The Education of Judgment: A Rationale

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"Students need to learn a process or processes whereby conflicting values or standards can be resolved in their own lives, or in living with others. If these learnings are to be achieved by some sort of rational process, the schools must be involved."

The question is: "Should public educational institutions become involved in, and responsible for, the education of judgment?" In order to answer this question, there needs to be a refocus on learning. Then a new series of questions should be asked and answered. Among the questions that need to be discussed are the following:

Can judgment be learned/taught? How, or from whom is judgment learned? Can the process of learning to judge be analyzed, sequenced, and applied as appropriate to readiness and/or maturity? Is the current process of learning or educating judgment adequate? Finally, what are the implications of using some of the alternative means or agencies to educate and train judgmental skills?

With the fear that questions often predetermine answers, with the understanding that the assertions contained herein will by no means be universally agreed on, and with the hope this will continue to further the dialogue, this monologue will proceed.

Can Judgment Be Learned?

It seems that the human being has few instincts. Most of what the human species does or knows is learned. In fact, learning may be one of the few instincts proper to human nature. The specific content, the manner, and the degree of learning may, and indeed do, vary. But the variations are due to organic or environmental causes rather than the nature of being human. People learn; they have a need and an appetite to learn. Further, the need to learn manifests itself in at least three integrally interrelated ways. People learn to know, they learn to use what they know, and they learn when to use what they know. People learn facts (concepts, generalization, truth); skills (abilities and capabilities); and values (attitudes, emotional response, and judgment criteria).

This last phenomenon, the learning of when to use what we know, is the concern to which this rationale is addressed. The assertion of this rationale is that people will learn to judge (an activity) both as or from a code (knowing, cognitive) and as or from a process (skill) and with conviction (from value and standards or criteria). People will do this instinctively and unconsciously unless the process is brought to the conscious and rational level. Thus judgment not only can, it must and will be learned.

Can Judgment Be Taught?

Can judgment be taught? The snap answer to this question is: whatever is learned, is and can be taught. But the snap answer hides a lot of neces-
ecessary information that might be of help later in answering the basic question: "Should public schools teach judgment?"

Yes, judgment can be and is taught. The teaching of judgment is just as natural and just as instinctive as learning—and for the most part just as unconscious. The primary teaching technique is example or modeling. The primary learning technique is observing and repetition of the model. In the realm of judgment, everyone is both teacher and learner, and the basic criterion for the success of learning/teaching is whatever works. The real question about teachability should therefore be reworded to ask whether the teaching of judgment (code or process) can be raised to the conscious level, and whether it can be analyzed and sequenced according to the maturity and readiness of the learner.

This question is as old as the Socratic dialogues, and modern education is undergoing critical examination of the issue. Answers to the question are found among the advocates of Moral Development (Kohlberg), Values Clarification (Raths, Harmin, and Simon), Values Education (NCSS 1971 Yearbook), and Law Focus Education. Concern is also expressed by educators in a more vague manner when the topic of discussion is the decision-making process. Although much remains to be done, particularly in the sequence, much progress has been made in the understanding of judgment education, and perhaps as a profession, we are now near some sort of definition of what judgment education is.

Judgment education may be defined as providing an opportunity for learners to learn to use a set of standards (or code) in arriving at a decision. Essentially, judgment is a process of applying standards to a set of alternatives offering a potential solution to a given problem or set of circumstances. The standards applied may be economic, sociological, esthetic, or religious, but they will be learned standards, and they will be weighted and applied from learned values or criteria. Judgment is applied both before and after a decision. Before the decision, the judgment is tentative. Judgment after a decision is evaluative and reinforcing or extinguishing. All of this, the process of judging, may be planned or spontaneous, it may be conscious or unconscious, it may be rational or irrational. These things must be understood by those who would be involved in judgment education.

Who Teaches Judgment?

Now that the nature of judgment learning and education has been explored to some degree, the current or traditional practice in the field needs to be discussed. The answer indicated above is that everyone teaches judgment or moral/ethical standards. Everyone teaches values criteria or standards from which to make judgments—this includes parents, peers, schools, institutions, and today, most especially, the media of entertainment and advertising. However, responsibility for such education can be more specifically pinned down than that. American society has more or less traditionally anticipated that the home—that is, parents—and the churches would be the institutions and agencies most directly concerned. Schools and public education institutions have not been involved in this view except in a supportive way. In theory, that is a view still held today.

