

# The Importance of People

Column editor: Richard L. Henderson

*Our February column, contributed by JIM BROWN of the English department at North Texas State College, developed the thesis that contemporary education of the progressive variety fails utterly to develop children's intellects, and that its products thus have no more impact on social movement than do the graduates of barber colleges (for instance).*

*Without presuming to answer Jim's charges one by one, we offer the following dialogue in the hope that it may make a bit clearer some of the theory on which contemporary education is based.*

RICHARD L. HENDERSON

## Conversation

*Professor Prowe:* We were talking about the function of education.

*Professor Cahn:* I was saying that the school exists to cultivate the intellect, not to promote social adjustment, facial beauty, or home comforts. These may be desirable, but they are irrelevant to the school's real function. To survive, we first and foremost need frontier thinkers, and the educational system must set their production as its major purpose. The content of intellectual education is the data of the disciplines, the funded capital of man's experience, so to speak; and its method is the rigorous application of young minds to the mastery of these data. Now since relatively few possess the mental capacity for this kind of education, we must inevitably come to what most societies have known and practiced for centuries: The dual system of education. By trying to develop everybody's intellect, we have developed nobody's intellect.

*Prowe:* what do you mean by the "intellect"?

*Cahn:* The organ of memory and reason.

*Prowe:* How do we go about developing this organ?

*Cahn:* By requiring that it struggle to acquire the facts, principles and concepts which constitute the raw materials to be sorted and drawn upon at need.

*Prowe:* What need?

*Cahn:* To meet a situation, to solve a problem, or simply to satisfy a curiosity.

*Prowe:* Then we master data in order to resolve unsettled situations?

*Cahn:* Yes.

*Prowe:* So that the acquisition of facts and principles does not in itself constitute intellectual development?

*Cahn:* Certainly not. We learn in order to be able to meet new demands effectively.

*Prowe:* And if, as in some utopia, there were no problems, there would be no need for intellectual development?

*Cahn:* I suppose not.

*Prowe:* Then the kind of intellectual development you describe really begins with problems?

*Cahn:* True.

*Prowe:* And would you say that these problems are personal, or social?

*Cahn:* I suppose that all problems are ultimately social.

*Prowe:* Even such a problem as paying one's rent?

*Cahn:* A man's condition and feelings affect others.

*Prowe:* So ask not for whom the bell tolls?

*Cahn:* Very good.

*Prowe:* So we conclude that intellectual development depends upon the existence of problems, social in nature?

*Cahn:* This is our conclusion.

*Prowe:* Very well. Now since intellectual development depends upon the existence of problems, and the data of experience are tools for solving problems, would you think it logical for education to be organized around problems rather than around data?

*Cahn:* I would think it logical to teach something to solve problems with, first, and the long history of education seems to support this idea. Recently, however, the professional education fraternity has discovered a way to educate the young without teaching them anything.

*Prowe:* At this point I am concerned with *how* something is best learned. Do you own a car?

*Cahn:* Of sorts.

*Prowe:* Have you read your operations manual?

*Cahn:* I have looked it over.

*Prowe:* You have not studied it seriously?

*Cahn:* Not exactly. Why should I?

*Prowe:* Assuming that you are driving at night through some of our western desert land, and your motor fails, would you need to use your manual?

*Cahn:* I suspect that I would.

*Prowe:* How would you go about it?

*Cahn:* I would check the section dealing with motor operation.

*Prowe:* And you would search out all

the information you needed to understand the trouble?

*Cahn:* I hope so.

*Prowe:* So that, although you lacked the necessary information beforehand, the pressure of the rather serious situation forced you to learn enough by reading and experimenting to get at the trouble?

*Cahn:* Possibly. Are you comparing the data of car operation to the data of the disciplines?

*Prowe:* Both are tools for solving problems, are they not?

*Cahn:* Obviously, but are car mechanics in the same league with the wisdom of the ages?

*Prowe:* I merely said that both are tools for solving problems. Now after solving your problem, while you still lacked information about the brakes or the steering assembly, you would know better how to tackle motor difficulties next time, even if only by way of confirming or eliminating a possibility?

*Cahn:* True.

*Prowe:* This simple analogy is based upon the considerable evidence now available that learning best takes place within the problem context; that not all data in a given field need be committed to memory even if it could be, so long as we know it to be readily available; and that those data which are seen to be useful and which indeed are actually used, are best retained.

*Cahn:* I deplore the constant insistence on usefulness! Must we eternally sacrifice the aesthetic on the miserable altar of utility?

