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HOMOGENIZING THE CURRICULUM:

Manufacturing the Standardized Student

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In 1916, Amherst College President Alexander Meiklejohn suggested:

insofar as a society is dominated by the attitudes of competitive business enterprise, freedom in its proper American meaning cannot be known, and hence, cannot be taught. That is the basic reason why the schools and colleges, which are, presumably, commissioned to study and promote the ways of freedom are so weak, so confused, so ineffectual (as qtd. in Burger np).

Meiklejohn spent his entire life fighting against education becoming a pawn to corporate enterprise, preferring instead a model based on what he believed to be more traditional ideals of humanistic education, the free and open exchange of ideas, a culture of possibilities rather than probabilities. Not surprisingly, Meiklejohn was run out of Amherst seven years after his inauguration, accused of being a Communist or a sympathizer. In the history of anti-corporate sentiment, proponents of possibilities, free curricular design, and true academic freedom have often met with such accusations, as if being against a corporate ideology was somehow synonymous with being against America herself. Even today, it's hard to argue against the supposed altruism of corporate America. What could possibly be wrong with the ideals present in the work-a-day world coming into the university? What could possibly be amiss in training our students to fit corporate expectations when they leave our hallowed halls?

Perhaps it would be easier to answer that question if I put it this way. What would be the difference, for your own elementary or high school child, between the vocational education program—where students are taught basics and trained for a specific task, most likely in a factory—and education in critical thinking that will open up the entire world? Would you prefer that your child only study grammar and never receive a course in the critical theory of world politics? Would you object if your child's daily routine was sponsored by Pepsi, never allowing him to choose Coke, or perhaps iced tea? Do you want your child to question or merely to accept? Furthermore, would you want your child's school to prepare our future corporate workers or our future thinkers, dreamers, scholars, and leaders? When we ask those questions about our children's educational environments, the answers seem to come easily. And yet, when we ask those same questions of higher education, we somehow become fuzzy. Are grown children somehow less precious?

I don't think there is anything wrong with vocational education as a supplement to a critical education. But we all know how it works. Those who do well on standardized tests will never see a vocational day in their lives. Those who can't cope with a test that has nothing at all to do with their real lives will most likely find themselves happy to never be challenged again. Training is quite different from education.

Learning a skill is not the same thing as learning to think. Training involves repeating the same task over and over until it is mastered, a mastery of the probabilities of daily experience. Education, on the other hand, involves opening yourself up to possibilities, seeing things from as many different perspectives as one can imagine, walking around the statue rather than assuming you know its entire essence by staring at it from the front. This is critical knowledge. And with critical knowledge comes freedom, freedom of the kind that Meiklejohn suggests should be the primary function of a university education. With knowledge comes the necessity to question, to ask why, to find the holes still needing to be filled. Possibilities will never be explored when the answers have already been set in stone.

And so the next question is obvious. How does a university education that is mired in corporate ideology and corporate culture restrict the kind of critical knowledge of which I have spoken? Perhaps the answer lies in the values behind the corporate enterprise itself. Jerry Mander, in his work on corporate culture's effect on American humanistic values (as well as the cultures of the Indian nations), describes several "rules of corporate behavior" which I'll summarize briefly and then show their impact on curricular issues.

Corporations have both a profit and a growth imperative. It goes without saying that in order to survive, the corporation must do whatever it takes, regardless of humanistic needs, to make enough money to continue to feed the machine that is its own existence. We can see this value at work in both secondary and higher education, where valuable programs and services are cut when they do not serve the profit or growth imperative of the educational machine. Courses that historically have been important to a well-rounded critical education have hit the chopping block because corporate values argue that their enrollment numbers were not high enough to sustain the cost of the room, the teacher, or, for that matter, the ink on the schedule, and their usefulness to the business mindset is doubtful. Why, for example, teach Shakespeare when technical writing is what serves the machine? Why enter the murky world of metaphor and analogy when one will only need to write technical reports to bring home the check? In a broader perspective, this is the sort of corporate imperative that has spelled the death of humanistic study at the university. Courses in the humanities have continued to fade away, while those in the business and technical schools have doubled and sometimes tripled. Probabilities outweigh possibilities.

