

EDUCATION, THE INDIVIDUAL, AND CONSUMERISM

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Summary

In addressing the cultural roots of the ecological crisis, it is essential to understand how emancipatory approaches to educational reform contribute to a consumer dependent form of individualism, and undermine the deep conceptual and moral foundations of cultural diversity. The ideal of emancipating the individual from tradition, which is a western idea rooted in Enlightenment assumptions that were shared by the Industrial Revolution, has the effect of undermining the varied forms of intergenerational knowledge that enables individuals and communities to be more self-reliant. Specifically, the emancipated individual would require the undermining of the cultural language that is the basis of thought and behavior—the language that is also a storehouse of the culture’s knowledge of local plants, animals and other ecological patterns essential to sustaining the community. Emancipation, as understood by Freire, Dewey, and current promoters of their ideas, would also require doing away with mentoring, elder knowledge, ceremonies, narratives, and learning the non-commodified skills and relationships essential to an intergenerationally connected culture. The emancipated individual, in effect, is supposed to be free of community patterns of mutuality and moral reciprocity; and in being free—if that were ever completely attainable, would lack the skills and knowledge necessary for living a self-sufficient life. In a word, the western ideal of the autonomous individual is what the Industrial Revolution required because this type of individual would be dependent upon consumerism to survive. What is essential now is for schools to help students

distinguish between traditions that undermine community and the environment, and traditions that are the bases of: mutual aid, knowledge of how to live within the limits or possibilities of the environment, and intergenerational responsibility—including the responsibility to leave a viable environment for future generations.

1. Introduction

In any discussion of how public schools and universities contribute to a consumer, technology-dependent lifestyle, it is necessary to take account of the impact of this lifestyle on the Earth's ecosystems. Enormous amounts of materials and resources are needed to sustain the modern consumer lifestyle. The average middle-class American family's yearly needs are met through the movement of some 4 million pounds of such materials and resources. This American consumer lifestyle, with its huge impact on natural systems, is now being globalized, along with the chemically disruptive technologies that support it. A visible consequence of this scale of environmental disruption can be seen in the large scale dependence of modern civilization and its economic base on fossil fuels and synthetic chemicals. Almost half of the world's GNP is said to be generated from chlorinated synthetic chemicals and the products made from them. Such a significant economic piece of the world economy cannot help but impact on the traditional functions of cultures and societies.

Indeed, there is a merging of cultural forces that are undermining the symbolic traditions of cultures and societies that have not, except for their elite and generally western educated classes, relied upon consumerism and western technologies to meet daily needs. The current practice of transforming research findings in the biological sciences into totalizing explanations of the genetic and evolutionary basis of human behavior and values, as well as the global spread of western media and computer networks, are fast eroding these belief systems. Corporations view these trends in terms of increasing profits and market share, while environmentally responsible scientists report changes in ecosystems that are on a scale that exceed the capacity of most countries' economic, technological, and political ability to reverse.

In the context of these diverging trend lines, where the rapid rise in consumerism is matched by an equally rapid decline in the life supporting capacity of natural systems, the cultural trends reinforced in public schools and universities become especially important. When public education first became available in the 19th century it was justified on a variety of grounds. It was claimed that schooling would foster a literate population and thus the prospects of democracy. It was also justified on the grounds that universal education was necessary to create an educated and adaptable work force. Historically, the rhetoric was often the expression of lofty idealism, but the more formative influence on education came from the growing dominance of the industrial mode of production. The factory system of organization, with its hierarchy of surveillance and need for rote learning, was clearly visible in the Lancaster model of the classroom that existed in nineteenth century England.

Although the development of public schools varied from country to country, they all have been shaped by how the needs of the work place have been understood. Until recently in North America, the design of school buildings served as visual metaphors

that schooling was preparation for a life of work in the factory. The organization of the curriculum still performs the stratification process that separates students who possess the potential for a life of mental work from those who are to be educated in the trades and service sector. Other patterns that continue to prepare students for the workplace include learning to organize experience in terms of the clock, following orders of a superior, working for a grade--all of which have their counterparts in the work environment.

