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Steps to the Corporate Classroom: A Propositional Inventory

by *Howard A. Doughty*

The title of this presentation begs clarification. So does the format. Let me begin with the title. It has been shamelessly purloined from a book that taught me more about biology than I had known before. The title was *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. I was fortunate to have studied some with its author, Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) and to have appeared with him on a panel at the East-West Center of University of Hawaii's Second Annual Conference on the Problems of Modernization in Asia and the Pacific in 1970.

I am sorry that you can't, for he has been dead for over twenty-five years; still, you can read some of his books including *Mind and Nature* and *A Sacred Unity*. They should be available at "The Noodle Factory"—more of that later.

The text for today's sermon derives from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, which contain the central elements of his extensive critique of education in Mussolini's Italy. Gramsci, of course, was a founder of the Italian Communist Party, and it did not take long for him to run afoul of Il Duce's fascist dictatorship. In prison from 1926 to 1937, he produced a remarkable amount of writing on many political and cultural subjects, all of which were scribbled out in student notebooks and smuggled from his cell to an awaiting world. His critique of education was especially fascinating, because he advocated a "classical" education for all citizens. This is the text:

"Too long, has a monopoly on higher learning been held by the ruling class, while workers were trained only in narrow vocational skills."

The problem for Gramsci was the same as for educators today: namely, how to provide citizens with the intellectual opportunities to make citizenship meaningful.

The story may be apocryphal, but it is widely said that Benito Mussolini, toward the end of his life, lamented that he had called his movement, his party and his government "fascist" in an unsuccessful attempt to link it symbolically with the ancient Roman Empire. Instead, he said that he should have labeled it "corporatist," for no society in the past had so seamlessly conjoined the economic success of capitalism with the legal authority of government. All elements in society, so it seemed, were to have their various interests subsumed under the joint powers of the private sector and the state.

I do not, of course, wish to argue that Canada is now near a

condition that might have fulfilled Mussolini's ambition. We are still some distance down river from "corporatism" in full spate; at the same time, there are disturbing signs for to all with the wit and the will to see them. We might therefore do well to recall the warning of Pastor Martin Niemöller, who said that, if fascism ever comes to North America, it will come on "kitten feet." No sturm und drang—just the pragmatic counsel of those who pretend to understand the ways of the world, who speak of the "reality" of the day and who explain that there are "hard choices" to be made. We do not notice and will not acknowledge the danger until it is too late.

Besides a hint of the worrisome word, corporatism, the simpler word "steps" also requires a quick word of explanation. It is used here ambiguously. First, I have in mind the actual stages through which Seneca College and most colleges and universities in Canada, the United States and, increasingly, the world are currently going. The path we are taking can be empirically demonstrated. The pertinent facts are associated with the social functions of education which are:

(a) to produce graduates with the immediately marketable skills needed to become participants in the production and distribution of goods, services and resources, uncritical consumers—with or without credit—and compliant citizens unwilling or unable to question effectively those who control the national and international political economy; and,

(b) to encourage among our students acquiescence in the dominant ideology of the day—which is to say the doctrines of late capitalism.

This is done by precept and example. We teach the substance of corporate ideology, and we model it in the social relations of educational production. As teachers, we relate to students much as assembly-line workers relate to manufactured products, and we relate to our immediate managerial "superiors" much as factory workers relate to their supervisors. The steps that Seneca has taken toward becoming a corporate college include the imposition of an industrial model of labour relations, the commodification of education and the reduction of active students to passive consumers of educational merchandise. Seneca increasingly displays a comprehensive and exclusive commitment to a definition of education that deskills teachers by transforming them from autonomous academics to standardized technicians "delivering curriculum" to submissive customers. Control over the entire process, of course, remains with a hierarchical management structure that regulates every step of the teaching and learning process, quantifying and monitoring each aspect of classroom performance and eliminating as much "variability" as possible in what and how teachers teach, and what and how learners learn, such that every expectation of the corporate agenda is met—including reduction of production costs to the lowest possible level.

