

The Banalization of Education

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Commentary

The self-evident degradation of educational quality in our society today has several causes. But of all of them there are three that most

immediately come to mind.

The first is the apparent inability of teachers and curricular designers to rigorously analyze the impact of new technologies on culture in general, and on the cognitive patterns of students in particular.

The second is the tendency among teachers and administrators to rapidly and often unreflectively consign exemplarity and love, long considered central to the learning process, to marginal roles within their daily teaching practices.

The third is the custom among many teachers who are alienated and frightened by the promotion of hedonistic individualism under our culture's dominant ethos of consumerism to try to remedy this evil by drastically minimizing the concepts of merit and personal responsibility in their interactions with students.

In his [“Amusing Ourselves to Death”](#) (1984), the great educational philosopher Neil Postman, following in the footsteps of his mentor Marshall McLuhan, reminds us again and again that while we, as adherents of the modern creed of inexorable linear progress, like to focus almost exclusively on the supposed benefits provided by new communication technologies, we tend to ignore the fact that each such innovation carries with it a new epistemology; that is, a new way of mentally organizing the physical, spatial, and temporal elements of our lives.

Postman does not believe that it is either advisable or possible to try to hinder or cancel the development of new communication tools. But he warns that it is the responsibility of all people interested in the continuity and enrichment of culture to talk openly and honestly about which cognitive and human qualities are lost, and which are gained, with the adoption of each important new communicative technology.

He suggests that it is only when we know whether and/or how the new technologies facilitate the apprehension of the skills and the canons of knowledge that we, as adults, have decided as essential to the

achievement of the good life, that we should allow them a prominent place in our classrooms.

But in order to do this, we would, of course, have had to do something that we have not done as citizens, educators, and administrators until now: have a serious debate about what exactly is this Good Life thing that the Greek philosophers (and every serious educator in history until quite recently) talked about, and what are the skills, and perhaps more importantly, the set of cognitive and psychological dispositions that are most likely to help students achieve it.

And this confusion brings us back to the second problem mentioned at the outset of this piece: how technical innovations profoundly alter our ways of perceiving reality.

When people, like Postman, reflect upon this phenomenon they generally focus, as we have seen, on how technological innovations affect our perceptions of space and time. What they do not highlight as often, however, is how they can also alter our perceptions of the *very nature* of what it means to be human.

I am referring to the rising tendency to conceptualize students as machines, and from there, the learning process in terms of the operations of a computer in which the output (knowledge) is seen as a mere product of the sum of the inputs (information) carefully provided by the programmer (the teacher).

Much more than information processors, however, young people are seekers of the transcendental; that is, those realities and experiences that transport them beyond ordinary elements of their daily lives. This is why they take so many risks during adolescence. And that is why they also seek, often without being able to admit it, adults who possess what they do not yet have: a knowledge of their own strength, uniqueness, talent, and resilience.

They are constantly seeking beacons of exemplarity, visions of what it means to be an intellectually formed person with the ability to wrestle with life and with complex ideas with enthusiasm and a style of their

own. And if, due to a lack of security or a fear of being seen as “repressive,” we as educators do not show them this *authority*—understood here in the etymologically-linked sense of becoming the true *author* of one’s life—they will look for it elsewhere.

At the same time as this, they are constantly looking for love, something that should not be confused, as is so often the case in our day, with an indulgence of their immature ways of being. No, they are desperately looking for a platonic form of love, honed by the constant, careful, and compassionate observation of them by a teacher who strives to understand their unique ways of being, and who seeks to convey to them, in small ways and large, that they are always much smarter and more capable than they believe themselves to be.

But to be able to behave like this with young people in a consistent way, the teacher himself must have cultivated his very own source of vitality, rooted in a firm conviction that the process of learning is in itself a noble and humanizing idea, and not a mere adjunct to the ubiquitous game of making a living.

And with this we arrive at the last great barrier against intellectual and human excellence in our schools: the listlessness induced in many teachers by our prevailing economic system.

While our economic system constantly promises us abundance and happiness, it is sustained in many ways through the cultivation of precariousness in large sectors of the population. And worse, as [Debord warned us more than fifty years ago](#), this consumerist spectacle tends to devour the traditions, values, and ethical presumptions—such as the idea that there must be a certain relationship between the difficulty, danger, or inherent social value of a job and its financial reward—that provided us with a sense of social order for many years.

Faced with this chaotic landscape, many teachers give in to discouragement and, in a fit of misplaced sympathy for our students buffeted by the ambient disorder, the temptation to “liberate” them from the traditional codes of conduct and the need to comply with merit-based canons of achievement.

But we must remember that in the life of a young person, there is only one thing worse than suffering the unjust attacks of the adult powers in his or her life. It is intuiting that the adults in their lives are big children; that is, beings incapable of showing them how to fight for personal dignity in a world that, despite all the rhetoric aired in the media in favor of inclusion and diversity, is increasingly characterized by its enormous intolerance towards individuals who disagree with the dominant narratives issued by the great centers of cultural power.

Having friends who listen compassionately to our woes is great. But, in general, we can only develop the “[intimate resistance](#)” that fortifies us during the endless struggles of life by observing the ways of being of older people who, having themselves dialogued and fought with both the “just” and the “unjust” authorities in their lives, have been able to develop their own philosophy and praxis of being.

When those of us who have been invested with institutional authority by society lower ourselves to the level of mere compassionate friends of the students, we run the risk of completely canceling this essential process of growth.

It is both incredible and shameful that it has taken us more than fifteen years to start a serious debate on whether or not to allow mobile phones, one of the most disruptive technologies in human history, into schools. They may or may not be a great accelerator of learning. But it’s a crime that we let them into our schools without a serious discussion beforehand about the possible negative consequences of doing so. The same can be said regarding the [current race to integrate AI into our teaching paradigms](#).

For centuries philosophers have spoken of the fundamentally spiritual nature of the teaching and learning processes. But under the influence of a culture that has replaced the veneration of transcendental forces with the veneration of mechanical solutions, we have forgotten this, resulting in a tendency to see the student as a kind of machine that processes “facts” instead of what he is by nature: a flesh and blood miracle capable of the most radical and creative acts of mental alchemy.

Consumerism is, to paraphrase [León Gieco's famous anti-war anthem](#), “a monster that stomps down hard” and obliterates most everything in its path. And it goes without saying that young people facing this voracious beast deserve compassion.

But perhaps more than that, they need practice in what it means to wage intelligent combat against the authority figures in their lives. So rather than trying, in utopian fashion, to try and protect them from pain and clashes with their elders, we should seek to provide them with ample opportunities to spar with us in our schools under conditions that are hopefully mediated by a core respect for their humanity as well as our own.

Working within the classic canons of liberal reformism, we can surely institute changes that will slightly improve the educational experience of students in the coming years. But it seems to me that in this moment marked by rapid changes in our perceptions of many basic elements of existence, incremental reforms of this type will no longer suffice. No, to face the educational challenges of our time of breakneck change in an effective way I believe we will have to return, paradoxically, to the old-fashioned spiritual and affective roots of education in our search for answers.

From the [Brownstone Institute](#)

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