2. Technology in Education Reinforces Consumerism

Computers have led to changes in the workplace where the controlling influence of the clock and the ability to carry out a task designated by a supervisor are not as universal as they once were. Public schools and universities are, in turn, beginning to reflect these basic changes in the workplace. Computer mediated learning is changing the role of the teacher, and is overcoming the traditional separation of the student from the outside world. Just as computers allow corporate employees to communicate on a worldwide basis, students can now access information and communicate on a similar basis. But computers have not severed the traditional connections between the classroom and the workplace; rather, they have made the connections more "seamless", to use a metaphor that supposedly describes the dominant characteristic of the Information Age. Students learn to ignore the forms of knowledge, skills, and patterns of face-to-face communication that cannot be digitalized; which happens to be the basis of less consumer dependent communities.

At the same time, the computer reinforces the pattern of thinking now required in the digital phase of the Industrial Revolution. That is, the use of computers reinforces the experience of being an autonomous individual who constructs knowledge based on subjective judgments and interests. The use of computers also reinforces viewing language as a conduit for communicating objective information and data, as well as experiencing time (how we fit into the continuum that connects the past and future) from the perspective of the subjective moment, and valorizing print based communication as more reliable than embodied forms of knowing and face-to-face communication. This mind set is conditioned not to be aware of how the language appearing on the computer screen encodes the metaphorically based thought patterns of a specific cultural group, thus further marginalizing the awareness that there are other cultural ways of knowing. In spite of the vast amount of data that can be accessed, and the ability to communicate with people in other parts of the world on a near instantaneous basis, the computer cannot reproduce how time is experienced in other cultures; nor can it reproduce the experience of moral reciprocity and intergenerational connectedness essential to viable communities. In effect, the computer contributes to a pattern of thinking that was a prominent feature of the Industrial Revolution; namely, thinking which reinforces the notion that differences in ways of knowing can be attributed to different stages in the evolutionary process that all cultures go through. Given this evolutionary framework, computer technology is assumed to represent the most advanced stage of technological development. Thus, undermining the traditions of other cultures is simply part of the process of helping them to catch-up with the more advanced cultures.

2.1 Computer Mediated Learning

There are other connections between computer mediated learning and the Industrial Revolution that can best be understood in terms of one of the main features of the industrial process--namely, its capacity to produce goods on a massive scale that, in turn, require an equally massive number of consumers. Just as the mode and scale of industrial production turned the environment and labor into a commodity, it has extended the commodification process into nearly every facet of life. Computers have added a whole new dimension by bringing the genetic basis of Nature into the industrial process. They also have expanded the ability of producers and even universities to reach new "markets." In terms of computer mediated learning, they have made such basic aspects of human experience as thought and communication dependent upon the ability to pay for the computer, the internee service, and the constant stream of computer upgrades. This is not to say that computers are solely responsible for the commodification of public schools and universities. Universities, in particular, have been taking on the characteristics of a corporation since the expansion of higher education following World War II.

While there are many beneficial uses of computers, they also create new forms of dependencies--particularly in the area of education. These dependencies range from relying upon spell-check rather than learning to spell for oneself, filling the sense of empty time by surfing the internet and participating in chat rooms, downloading rather than writing papers to meet class assignments, playing the mesmerizing interactive games that can fill hours, and following class assignments and other information that the teacher and professor wants the student to have. Even when using the computer for constructive purposes few students are aware of how they are being socialized to accept the presence of computers as though they were as natural as the air they breath. Yet this taken-for-granted attitude involves future political and economic risks that few students (or adults) are aware of. Every use of the computer, unless it involves special software, leaves an electronic footprint that can be recovered and used in ways that are politically and economically injurious. For example, what before was considered the private aspects of a worker's life can now be electronically monitored and used as the basis of dismissal, and information about a person's genetic predisposition toward costly diseases can be known to employers. Ironically, the increasing reliance upon computers in classrooms does not involve learning about their cultural mediating characteristics, nor does it involve helping students identify the uses that should be the focus of public debate and democratic decision making. Who gains and who loses, and what are the forms of knowledge and relationships that cannot be mediated by computers, are also questions seldom, if ever, raised in the classroom.

