

## **Pursuing Relevance: where is the problem?**

By Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner

*These extracts are taken from the fourth Chapter of the book "Teaching as a subversive activity" by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner. While the book itself highlights the urgent need for educational institutions to help their students focus on learning to learn, the chapter on Pursuing Relevance tries to substantiate the conclusion, "the enthusiasm that community leaders display for an educational innovation is in inverse proportion to its significance to the learning process."*

Here is a playlet where a group of the young resident surgeons at Blear General Hospital along with a senior doctor, Dr Gillupsie begin their weekly analysis of the various operations they have performed in the preceding four days.

GILLUPSIE: Well, Jim, what have you been up to this week?

KILDEAR: Only one operation. I removed the gall bladder of the patient in Room 421.

GILLUPSIE : What was his trouble?

KILDEAR: Trouble? No trouble. I believe it's just inherently good to remove gall bladders.

GILLUPSIE: Inherently good?

KILDEAR: I mean good in itself. I'm talking about removing gall bladders qua removing gall bladders.

GILLUPSIE: Oh; you mean removing gall bladders per se.

KILDEAR: Precisely, Chief. Removing his gall bladder had intrinsic merit. It was, as we say, good for its own sake.

GILLUPSIE: Splendid, Jim. If there's one thing I won't tolerate at Blear, it's a surgeon who is merely practical. What's in store next week?

KILDEAR: Two frontal lobotomies.

GILLUPSIE: Frontal lobotomies qua frontal lobotomies, I hope?

KILDEAR: What else?

GILLUPSIE: How about you, young Dr Fuddy? What have you done this week?

FUDDY: Busy. Performed four pilonidal-cyst excisions.

GILLUPSIE: Didn't know we had that many cases.

FUDDY: We didn't, but you know how fond I am of pilonidal-cyst excisions. That was my major in medical school, you know.

GILLUPSIE: Of course. I'd forgotten. As I remember it now, the prospect of doing pilonidal-cyst excisions brought you into medicine, didn't it?

FUDDY: That's right, Chief. I was always interested in that. Frankly, I never cared much for appendectomies.

GILLUPSIE: Appendectomies?

FUDDY : Well, that seemed to be the trouble with the patient in 397

GILLUPSIE: But you stayed with the old pilonidal-cyst excision, eh?

FUDDY: Right, Chief.

GILLUPSIE: Good work, Fuddy. I know just how you feel. When I was a young man, I was keenly fond of hysterectomies.

FUDDY (giggling): Little tough on the men, eh. Chief?

GILLUPSIE: Well, yes (snickering). But you'd be surprised at how much a resourceful surgeon can do. (Then, solemnly) Well, Carstairs, how have things been going?

CARSTAIRS: I'm afraid I've had some bad luck, Dr Gillupsie. No operations this week, but three of my patients died.

GILLUPSIE: Well, we'll have to do something about this, won't we? What did they die of?

CARSTAIRS: I'm not sure, Dr Gillupsie, but I did give each one of them plenty of penicillin.

GILLUPSIE: Ah! The traditional 'good for its own sake' approach, eh, Carstairs?

CARSTAIRS: Well, not exactly. Chief. I just thought that penicillin would help them get better.

GILLUPSIE: What were you treating them for?

CARSTAIRS: Well, each one was awful sick. Chief, and I know that penicillin helps sick people get better.

GILLUPSIE: It certainly does, Carstairs. I think you acted wisely.

CARSTAIRS: And the deaths. Chief?

GILLUPSIE: Bad patients, son, bad patients. There's nothing a good doctor can do about bad patients. And there's nothing a good medicine can do for bad patients, either.

CARSTAIRS: But still, I have a nagging feeling that perhaps they didn't need penicillin, that they might have needed something else.

GILLUPSIE: Nonsense! Penicillin never fails to work on good patients. We all know that. I wouldn't worry too much about it, Carstairs.

Perhaps the playlet needs no further elaboration and the points to be made can be made explicit now. First, if the conversation between Dr Gillupsie and his young surgeons could have been continued, it would have included a half dozen other 'reasons' for inflicting upon children the kinds of irrelevant curricula that comprise most of conventional schooling. For example, one doctor could still be practising 'bleeding' his patients because he had not yet discovered that such practices do no good. Another doctor could have insisted that he has 'cured' his patients in spite of the fact that they have all died. ('Oh, I taught them that, but they didn't learn it.") Still another doctor might have defended some practice by reasoning that, although his operation didn't do much for the patient now, in later life the patient might have need for exactly this operation, and if he did, voila!, it will already have been done.

Secondly, there are thousands of teachers who believe that there are certain subjects that are 'inherently good', that are 'good in themselves', that are 'good for their own sake'. When you ask 'Good for whom?' or 'Good for what purpose?' you will be dismissed as being 'merely practical' and told that what they are talking about is literature qua literature, grammar qua grammar, and mathematics per se. Such people are commonly called 'humanists'.

