

# Education— A Horse on You

John Madsen

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*Faculty members of small universities should be judged by their teaching ability, not by their publications.*

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When I was a boy on the ranch in Idaho, I had a horse who tossed his head back often and violently. The rider was constantly in danger of being beamed by the horse's head. My stepfather, an unkind and unthinking man, told me that I should ride him with a large club in hand, and whenever he tossed his head I should hit him squarely between the ears. He said this would cure the horse's bad habit. So I got a section of two-by-four and got on the horse. He tossed his head. I hit him. He tossed his head again. I hit him again. He tossed his head a third time. I didn't hit him anymore, but he tossed his head back even more violently than before, anticipating the blow he expected to receive.

This little story illustrates to me some of the things that are wrong with American education. The horse's head should have been secured by a tie down, a convenient device that attaches a horse's bridle to a breast strap. Similarly, we should stop beating American education with our various clubs and start doing something to correct its many faults.

For the last few years I have had a good deal of experience with the teachers of my town, which is small and has a university. I think that the problems of education seen in our town are typical of those of the nation-at-large, and they seem to me to represent in small what is wrong with national education.

One of the things that distresses me about teachers is their lack of preparation, their lack of motiva-

tion, and their lack of adequate morale.

We wonder why Johnny and Mary cannot read, why they cannot write, why grammar is such a mystery to them. We can look at our high school teachers and see in them the very faults that we criticize in our younger people. Our young people who never learn grammar will grow up to be the same kind of ill-equipped, ill-trained, unknowledgeable people as their mentors.

## Publish or Perish

Ultimately we must blame the university for the poor quality of teachers. The university in my area is typical. A liberal arts university and one of three state universities, it has a number of professional schools including a vocational technology school, a pharmacy school, and a school of education.

Most of the teachers in my area come from this university, and what do we find here?—the traditional "publish or perish" policy. I should not have to comment on this after what William D. Schaefer, past president of the Modern Language Association, said:

The stupidest thing we did, and this was not forgivable because its

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*"I took the trouble to look at some of the articles in the Faculty Directory of Publications, and nearly all of them are nonsense. There was no reason to publish them."*

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implications were and are so ugly, was to perpetuate a rewards system based on publication. . . . The stupidity was not apparent at a time when there was still plenty of room in the inn, when first-time job seekers could still pick and choose. Once the no-vacancy signs began to appear, however, panic set in and nearly all departments began to take the fiction seriously. Thus for the first time (or second or third time) job seekers, finding a place in the sun meant finding first a place in a scholarly journal. What should have been a natural and healthy act, sharing ideas with colleagues through print, became unnatural, sick. What should have remained student papers or notes for undergraduate lectures became "articles" in which, in emulation of the sciences, we more often than not pretended to "solve" literature rather than to interpret, understand, and appreciate it.

This policy is absolutely disastrous. For a few large colleges like the University of Chicago, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or Columbia, we can expect the faculty to publish, and publish something worthwhile. To expect a small university to have a faculty that can publish important work with any frequency is foolishness.

Take a look at some of the publications at our university. We have a list of faculty publications, and there are a lot of notes in it that one faculty member or another has contributed some part of a bibliography or has done some part in some larger work. These people are literally grasping at straws to have themselves put in print.

I took the trouble to look at some of the articles in the *Faculty Directory of Publications*, and nearly all of them are nonsense. There was no reason to publish them. They just add to the burden of scholars trying to find the worthwhile material in any field.

I think that 90 percent of the publications in this country should never see print. They appear so that faculty members may publish and not perish. This policy creates a

huge surplus of unnecessary and cluttering material that we must all wade through to get at things of real importance.

Aside from this, publish or perish has other damaging features. Professors at a university who must publish or perish will see publication as being their most important job. They will publish come hell or high water. All of their energy, all of their attention will be bent in that direction. On the other hand, little of their attention, little of their energy will be directed to something far more important, which is being a good teacher.

Every university professor in this country cannot be gifted with the energies it takes to be a good teacher and at the same time the talents to be a good researcher and a good writer.

We should reserve to a few large universities the "publish or perish" policy. Those teaching at large universities rarely have any trouble writing or getting published anyway. They will publish regardless.

Small universities should direct their attention to producing good teachers. They should reward good, imaginative, talented teachers with fair salaries, tenure, and other benefits.

### Running Scared

In 1957, American educators came under attack when Sputnik was launched. They were blamed for the fact that Russia came first in the space race. This was unfair. Naturally administrators started feeling paranoid. They turned to their faculties and started blaming them. The faculties responded by starting to hit the horse on the head with every two-by-four at their disposal.

We had, "Why Johnny can't read." We had the new math. We had the new grammar. We had every conceivable kind of new theory and new experimentation with our students.

The end result is that American education is now going crazy and has been for a long time, going crazy with fear, fear of being hit again. American education has been running scared. It has been asking for results, results that can be counted and touched and felt, and this is an unreasonable demand.

Years ago, in Chicago, we used to play a dice game in the bars. It was a two-out-of-three game. When you lost a bout, it was a horse on you, which meant you were losing the game. This is the position of American education—it's losing the game and no amount of hitting the animal in the head is going to do anything but make the horse throw its head even worse than before.

My recommendations, then, are that we stop maintaining the "publish or perish" policy in our small colleges, where most of our teachers receive their training. Instead we should encourage and promote good teaching in these schools. Let us again train teachers who are inspired by what they are doing and would rather be doing that than anything else in the world and who see their task as important—and even noble. Only then will we have teachers who are really teachers and not status-seekers or union bargainers. We will again have teachers who take professional pride in themselves and the job they do. *ET*



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