*Prowe:* If one wishes to read, compose music, paint, write, or simply think—are these activities not pleasurable and thus useful to him?

*Cahn:* Absolutely. I insist that they be encouraged for their own sake!

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*Prowe:* I think that on reflection you will see that instead of limiting or preventing such activities, the problems approach actually stimulates and encourages them.

*Cahn:* It had better! Now about your evidence on learning: I have a feeling that this evidence, produced by and for professional educators, would be inadmissible in court as pseudo-scientific.

*Prowe:* I can only ask you to suspend judgment until you have examined the careful studies of learning by college students conducted by Tyler and others. You must decide on the basis of your own investigation. And incidentally, please reflect on our shared despair at the wretched ignorance of many of our own graduates who are products of the very kind of program you espouse.

*Cahn:* This is a bit unkind, but I shall reflect.

*Prowe:* Touché! Now would you say

that problem-solving involves a process, a skill, and that it is conditioned by habits and attitudes?

*Cahn:* Please explain.

*Prowe:* Is it possible for a man to be learned, to have mastered the data of certain disciplines, and yet be unwilling or unable to act upon what he knows in problem situations, and thus fail to have any useful impact upon society?

*Cahn:* For instance?

*Prowe:* Educated or learned political figures, civic leaders, lawyers, medical men, educators, and even theologians, who wilfully or ignorantly reject scientifically verified findings when their implications threaten traditional practice or the claims of the multitude?

*Cahn:* Habits and attitudes often appear to dominate reason.

*Prowe:* Would you then agree that the school be as concerned with the skills, habits and attitudes involved in problem-

solving as with the acquisition of data to be sorted and drawn upon at will?

*Cahn:* Not at all. These skills and habits ought to be learned on the job. School is not a job.

*Prowe:* Well, let me further illustrate the point I have just made about effective learning taking place best within the context of the problem. Is the medical internship a job?

*Cahn:* Not entirely. The intern is supervised.

*Prowe:* To develop further his skills and to prevent his doing harm to the sick? So this is really part of his schooling?

*Cahn:* Yes.

*Prowe:* Do you approve of this kind of internship?

*Cahn:* I surely do.

*Prowe:* Does the young citizen serve an internship after leaving school to learn the habits and skills of using his knowledge to solve social problems?

*Cahn:* Not in the same way.

*Prowe:* In what way then?

*Cahn:* He takes a small part in community life, learning how best to tackle the larger social problems.

*Prowe:* So he learns by making small mistakes in small situations?

*Cahn:* Exactly.

*Prowe:* How are the mistakes detected by this small citizen and his fellows?

*Cahn:* By the effects in the community.

*Prowe:* The effect being that some people suffer, or are less well off, or less happy?

*Cahn:* These are some indications.

*Prowe:* Would you object if we could set up a community in which young citizens could serve their internships without bringing about any real suffering or unhappiness?

*Cahn:* No objection, except that such a community would not be the real thing.

*Prowe:* Could you conceive of the school as such a community?

*Cahn:* The school is not the real thing.

*Prowe:* It is not a real society?

*Cahn:* It is only a small part of real society.

*Prowe:* Is a community all of real society?

*Cahn:* Of course not, but its problems are much like those of the larger society.

*Prowe:* School children face situations demanding certain skills and knowledges, and are constantly confronting problems of human relationships, caste and class, care of property, finance, political structure, and the like. Do not these problems parallel those of the non-school community?

*Cahn:* Possibly.

*Prowe:* So that it might be productive for the school to provide not only the opportunities for acquiring facts and concepts, but also the opportunities to learn



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the skills, habits and attitudes involved in effective problem-solving?

*Cahn:* This is the reason behind all the "doing" in schools?

*Prowe:* This seems to be one reason.

*Cahn:* Such doing as building grocery stores? Or transferring the classroom into a Mesozoic landscape? These kinds of "doing" are related to the solutions of social problems, while learning the data of economics from standard textbooks is not related?

*Prowe:* Both may be related. But tell me, what do you think of the psychological problems involved in human migration to another planet under the pressures of over-population?

*Cahn:* If you are serious, I am not at all concerned right now.

*Prowe:* Nor are young people in school concerned with international law (unless we are in real danger), or with race relationships (unless the school is multi-racial), or with banking problems (unless they have considerable bank accounts). But they are concerned with problems whose solutions will have some more or less immediate effect upon their lives, as you are concerned with the proper function of the school. You are an educator, and what goes on in schools has real meaning to you.

