

Education Is Controversial, Too

"The only alternative to 'neutral' and confused teaching is that which emphasizes objective study of ideas, and it is part of every teacher's job to render explicit the definition of truth implied by such study."

PUBLIC SCHOOLS are criticized for doing what everyone wants them to do. Or, more accurately, they are criticized for not doing what large segments of the public oppose their doing. The alleged failure to foster intellectual development is a case in point. According to the indictment, our schools are glorified night clubs with watered down course offerings. Students are not challenged to think, and most of the curriculum is more interesting than intellectually challenging. This indictment is made by groups ranging from the most conservative to the most liberal. Practically everyone, regardless of his political coloration, seems to believe that public education is no longer devoted to a cultivation of such intellectual virtues as logical thinking, grounded conclusions, sound judgments, and artistic feelings.

If one talks to teachers about this indictment, he learns that they do not feel free to teach intellectually challenging content. Their lack of freedom is rooted in a fear of public criticism. Let us take the study of controversial issues as our example. Every well-trained teacher knows that such study is essential to any program of intellectual development. Yet teachers who engage their students in this kind of intellectual challenge are fearful of public reaction. Our teachers

are now saying that it is no longer possible to teach an understanding of American institutions because a substantial proportion of the public opposes any criticism of our institutions. A defensible theory of education holds that understanding is a product of criticism, and without criticism the product is never produced. If teachers and other citizens shared this defensible theory of education, our schools could be as intellectually challenging as everyone wants them to be. If schools are less challenging and demanding than we want them to be, it is because we don't really know what we want. The most awesome aspect of this problem is that teachers can be as confused as their lay critics.

The Challenge to Intellect

The nature of our confusion is in part reflected in the terms we use. "Critical thinking" implies that some thinking is not critical, and in an age of moderation "uncritical thinking" is likely to be everyone's preference. "Controversial issues" implies that some issues are not controversial and again an age of moderation is likely to regard controversy as vulgar. I like Robert Hutchins' view that all thinking is critical, and that a successful attempt to exclude controversial issues from the curriculum would mean that all issues would be omitted. If anyone can

send me a list of non-controversial issues, I would like to see it. Whenever our schools become thoroughly devoted to the uncritical study of non-controversial issues, we will need to create a new institution whose chief, if not only, purpose will be fostering the intellectual development of the young.

A few anecdotes may illustrate the dilemma faced by teachers who try to challenge the student's intellect. In a social studies class the students are discussing their current events paper, and particularly an article on rain-making. In the midst of this discussion a student says: "I don't think we should try to make it rain. If God wants it to rain, it will rain, and no human being should interfere with God's will." The teacher asks: "Do you also mean that we should not use fertilizer on our farms? If God wants our fields to be fertile, he will see to it that our soil will remain rich and productive?" This sort of question must be asked by any teacher who wants his students to use their intellect in order to clarify what they believe, and why they believe it. But many teachers feel that this kind of questioning is suspect, and no teacher likes to be called a subversive.

In another class a teacher questions the legality of the Louisiana Purchase. He points out that Napoleon held the territory as a consequence of breaking a promise to Spain. He also points out that Jefferson's philosophy of constitutional interpretation raises doubt as to whether the national government had the power to acquire the territory by purchase. In other words, we purchased some land from a man who perhaps did not "own" it, and the act of purchase was itself subject to a possibly unconstitutional interpretation.

A third teacher is discussing with his class the initiation of a parcel post serv-

ice by the national government during Taft's administration. He asks: "Is this what some persons mean by 'creeping socialism'?" Should the government compete with private business? Does free and private enterprise mean that the government should not deliver packages at a cost that private business cannot compete against? If we oppose TVA, and similarly socialistic endeavors, is it consistent for us to advocate that the government get out of the business of delivering mail?"

Of course, students can develop their intellect in certain directions without teachers asking questions about controversial matters. Youth could learn rules of thinking from a study of non-controversial material such as the subject matter of plane geometry. But it does not follow that they would find it easy to transfer this learning to a study of controversy. Although our theories of transfer are less complete than we would like them to be, we are at least certain that persons will approach controversy rationally only if their education includes a rational study of major issues in American life. Limiting their education to rational study of non-controversial materials would prolong and deepen the problems of cultural lag which plague our civic life. Controversial issues in citizenship are the issues which most cry out for solution, and an education which neglects full, free, and reflective study of cultural conflicts would limit the thinking of students to problems of least importance. Furthermore, the study of plane geometry takes on a new vigor and rigor when teachers question the practical use of Euclidean geometry. It is a

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practical geometry for those who wish to lay out a baseball diamond but its usefulness is limited when one tries to track the stars, or to understand the mysteries of nuclear physics.