Thirdly, the 'trouble' with all these 'reasons' is that they leave out the (patient) learner, which is really another way of saying that they leave out reality. With full awareness of the limitations of the patient-learner metaphor, they assert that it is insane for a teacher to 'teach' something unless his students require it for some identifiable and important purpose, which is to say, for some purpose that is related to the life of the learner. The survival of the learner's skill and interest in learning is at stake. "In plain truth, what passes for a curriculum in today's schools is little else but a strategy of distraction. It is largely designed to keep students from knowing themselves and their environment in any realistic sense; which is to say, it does not allow inquiry into most of the critical problems that comprise the content of the world outside the school.

Consider a piece of the curriculum of a modern school. It is a 'good' school, which means, to the people who call it 'good', that there are few Negroes in it, that the parents of many of the children want them to go to college, that the school is housed in an expensive physical setting, that there are few serious 'reading' problems, and that the students get high scores (one way or another) on state-wide or national tests.

We owe a great debt to the ancient civilization of Egypt, Greece and Rome especially in art, literature, science and government. Since this is such an important unit we will study each country separately beginning with Egypt; then we will study Greece and lastly Rome. For each of these peoples there will be a list of questions and a list of projects. You will each write the answers to all of the questions. Everyone will do one project for each country being studied. These may be done alone or in a small group of no more than three members.

The following books will help you to get started. Read at least two of those suggested before you begin to answer the questions or to work on your projects. You are expected to obtain at least two (2) other books from the library and to read no less than thirty (30) pages about each country. . . .

## Questions

### Ancient Egypt

1. How were the Egyptians affected by the climate and geography of their country? Discuss the following in your answer: (a) an oasis (b) living in a desert area (c) irrigation (d) delta (e) safety from warring tribes
2. What were some of the ways of earning a living in ancient Egypt? Include the following in your answer: (a) agriculture (b) manufacturing (c) education (d) government jobs (e) any others you find in your reading...

### Ancient Greece

1. Who were the ancient Greeks? Where did they come from? How did the geography of Greece affect them?
2. Why was Athens the leading city in Greece? What is a city-state?
3. How many languages were spoken in Greece? How did this affect Greek life?
4. What sort of religion did the ancient Greeks have? How does this compare to that of the Egyptians?"

The most depressing aspect of this piece of pretentious trivia is that to most people nothing seems wrong with it. Indeed, it may even be thought of as reflecting a 'progressive' idea or two. (After all, aren't the students asked to work in small groups and do 'projects'?) Clearly, defenders of 'high standards' would have no cause for complaint here. The same is true for makers of standardized texts, 'transmitters of our cultural heritage', and lovers of 'basic education' everywhere. Perhaps even most of the students

for whom this 'unit of work' is intended would approve of it. But if they do, we can be sure their approval rests largely on a carefully cultivated schizophrenia that is necessary, in present circumstances, to their academic survival. (Mencken once wrote that the main thing children learn in school is how to lie.) The children know that none of these questions has anything to do with them, and the game that is being played does not require that the questions do. The game is called 'Let's Pretend', and if its name were chiselled into the front of every school building in America, we would at least have an honest announcement of what takes place there. The game is based on a series of pretences which include: let's pretend that you are not what you are and that this sort of work makes a difference to your lives; let's pretend that what bores you is important, and that the more you are bored, the more important it is; let's pretend that there are certain things everyone must know, and that both the questions and answers about them have been fixed for all time; let's pretend that your intellectual competence can be judged on the basis of how well you can play Let's Pretend.

Of course, what you have here is a classic 'put on'. But an extremely dangerous one because the participants are not fully conscious of the sham. Its most devastating effect is to produce in students a feeling of alienation from the educational process. G. B. Shaw's line that the only time his education was interrupted was when he was in school captures the sense of this alienation. The learner comes to understand that what he is asked to think about in school has no bearing on what he needs to learn to think about. He, therefore, removes the best, the most vital part of himself from his formal education. He realizes, too, that the standards used to judge his school performance lack authenticity, and his contempt for such standards is widespread and (from the perspective of his teachers) scandalous. Consider the meaning of the following article from the New York Post, Wednesday 26 April 1967:

#### The Cheating Scandal: Four Boys on the Carpet

Leonard Katz Authorities at DeWitt Clinton HS in the Bronx today were studying what punishment to hand out to four seniors who distributed stolen copies of midterm exams.

And some 2,000 Clinton students were stewing over the news that they must take the tests over.

Principal Walter J. Degnan yesterday ordered all English, economics and American history tests taken over after learning that the tests had been stolen and the answers passed around the school in one of the city's worst public-school cheating incidents.