*Cahn:* Now let's go back to the planet business. I contend that if the teacher considers this a significant problem, and keeps me at it long enough, I will become interested, and will amass many new and important data and bring them to bear on the problem, and so will widen my horizons and learn to think in the bargain.

*Prowe:* This may be true, of course. Are you saying that any problem, however remote from present reality, can become interesting if one sticks with it long enough?

*Cahn:* Certainly, provided it is not beyond the mental grasp of children.

*Prowe:* Then on what bases shall the teacher make choices among problems?

*Cahn:* They must be within the grasp of children, and of course they must conform to reality, which eliminates problems of exploding the schoolhouse or of flying to the sun unassisted.

*Prowe:* These criteria do not narrow the field much. Are there others?

*Cahn:* You wish me to mention that of interest, but I am convinced that few interests of children lead to educative activities.

*Prowe:* What major teaching responsibility does your point suggest?

*Cahn:* That children are led beyond their immediate interest into problems of wider scope and greater significance.

*Prowe:* Exactly. Then to our criterion of interest we need to attach the idea that we introduce problems which are *capable of exciting* interest?

*Cahn:* This is what I mean. You place a great burden on the teacher!

*Prowe:* Greater than that of lecturing, or laying out information to be learned, and then testing for its acquisition?

*Cahn:* Much greater.

*Prowe:* I am wondering if there is another outcome of the internship beyond the development of skills in problem-solving?

*Cahn:* Such as?

*Prowe:* When you are seriously ill, do you prefer the judgment of several physicians to that of a single member of the group?

*Cahn:* Several, of course. Their combined resources should be greater than those of any individual group member.

*Prowe:* And the personal or medical prejudices of one individual are less likely to gain sway?

*Cahn:* True.

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*Prowe:* And would you say the same of a situation in the field of science?

*Cahn:* Yes.

*Prowe:* And when social problems are to be attacked, you would again prefer the judgments of several social scientists about the nature of a problem?

*Cahn:* I believe so.

*Prowe:* So that intellectual power really comes to fruition in group situations?

*Cahn:* In a way, certainly.

*Prowe:* Then would you agree that an important outcome of the internship might be an understanding of and an appreciation for the greater objectivity normally derived from group attack on common social problems?

*Cahn:* Working together would, I suppose, generate such.

*Prowe:* Returning to your idea that many children lack capacity for intellectual development, would you agree that society is faced with an infinite variety of problems?

*Cahn:* Certainly.

*Prowe:* Problems which cut across, or straddle, many fields of knowledge?

*Cahn:* True.

*Prowe:* And that being complex, the analyses and solutions require many different kinds of talents, skills and understandings—spatial, mechanical, artistic, verbal, and the like?

*Cahn:* Yes.

*Prowe:* Would you further agree that few possess, or can be helped to possess, all or enough of the varied talents needed for effective solutions?

*Cahn:* Very few indeed, these days.

*Prowe:* So that the solutions require many different kinds of intelligence, so to speak.

*Cahn:* Yes, yes.

*Prowe:* Now since we tentatively agreed that education can more effec-

tively proceed through problem-solving, does it not follow that persons of varying degrees of intelligence and of different kinds of intelligence, can profit together? The verbally gifted contributing what they are able, the mechanically gifted what they are able, and the others contributing their diverse talents to whatever aspect of the problems lend themselves to these talents?

*Cahn:* This, of course, would be most difficult to arrange.

*Prowe:* So, beginning with problems, the kind and the amount of information, and the kind and complexity of the skills any child, including the gifted child, could acquire, need not be limited by others, but only by the child's own natural capacities?

*Cahn:* Granting this approach, it would appear so.

*Prowe:* And there would be nothing to prevent, but everything to encourage,

children's personal and individual growth through solitary reflection and guided study so vital to the production and implementation of ideas?

*Cahn:* True, using this approach.

*Prowe:* And therefore, we need not separate children on the basis of superior or inferior mental capacity?

*Cahn:* Apparently not, although the problems approach would demand extremely capable teachers, all sorts of laboratories and equipment, small classes, and indeed a thorough reorganization of school programs, among other things.

*Prowe:* Plus the freedom to inquire, boldly?

*Cahn:* This above all.

*Prowe:* I see that classes are about to begin. Shall we continue later?

—RICHARD L. HENDERSON, *professor of education, Agnes Scott College and Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.*

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