Some critics of public education who decry the lack of intellectual challenge in its curriculum also oppose problem-centered teaching of the social studies on the ground that it upsets young people, leads to wrong conclusions, fosters cynicism and doubt, and wastes the students' time when they would be better engaged in a study of less interesting but more fundamental material. Opposed to this view is the idea that intellects develop when thoughts occur, and that students are not likely to think except when faced by conflicts of belief which are as interesting as they are puzzling. And this latter view emphasizes thoughtful study of civic issues as an antidote for civic apathy, social prejudice, stereotyped concepts, and cultural lag. If it be true that the social sciences lack the mature development of the physical sciences, we cannot bring citizenship in this country up-to-date except as we train our future citizens in rational approaches to the making of civic decisions.

"A Prizing of Objectivity"

An individual teacher can resolve this issue for himself only by thinking himself through to a position that he can call his own. Without a position, he cannot teach, and as soon as he achieves a position he ceases to be neutral on this particular issue. A public group which insists upon objectivity in our teachers, and then proceeds to define objectivity as a synonym for neutrality, is insisting that teachers have no educational theory at all. A prizing of objectivity implies a total theory of education based upon scientific data and a valuing of democ-

racy. The only teachers who can take an objective approach to learning are those who are rational in their conclusions about the nature of learning, and who are democratic in their value preferences. It may be true that students cannot learn democracy except as they practice some, but without an objective study of what democracy means they can hardly know what it is that they should practice. And teachers cannot develop this understanding of democracy by neglecting to nourish in their students an objective study of democracy.

Let us suppose that students in a science class are learning the data upon which scientists base their acceptance of a theory of evolution. If a student insists that there is a "higher" truth above and beyond the experimental truth of science, and if other students disagree with him, the objective teacher ceases to be neutral if he suggests an objective study of this difference in point of view. His espousal of an objective approach would be regarded by many religious leaders as anything but a neutral stand. Likewise, if he takes the position that there is a truth we cannot ascertain with human intelligence, some social scientists will feel he has departed from neutrality. Some science teachers would resolve this difference by pointing out that we have at least two views of the universe and its truth, explore the origin of each, identify the premises of each, and compare the achievements of science with those of religion. Again, this resolution may be objective but far from neutral. Perhaps the best insight that we can offer such a teacher is that social neutrality is usually more social than neutral, and that democratic societies provide the greatest freedom to explore beliefs objectively. Many physicists hold this insight but not so many sociologists.

Every teacher has a definition of truth implicit in his teaching. Without a definition he cannot teach. Many teachers no doubt have confused and conflicting definitions, and a certain ambivalence, if not sheer opportunism, may appear in their teaching. It may be the confused, or ambivalent, or opportunistic teacher that some persons have in mind when they advocate neutral teaching. The only alternative to "neutral" and confused teaching is that which emphasizes objective study of ideas, and it is a part of every teacher's job to render explicit the definition of truth implied by such study. Unless he does this, his students are not likely to sense, except in the dimmest sort of way, the values and purposes to be achieved from a study of problems, issues, or ideas.

We dare not forget that among those critics who want thinking in the schools without having thinking in the schools are thousands of high school graduates every one of whom spent 12 or more years in a public school. Evidently, one can go to school for years and years without learning what schooling is. I do not wish to suggest that high school students should be required to take "education courses." I can think of no greater waste

of time for either teachers or high school students. But surely an understanding of public education, learning, and thinking are among the concepts to be taught in any program of general education a high school might conceive. And adolescents being what they are, the high school which teaches that learning to think takes place when problems are faced and resolved reflectively had better have some problem-solving in its curriculum. The more controversial the problem the more challenging to intellect it will be.

To some extent this clarification of what education is and how intellects develop can be a by-product of all good teaching. Students who think about community controversy are likely to acquire by osmosis some understanding of how human beings learn. But very probably the general education program in high schools of the future will have to include a systematic study of public education, and this study would be largely cultural and psychological in its subject matter content. Until this occurs on a systematic basis, I believe we can continue to expect to encounter adult citizens who because of their "education" oppose in our public schools the kind of education they don't know that they want.

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