3. Consumerism Targets Students

As the above analysis points out, public schools and universities continue to reinforce the patterns of the workplace even as these patterns change in response to the introduction of new technologies. With the huge increase in marketing since World War II, classrooms and campuses have increasingly been swept up in the corporate frenzy to capture the youth market that now spends hundreds of millions of dollars. The youth market is also seen as critical to establishing brand loyalty in later years when

increases in personal income leads to even greater purchasing power. Efforts to turn students into consumers can be seen in the marketing of clothes as status symbols, the donation of computers that will lock students into using a specific system, the logos on sports equipment and uniforms, the growing presence of fast food outlets in schools and on university campuses, and the ubiquitous presence of vending machines. The recent multi-million dollar contract signed by three Colorado school districts that gives Coca Cola the exclusive right over a ten year period to sell its products in schools no longer stands out as extraordinary--or as a morally problematic compromise of adult responsibility. The daily beaming of Channel One, with its mix of news and commercials specifically designed for student audiences, into over 12,000 middle and high schools in the United States represents yet another way corporations are attempting to shape consciousness and consumer habits. Increasingly, corporations are producing curriculum materials that purport to have educational content but also contain biased interpretations that advance their interests.

4. Globalization of Consumerism

Ironically, the constant stream of “progressive” educational reforms promoted in teacher education programs also contribute to undermining the traditions within different cultural groups that provide non-consumer alternatives to meeting daily needs. This is ironic because many of the progressively minded teacher education professors justify their reforms on the grounds that they foster individual decision making, democracy, creativity, and empowerment. Many professors of educational studies even view themselves as critics of the growing domination of corporate values and life-shaping technologies, and would largely agree with the analysis of the commodification of formal education. The irony is in the fact that these critics share with other progressive approaches to educational reforms that same deep assumption taken for granted by the early promoters of the Industrial Revolution; assumptions that are now the basis for promoting globalization of the western consumer-dependent lifestyle.

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Biographical Sketch

C. A. Bowers holds a Ph. D. from the University of California, has taught at the University of Oregon and Portland State University, and was granted emeritus status in 1998. He has published more than seventy five articles, ten chapters in other books, and eleven of his own books. His most recent books include: Elements of a Post-Liberal Theory of Education (1987), The Cultural Dimensions of Educational Computing: Understanding the Non-Neutrality of Technology (1988); (with David Flinders) Responsive Teaching: An Ecological Approach to Classroom Patterns of Language, Culture, and Thought (1990); Education, Cultural Myths, and the Ecological Crisis:Toward Deep Changes (1993); Critical Essays on Education, Modernity, and the Recovery of the Ecological Imperative (1993); Educating for an Ecologically Sustainable Culture: Rethinking Moral Education,Creativity, Intelligence, and Other Modern Orthodoxies (1995); The Culture of Denial: Why the Environmental Movement Needs a Strategy for Reforming Universities and Public Schools (1997); Let Them Eat Data:

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He has been invited to speak at 30 universities in the United States and 26 universities in other parts of the world--including the University of Trondheim, University of Zagreb, University of Queensland, University of Cape Town, Rhodes University, York University, University of Toronto, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He was recently invited to lecture in 5 German cities. He was also asked by Vice-President Al Gore to be the featured speaker at a dinner/seminar (held at the Gore residence) on the influence of metaphorical thinking on environmental and technology policies.

He was one of 6 western scholars, along with the former Chinese Minister of Culture, invited to speak at the International Congress on Culture and Humanity in the New Millennium sponsored by the government of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

He gave the John Dewey Memorial Lecture in 1982, and is a member of the Jacques Ellul Society.

A new book manuscript titled "Educating for Eco-Justice and Community" is being published by the University of Georgia Press.

His writings have been translated into Korean, Chinese, and Spanish.

He is currently Adjunct Professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Oregon.

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