The spirit of competition is obligatory in corporate culture. Yet when competition enters the educational arena, perspectives can become skewed and priorities altered. Recent examples are the argument over school vouchers and, on the university level, the overvaluing and excessive funding of sports programs as opposed to, for example, libraries (e.g. at UMKC). A further irony arises when one considers that competition may actually promote standardization. Our desire to be the best may well result in our students becoming mere clones of each other. Standardization requires that all students, regardless of life context, know such-and-such information with enough proficiency to pass a standardized test. Competitive standardized testing determines whose child will receive training and whose will receive a critical education, which district will be viewed favorably for funding and which will be punished. Competitive standardized testing pressures teachers of all subjects in all levels to stop teaching what the students may want to learn in favor of what the standards demand they learn. It's called teaching to the test rather than to the student, or probabilities instead of possibilities.

There are other corporate values that have effects on curriculum. Corporate culture tends toward amorality and excludes altruistic goals. It is hierarchical, with decisions often made at a distance from the real-world time and place of the situation at hand. It is dehumanizing, because people become products and resources and names become identification numbers. And finally, corporate culture values quantification while shortchanging quality. Let knowledge be objective rather than subjective, impersonal rather than personal, probable rather than possible.

Corporations promote corporate values. But shouldn't educational values differ, even slightly? Shouldn't we make a distinction between the human being as developing child and working adult? Furthermore,

shouldn't education, in the long run, be about the making of a well-rounded citizenry capable of participating in a democracy? Shouldn't education value the preparation of each person to be a productive member of the community rather than merely a producing member of the workforce? And given the distinctly American value placed on a free speaking, free thinking population, isn't it wise to demand that corporate interests be held at arm's length from the determination of what counts for knowledge and its creation?

Apparently, corporations do not agree. At the 1997 Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum in Vancouver, Canada, the 16 voting-member countries released a policy statement on education:

The emphasis on education for itself or on education for good members of a community, without large emphasis on preparation for future work, [is] no longer appropriate. In other words, the idea that work is only an instrumental part of one's life is no longer appropriate. Such a dichotomic [sic] view on education and work cannot be justified in a world where economic development is emphasized (as qtd. in Robertson np).

The APEC document goes on to recommend "maximum business intervention" in matters of curriculum, criticizing curriculum designed by "intellectual elites" who value the teaching of "concepts and theories," and even "learning for the sake of learning," without due attention to "outcomes." Their final recommendation to correct these problems? "Business-education partnerships" (Robertson np). Unfortunately, what was a possibility in 1997 becomes more of a probability with every year that passes.

There is one final corporate value that encourages the standardization of both curriculum and student, the corporate reliance on part-time, contingent employees. What are the benefits of using part-time employees? Most are obvious: you don't have to pay full, competitive wages; there is no need to supply benefits, such as insurance and retirement packages; and you are often not bound by contractual arrangements. In addition, part-time employees are alleged to be easier to train, because their jobs are generally skills-based, rather than complicated functions of an overall focus. They do not need to be educated toward the larger business operations, but merely trained to perform a specific task. They are also easily hired and easily fired as the profit and growth imperative fluctuates. Their job security relies on a force completely out of their control. And, finally, part-time employees are regarded as easily replaceable. Since they are not people but embodiments of skills devoid of critical perspective, one is just like another. It does not matter which person sits in the chair. They are all the same: homogenized, standardized.

What's ironic is that many modern corporations are now seeing the error of this way of thinking about part-time employees. And yet, our academic system still clings to the vestiges of this value long after it has become unwise and, indeed, inhumane to do so. Part-time faculty are easily hired, easily fired, and entirely replaceable. Part-time faculty are underpaid, overworked, and undervalued. And we are undervalued primarily because it is assumed that our courses have already been hammered into standardization and, therefore, can be taught by anyone. But I am not a resource or a number. I am not bound by probabilities. I am, however, continually freed by possibilities.

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