The seniors who took the tests had 'impeccable' records, authorities said. But they used master keys to take the tests from storerooms before they were given.

The keys were given them by a supervisor for whom they worked in the school's night community center at Mosholu Pkwy and Paul Avenue.

Boys Bragged

The answer sheets were spread around and the boys began 'to brag a little and word filtered back', a Board of Education spokesman said. But not before the tests - which won't be graded now - were given.

All but one student in an informal poll denied benefiting from the answers but most believed they would suffer on the second test.

'It's a bomb,' said Raymond Rodriguez Jr, 17, a junior of 960 Simpson St. It's not fair. I didn't know anything about it, but I know I passed. Why should I put myself on the line again?' Edward Torres, 18, of 1997 Vyse Ave, agreed. 'Lots of kids will do worse the second time around,' he said. 'Not because they cheated or anything, but you study for the big day and then you take the test and then you forget what you studied.'

Felix Figueroa, 17, a junior of 585 Union Ave, said. It's unfair to everybody. The ones caught cheating are the ones who should be made to take the test over. Not the whole school.'

But Domingo Maldonado, 17, a junior of 936 E. 172 St. said retesting was fair 'as far as I'm concerned. They can't ask you anything you haven't covered in class. I'll probably do better the second time. 'At least now I'll have an idea of what the test will be like.' A senior, who withheld his name, admitted he had received the answers to the English test.

'Man,' he said, 'I'll never pass. I've been flunking this . . . subject all term and I'll never pass without the answers.'

Beautiful, isn't it? The students all had 'impeccable' records, but Rodriguez doesn't want to put himself on the line again, and Torres knows how easily you forget what you studied, and Figueroa is teed-off at the ones who were caught cheating, and Maldonado figures he'll finally know in advance what a test is going to be like, and an unnamed senior is worried because, without the answers, he knows he's finished. What kind of vicious game is being played here, and who are the sinners and who the sinned against?

This state of affairs - these chilling remarks by totally alienated students - is a result of a severe ecological imbalance. Ecology has to do with the relationship of all the elements of an environment and how these relationships lead to balance and survival, and how they lead to imbalance and death. In the learning environment, there are at least four critical elements: the learner, the teacher, the 'to-be-learned', and the strategies for learning. For this environment to fulfill its function, these elements must serve, complement and derive meaning from each other. It simply will not do to invite students to be aggressive, independent inquirers and then insist that their inquiries focus on the ways of earning a living in Ancient Egypt. Nor will it do to put a sensitive non-authoritarian teacher in a classroom whose students are required, by curriculum mandate, to read at least two (2) books before they undertake their project, and to read two (2) during, and certainly not less than thirty (30) pages from each book.

There is no way to help a learner to be disciplined, active and thoroughly engaged unless he perceives a problem to be a problem or whatever is to-be-learned as worth learning, and unless he plays an active role in determining the process of solution. That is the plain, unvarnished truth, and if it sounds like warmed-over 'progressive education', it is not any less true for it. Moreover, if it is a truth that is susceptible of easy parody ('Well, children, what we shall study today?' 'Gee, teacher, can't you tell us what we want to study for a change?'), so are most important truths, and so what? Besides, it really isn't much of a parody anyway since a teacher can, without injuring the learning process, suggest all sorts of things for study. No one has ever said that children themselves are the only, or necessarily the best, source for articulating relevant areas of inquiry. What has been said is that, regardless of source, unless an inquiry is perceived as relevant by the learner, no significant learning will take place. No one will learn anything he doesn't want to know. And if he is made to - that is, forced to act as if he does - he and his teacher will regret it, for he then talks about learning the way Rodriguez and Torres and Maldonado do. We didn't make that up. That's the way it is.

It is sterile and ridiculous to attempt to release the inquiry powers of students by initiating studies that hold no interest for them. For example, the use of the inquiry method to discover the characteristics of pendulums or the forms of verbs? It is a kind of intellectual minuet - all form and no substance. The students behave oddly, as if they are expecting something to happen, but nothing does. Their generalizations turn out to bear no relationship to anything they care about. Reason, Plato insisted, must have an adequate emotional base if education is to accomplish its purpose. If there is no emotional base, or if it is an ersatz one, very little of significance can happen to a learner, except in the most negative terms.

For all the attention Jerome Bruner has attracted to the structure of inquiry, we probably need to hold him accountable for what might be called the 'discovering your pendulum' application of the inquiry method. Bruner has done much to answer the question 'How do people come to know?', but, curiously, he has not addressed himself to the question 'What's worth knowing?', at least from the point of view of the learner. ... many of the innovators and experimenters who have learned from Bruner, have also learned his mistakes. They haven't much asked themselves, what's worth knowing?' either. Thus, they have insured that there will be an ecological imbalance in the new learning environments they have tried to create.