However, in actual practice, the family unit has become essentially an economic unit, in many cases with both parents working. Families no longer maintain the stability and consistency they once did. Many parents no longer espouse any code of behavior beyond economic survival and personal pleasure.

Churches have depended on the family for membership and for support of the values and moral behavior standards espoused by their institution. Aside from declining membership, many churches are in a transitional state that has in turn caused confusion and defection among the membership.

Society-at-large has left the field of value education primarily to media. Although printed media have an important influence, the visual
media have the greatest impact. Television in particular, through its programming, selects the values and standards people will view. From children watching Saturday morning cartoons to the adult population watching public issue presentations, the impact of what people see on television, just in the form of entertainment is tremendous.

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The purpose and result of advertising on television in terms of educating judgment standards or criteria are obvious and measured.

Finally, the schools that were to support the teaching of others find that the traditional values and standards are not there to be supported. The schools are still bound by the theory that they may not teach directly any specific set or code of values and judgment criteria.

This being the case, and given the fact that children will indeed learn values and criteria, from whom and what do children learn regarding judgment? They still learn from the example and from discussion with their peers, and finally from the example of society-at-large. The standards the children are learning can be boiled down to a few: profit; efficiency; doing one's own thing; it's not what one does that counts, it's what one gets away with; and so on. The old values of honesty, integrity, loyalty, fidelity, service, dedication, human concern for others, and the like receive some verbal support, but the example from broken and mobile families, from daily accounts in the media, is all to the contrary—for what is done is more important than what is said, especially if it is successful.

Evidence of what is being said here abounds: the rising crime rate, teenage addiction and suicide, increasing poverty, the need for environmental and consumer protection, public scandals, and so on. The questionable societal values and judgment standards are probably not the sole cause, but they are a large and perhaps the major contributing factor. If American society is to endure, such haphazard learning of judgment criteria cannot be tolerated much longer. Indeed, concern and movement in this direction have already been manifested as indicated earlier.

The Involvement of Public Education

The schools are the agency that American society has set up to teach its youth the knowledge and skills of survival and continuance of that society. More and more of the burden of teaching these skills has fallen upon the "shoulders" of public education. It once was that the skills of cooking and sewing and of trade and livelihood were taught in the home. Modern society and technology have mandated that these skills now be taught in the schools. It would seem that the time has come for the schools to take a more active role in the development of values and judgment standards or criteria, at least to the extent of providing an open forum for the discussion and examination of such standards and criteria. This is not to say that schools should usurp the role of home and church where those institutions are doing an adequate job, and care does need to be taken to avoid indoctrination. Specific values and judgment criteria should be neither promoted nor disparaged, although positive values in general should be encouraged.

The home is still the prime teacher of values. The student, as he/she grows older, assumes more and more responsibility for the criteria accepted and used. But such development should no longer be left to chance. The school's responsibility should become to help learners recognize the values and codes they hold, and the possible consequences of those values and standards. The schools should help the student learn how to use those values in the decision-making process, that is, the skills. Students also need to learn and accept the fact that others may hold alternative values and standards or alternative priorities, which may differ from those they hold. Students need to learn how values and standards are acquired. Students need to learn a process or processes whereby conflicting values or standards can be resolved in their own lives, or in living with others. If these
learnings are to be achieved by some sort of rational process, the schools must be involved. The involvement of the schools should and must not be indoctrinary, but should promote understanding and compassion in the knowledge and acceptance of all values enhancing societal survival. The schools should teach and provide opportunities to learn and practice the skills of judgment in an academic and nonthreatening environment, and to appraise the effect of the application of judgment standards. Schools can and should provide the opportunity for students to grow and make more mature judgments as they grow and become more mature physically. The schools can help the learners become people who care enough to think carefully, choose wisely, and act responsibly, for the good of themselves and their society.

In summary, the purpose of this discussion has been to provide an answer and a rationale for the answer, to the question: "Should public educational institutions become involved in, and responsible for, the education of judgment?" This paper has tried to demonstrate the need and the void for such education. Yes, the public schools should share the responsibility for the education of judgment.

By giving people a helping hand in the development of moral and spiritual values, we can help them find security in an insecure, changing world. We cannot give them solutions to problems not yet formulated, but we can help them arrive at moral and spiritual standards against which to evaluate and judge both the problems of the future, and the solutions that will be proposed for those problems. We can give them the skills.

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