

Cult of Content

How much—and for whom?

IT is possible that the cave men of the Stone Age, after hobbling their dinosaurs for the night, sat around the camp fire and argued about the true purposes of education. Perhaps they would be startled to know that the issue is still unsettled, that there are still widely divergent opinions concerning the intent of the educative process itself.

The polarities may be simply stated: (a) we impose subject matter on students because it has inherent value to them; (b) subject matter is not of great value in itself, but is merely a tool by which we develop ability to reason. This issue can be compared to the 17-year locust. It lies dormant for awhile and is almost forgotten. Then it swoops down upon a drowsy world and becomes a subject rife with emotionality. Accusations ring through the press; *educator* becomes a controversial word; criticisms are hurled and met with resentment. A new word, signifying contempt, is invented—"educationist." Those being vilified by

terminology respond by losing both objectivity and dignity.

Aristotle was an early advocate of the concept that the purpose of education is to teach the learner to think. His philosophy, widely discussed at that time and since, was that subject matter is important only in relation to its training of the intellect. Within the memory of the present middle-aged generation, Latin was required in schools because its advocates insisted that studying it "developed the mind." Mathematics was similarly defended because it was said to teach "reasoning power."

Lip service to Aristotle notwithstanding, the temper of the present time is to teach course content as an end in itself, rather than as a means to an end. In these days of National-Emergency-Education, we hear on all sides that the solution to our national crisis lies in giving students more science, math, and modern foreign languages.

We would be avoiding the issue should we deny that much of the content in our teaching programs is valuable for its own sake. Our children must learn to recognize printed words and must master the "shorthand counting" which we call

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mathematics. They must have quantities of factual knowledge in order to deal capably with the world in which they find themselves. The simple addition of more and more *facts*, however, does not produce better and better education. If this were true, teaching children would be a pretty simple and straightforward proposition. We could simply add more of everything: more time in the school year, more hours in the school day, more pages in books, more facts for the memory. It is possible, though, that we have already reached saturation level from the standpoint of "more" and we may be justified in viewing with alarm the degree to which we have sacrificed reasoning and thinking on the altar of content.

There are many strong forces at work which are moving us away from the goal of education for thinking. These forces are sometimes the very ones which seem to be most interested in raising educational standards. For example, many sincere critics of education are insisting that certain subjects be pursued at advanced levels if young people are to be prepared adequately for college. It is probably true that successful experience with subject matter areas will help the student to comprehend college work. But the assumption that college attendance is the sole criterion of the educated man is one which we cannot afford to accept blindly. Many persons are intellectually competent, culturally replete and economically successful who have never attended college. Conversely, many college graduates have remained intellectually sterile, culturally boorish and economically impoverished. It is quite possible that four years of college may leave a man with only a thin overlay of counterfeit sophistication, which society mistakenly accepts as intellectual stature.

Why, then, do those students who

have been placed in "advanced" courses seem to succeed in college entrance examinations and, later, in college itself? Is it possible that both the high school and the college are enmeshed in the same philosophy and striving toward the same goals: the acquiring of more and more facts? Is it possible that we think that the young person who can recall the exact date of the First Battle of Bull Run is, ipso facto, well prepared for making the difficult decisions involved in casting a ballot for President of the United States? We are pretty well agreed that one of our educational objectives is the preparation for citizenship. In what ways, then, are we teaching our youngsters to evaluate issues or to discern between demagoguery and statesmanship?

Perhaps it is equally true that we substitute presenting facts to our students for presenting seasoned and mature thinking of our own. The simple recitation of facts and the demanding of their recall on schedule is an effective way to dodge the issue of thinking for ourselves and of suggesting challenging ideas. It is disquieting to consider this: if our recital of facts were stripped from us, would we stand intellectually naked in front of the class?

