, “learning to work in a group.” The latter is likely to facilitate the tyranny of shallow minds. It’s a violation of the right to avoid bad company. (Fair-minded leadership is in just as short supply in groups as it is everywhere else in this world.)
- Now that the analysis of human tone of voice, body language and facial expression is becoming more subtle and insightful, there could be virtual role playing where teachers contend with sounds and images of disruptive and menacing students appearing on large screens. Teachers’ responses could also be recorded. Human operators, perhaps retired veteran teachers, could make insightful decisions as to how to challenge inexperienced teachers.
- Unlike their smiling personas in yearbooks, the self-portraits of art students are usually pictures of angst.
- “Carpe diem!” said Mr. Keating to his English students in the movie *Dead Poets Society*. Well okay. But then he should have added the following: *Refrain from saying and doing the types of things the memories of which will make you hate yourselves when you’ve grown up.* Moreover,

those unbearably silly active learning exercises instigated by Mr. Keating in the movie were hardly Robin Williams at his best. I could only feel embarrassed for everyone involved.

- Freedom of conscience needs to always be upheld. I remember having read somewhere of a student for whom it was sacrilegious to dissect a frog in biology class. I could only feel deep sympathy for her. She deserved an alternative assignment. Students should also have the right to choose whether or not to include evolution in their biology and world history courses. This differentiation could easily be accomplished by means of computers.
- So as to avoid alienating Native Americans and African Americans, math and science texts need to leave out hagiographies of the pale faces who brought those subjects into the world. You can learn everything Newton discovered without ever having heard of Newton.
- It's worth repeating here: *Pursuit of excellence as an act of deep rebellion is a thought that I, a white American, would like to offer to Native as well as African Americans for its value as a means of telling off the closet bigots and the white supremacists who still inhabit our society.*
- If politically possible, there might someday be an *optional* course in skepticism. (As one who likes to boast at having flunked Sunday School, I always like to say there's far more truth in the multiplication tables than there is in any religion or ideology whatsoever.)
- I once heard an education professor admit that too many education professors do their research from behind their desks. The well-known maxim bears repeating here: "A page of history is worth a thousand pages theory."
- Ignorance of, and even contempt for, the United States Constitution is rampant in America. Its deepest principles need to be explained in plain language to every high school student. And students also deserve the right to air opinions as to what they think should be amended.
- When parents drive like jerks, they will teach their children to drive like jerks. Every high school student needs to take a mandatory driver's education course behind a computer screen before getting behind the wheel of an actual vehicle.
- Youths need to be discreetly shown a list of clueless social behaviors to spare them the humiliation of learning experientially.
- A course in home safety needs to be required. For instance, pots of boiling water on the stove need to have their handles turned inward so as to prevent the tragedies of curious children pulling them down on their heads.
- The maxim "Always treat a gun as if it's loaded" needs to be taught repeatedly, beginning no later than nursery school. And more to the point, the overwhelming problem is America's out-of-control murder-machine culture and the Second Amendment, which isn't going to be repealed anytime soon. And is it really any help to say that "mental health" is the fundamental issue? You can't keep track of every incurably sick mind that wants to commit mass murder. That guy who murdered all those people at Fort Hood was a psychiatrist!
- Schools of engineering need to require courses on engineering disasters and, most of all, the cavalier and cost-cutting attitudes that cause them, as in such cases involving Boeing, Union Carbide, Deep Water Horizon, Firestone, Camp Lejeune, the Edmund Fitzgerald, the Challenger, not to mention that explosion that killed fifteen people at that British Petroleum refinery at Texas City.
- Is it even possible to survive the certification labyrinth without being phony? I once heard of an education professor who was popular on account of his iconoclastic sense of humor. He was quoted as having said: "Be careful not to put anything true in your portfolio. Be careful not to write anything true in your autobiographical sketch. Just take Mother Teresa's biography off the internet and change the name."

McHonors: The Undeserving Power Elite

Naïvely assuming that a teaching internship would help me develop my teaching skills, I enrolled in a chemistry internship, a physics internship having been unavailable. The setting was a large and mostly

white suburban high school. It wasn't long before my supervising teacher left me for much of the time to fend for myself—that is, to carry major parts of her teaching load without her—first with the AP students for a while, followed by a relegation to the classes labeled “Honors.” And why? To free herself to leave the room to go and work on her master's degree. Gee, what a mensch. It belabors the obvious to say that I was being used.

I got along well with the advanced placement classes, as they were composed of the most able and motivated students. One of them, an African American, went on to earn a degree in electrical engineering from MIT. Another one, a son of Indian immigrants, managed to graduate from Caltech while still on the sunny side of twenty.

But then there were those Honors classes. To be fair, there were a number of decent Honors kids who were willing to give the subject an honest try. But they were not the ones running the show. The majority were incurably chatty types who refused to let me have the floor. And I, a serious content-oriented teacher, was quite the unwelcome guest in their exclusive playpen. Moreover, a number of the Honors students couldn't even fathom the simplest algebra. A musical analogy for this would be Honors A Cappella for the tone-deaf students. An athletic analogy would be Honors Basketball for slow and clumsy people with short limbs and stubby fingers, like the guy who just finished correcting the typos in this sentence.

To no avail were my emailed pleas for help from the AWOL supervising teacher. Finally, in desperation, I appealed to the ed-school “coordinator” to arrange a meeting with my supervisor. This did not go well. The coldly unsmiling coordinator accused me of being “content driven,” told me that the subject I was teaching was “sterile,” and *said that she had wanted no part of chemistry when she was a high school student!* Her sympathies were obviously on the side of the Honors crowd.

It wasn't long before my supervisor abruptly terminated me, this because of my refusal to function as a credentialist, and also because of my knowledge of the mess she had bestowed on me, the news of which had traveled on the grapevine to other teachers who had shown me signs of sympathy. But the self-serving coordinator, who was in theory charged with the responsibility of finding me a better mentor, merely told me to withdraw from the internship. Withdraw I did. I hadn't known what hit me.

The school principal, a smiley fellow whom I only knew as a waving acquaintance, was apparently blissfully unaware of all of this.

When, at my own initiative, I later signed in at the front office one last time in order to return a number of chemistry books I had borrowed from her, the teacher, seated at her desk in her room, studiously ignored this parting act of courtesy.

Well okay. Let's leave the last word to the authors of *A Nation at Risk*:

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war.

We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.

Indeed.

I'm now a retired school custodian. © 2026, Paul Engelbert. Printouts and photocopies permitted.