Why this is so is worth talking about, we believe, for several reasons. The first, as always in matters of educational innovation, has to do with teachers. Let us take English teachers as an example and imagine that they have accepted (as in many cases they have) the idea of an essentially inquiry environment. That means creating an environment that gives the highest possible priority to inquiry behaviour. It is an environment that values above all else the development of such survival attitudes and perspectives as objectivity, tentativeness, self-sufficiency, contingency, open-endedness, flexibility, inventiveness and resourcefulness. The teachers intend to cultivate such behaviour by having their students engage in question asking, defining, observing, classifying, generalizing, verifying and all the other skills of inquiry. Thus the 'content' of the environment would

seem to be a process. The medium is the message and all that. So far so good. But there is, in another sense, a 'content' that has to be accounted for. What will the students think about? What are the problems they will use their inquiry skills on? Towards what matters will they apply the attitudes of competent learners?

Now, if the 'subject' is what is called 'English', the list of possible relevant problems is literally endless. For example, if one accepts the rather obvious fact that language is almost always produced by human beings for human purposes to share human meanings, then the study of language is inseparable from the study of human situations. A language situation (i.e. a human situation) is any human event in which language is used to share meanings. A poem is a language situation. So is a joke, an expression of condolence, an editorial, an advertisement, an argument, a TV newscast, a scientific report, a song, a menu. Here, it is merely necessary to say that each of these language situations is different from the others, that is, it has its own rules. Each is a situation about which children know a great deal, but not nearly enough. And each is a situation which is real, may easily be encountered, and is therefore useful to know about. In other words, in studying about how language works, one has available all the possible forms of human discourse to examine. So what do you think the focus of the 'new English' is? Grammar. So help us.

But the question is, why is this so? Why have English teachers looked to grammarians for their opportunities? Why, of all the relevant and even critical language problems under the sun, have English teachers selected grammatical ones as the terrain for their students' inquiries? In answering, one must try hard not to be libellous. But the fact is that many teachers of English are fearful of life and, incidentally, of children. They are pompous and precious, and are lovers of symmetry, categories and proper labels. For them, the language of real human activity is too sloppy, emotional, uncertain, dangerous, and thus altogether too unsettling to study in the classroom.

Grammarians offer such teachers a respectable out. They give them a game to play, with rules and charts, and with boxes and arrows to draw.

What we are complaining about is ... teachers who are afraid to go where the feelings, perceptions and questions of children would take them. You see, there simply aren't any children who would have any possible reason - now or for the rest of their lives to care about how a noun is defined, or what the transformational rules are for forming the passive voice, or how many allomorphs there are of the plural morpheme.

The same is true of other 'subjects' as well. It is close to futile to talk of any new curriculum unless you are talking about the possibility of getting a new kind of teacher - whether his 'subject' is English, science, social studies, or whatever.

But it would not be wholly accurate to blame the pursuit of irrelevance entirely on teachers. We are, after all, talking about educational innovation that would produce a different kind of person from those who are valued in schools today. Many people other than teachers have a stake in such a possibility. We have in mind political and religious



leaders. Bureaucrats and the bureaucratic-minded. Businessmen and advertisers, and many others, including all those who have large spiritual and material investments in the kind of mentality our schools currently produce. Consider this: the first hole ever dug on the moon by a man-made machine is now done. It is the most expensive hole in the history of the human race. Now, what does that mean? How do we know whether this is one of man's noblest achievements or if it is a game being played by a small group of lunatics for their own amusement - at our expense?

As we write, a large group of native Americans are in open rebellion against their government. There is insurrection throughout the land, as there has been before, in 1776 and 1861. How do we know if this is one of man's deepest needs expressing itself ('the language of the unheard', Dr King called it) or if it is a mindless aberration precipitated by summer heat and boredom?

As we write, there is war in Vietnam. Fifteen thousand Americans are dead and B-52s have dropped more bombs on Vietnam than were dropped on Germany in the Second World War. Is this done truly in the cause of freedom - ours or someone else's -or is it a mindless madness that is self-propelling?

We do not think it unreasonable to suggest that there are many influential people who would resent such questions being asked - in fact, would go to considerable trouble to prevent their being asked. Such people depend heavily on the continuing irrelevance of most school curricula. But this is not to say that they oppose educational innovation. On the contrary. They usually can be relied upon to give unflagging support to instructional television, team teaching, green chalk boards, movable chairs, more textbooks, teaching machines, the use of overhead projectors and other innovations that play no role in effecting significant learning. Operating in these matters is a kind of variation of Parkinson's Law of Triviality: the enthusiasm that community leaders display for an educational innovation is in inverse proportion to its significance to the learning process.