Expanding Horizons

We have already acknowledged that some fact-giving is essential in teaching. Everyone must have facts in order to form opinions. We must, however, reach some peace with ourselves over the question of *how much* factual information is desirable. Even more important, perhaps, is this question: *for whom?*

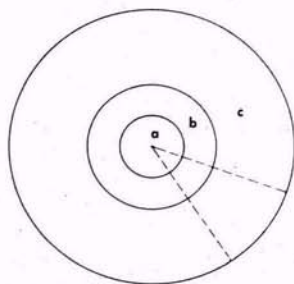
Our high schools have begun to answer the question, *how much*. The stark and simple reply is: MORE. We find that in many places, graduation require-

ments have been proliferated, particularly in the area of the "solid" subjects. If there is one certain way to lower academic standards, it is to increase the number of course requirements in basic subjects. For instance, if a school board increases mathematics requirements for all students from one year to two years, certain results will follow inevitably: (a) Many students will be unable to comprehend the second and more difficult course. If they cannot pass the course, and cannot graduate unless they do, they will drop out of school. Thus, we increase the number of early school leavers and reduce the number of high school graduates. (b) Teachers who must try to instruct slow-learning students in advanced mathematics will find that they must "water down" the material to such an extent that they actually are conducting only a review of the first year course. Requiring a second year of mathematics thus becomes window dressing and a standard to which we "point with pride" but dare not examine too closely.

It should be seen fairly readily that we cannot separate the *how much* from the *for whom*. Our way of life is geared to the concept that individuals are vastly different from each other, not only in what they are able to do and be, but also in what they are interested in doing and becoming. Since our total culture is based upon this idea, why do we not run our schools as though we thought it were true? It is just as ridiculous for a school to require two years of mathematics for everyone as it would be for the same school to require two years of auto mechanics. Both skills are needed in our society, but they do not necessarily need to be mastered by the same persons.

Many references have been made to the expanding horizons of knowledge.

No one questions the fact that the actual body of available information is increasing—almost to the point of doubling itself—each year. But there is a real question about the implication of this signal growth for the processes of education. There seems to be an assumption that we need to impart all of the new information to everyone. Can we justify such a position?



In the accompanying illustration, let us assume that the smallest circle (a) represents the total body of knowledge in existence one hundred years ago. The next larger circle (b) may represent the body of knowledge extant at the present time. Finally, the outside circle (c) may indicate the predicted expansion of man's knowledge of the world and of himself one hundred years hence. If the pie-shaped segment in circle (a) stands for that part of knowledge that a highly educated man might have mastered one hundred years ago, it is clear what an extension of that segment may mean for today's student. But perhaps the most significant feature of the illustration is represented by the large area of content which was not mastered one hundred years ago, nor today, nor one hundred years hence. One conclusion would seem to be unavoidable: any attempt at total mastery of subject matter is futile. We might add that such mastery is as unnecessary as it is futile, since man will

probably be able to cope effectively with his environment at least as satisfactorily in the future as he has in the past, and without benefit of total mastery.

The real need for our society has been, is, and will be for people who know how to find out what they want to know, how to make application of what they have learned, and how to select those facts and ideas which are of use to them and discard those which are of no use. Our schools should help young people choose appropriate areas of study—appropriate for each individual—how to motivate students to high levels of enthusiasm for the learning they have embraced, and how to help them to see relationships among the knowns and the unknowns with which they must deal.

Perhaps one of the problems with which schools deal each day—student apathy—is self-induced. For the youngster who can see no connection between the Crossing of the Rubicon and his own day to day living, there is bound to be resentment engendered when such factual information is inflicted upon him. But man's destiny is to explore—and the exploration of ideas can be exciting, even for the faint in heart and weak in mind. An Expedition of Exploration requires leadership. This, then, is the challenge of education.

Editorial

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should develop. While that competency is being learned, assistance in designing and executing studies is available from colleges, universities and state departments of education. It is also hoped that ASCD's Research Commission will give leadership to the development of some nationwide research endeavors in which many individuals and school systems over the country can participate. Much

curriculum work must become research oriented.

What are some of the frequently-stressed principles to which supervisors must continuously give attention as they work for curriculum development, improvement and maintenance? Some helpful principles are these: (a) Planning for activities should be done with those who participate. (b) Development of plans for coordination should be done with the staff; developing and maintaining open lines of communication throughout the individual school and school systems are essential for successful curriculum work. (c) Providing opportunities for parents and other lay citizens to discuss their hopes and expectations for their children, for the school program is essential. (d) Providing continuous information about education and the educational program of the community increases not only understanding of but also support for the program.

Working toward a theory of supervision: A plea has been made in this statement for supervisors to take leadership in placing their curriculum development work in a research setting.

A further plea is made that supervisors and other curriculum workers shall proceed in developing a theory of supervision and curriculum in order that activities in this area of leadership may be more effectively analyzed and researched. At present we do not have sufficient descriptive data as to how curriculum change takes place, the factors that seem to facilitate and to block. Systematic efforts in theory building for this leadership function need to be undertaken.

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