The second meaning of steps is different. It involves the process of understanding what we are doing individually and collectively in the service of the corporate agenda. We not only are moving apparently relentlessly toward the complete corporate college, but we are able to describe, analyze, interpret and explain ourselves as we travel the path. This active interrogation and assessment of the institution which employs us and of our work within it helps us to comprehend the structural demands that are made of us and the limits within which we carry out our obligations – to society, to the college, to the students and to ourselves.

In the intellectual steps that we can take toward understanding the material steps we are taking toward the corporate college, three overarching themes must be considered:

- The role of the college in the political economy of late capitalism, for without this knowledge all else will be illusion;
- The policies and practices of the college as they combine to construct the social relations among students, teachers, management and the curriculum;
- The place of the classroom as the repository of the consequences of the larger more comprehensive organizational contexts.

A rigorous examination of power and purpose is an essential first step toward a critique; and a critique is a necessary first step toward praxis—conscious, thoughtful and purposive action. The required investigation must be historical, for we must know how far and how fast we have moved toward corporatism. It must also be empirical, for we must understand evidence as well as sentiment. Although the destination is presented as inevitable, when we see it clearly and take account of the forces that drive us toward it, other possibilities open—not least opportunities to re-think and re-direct our beliefs and behaviour. When we also consider the several crises that our society is enduring – not educational alone, but economic, ecological and ethical—the importance of seeing alternatives becomes more than an option; it becomes a social necessity. Corporatist motives, methods and means have put our civilization—and perhaps all civilizations—in jeopardy. Corporatist solutions, at best, buy some time. The path to the corporate college is treacherous, for it is not only mapped by the same cartographers that have led us to unsustainable energy problems and environmental crises of potentially apocalyptic proportions, but have also led us away from the fundamental human values that we, as a species, were only beginning to fulfill in the wake of an “enlightenment” that promised an end to tyranny, poverty and ignorance and a blossoming of democracy, prosperity and knowledge.

At the very least, we must know that the political economy of corporatism—so much in evidence in the world today—has betrayed us, that its predictions about the future are false, but we must also recognize that we possess the option of either doing otherwise or of

persisting along the path and being culpable for what next befalls us.

In order to see better what is happening, how it might be modified, altered or, where necessary, reversed, I wish to explain what I mean by a propositional inventory. I have arranged seven subtopics through which to focus on one or another element in the complex set of corporatist arrangements within which we live our professional lives. Each one contains three propositions and a summary question that, if effectively considered, could help erect a framework upon which it will be possible to construct an alternative vision of what the college could have been and what it still could be and should be, although the chances that it will be remain slim. I have been teaching here for forty years. I have seen the possibilities and the promise. I have also witnessed fateful changes in ideas and ideals. I have been frequently told that the alternative I wish to embrace has been long lost and is unrecoverable. If this is so, then the college may be irredeemable. I do not, however, insist that my idea of Seneca College is either optimal or even possible. I do believe, however, that some alternative is fundamental to the redemption of the college and the restoration of its capacity to contribute to the recovery of what is best in our civilization, necessary for our society, crucial for our college and vital for the emancipation of the people—including ourselves and our students—who live within it.

Changing Patterns of Work

- Technophiles made false promises that linked high technology to a world of exciting, creative and well-paid jobs.
- Current labour market conditions are reducing the possibility for careers and producing mainly poorly paid, insecure and temporary employment.
- The prediction that the crisis of the 21st century would be boredom because of an abundance of leisure time has become a cruel joke.

How can we use education to illuminate the real nature of work and the economy in order to help our students comprehend what awaits them and develop strategies to cope with or, preferably to change it?

Reproduction of the Labour Force

- As the recession lingers, colleges are used largely to “warehouse” the young, keeping them off the streets, out of trouble and perhaps learning useful lessons.
- While in college, the unrealistic expectations and the sense of entitlement which they possess are being systematically lowered as their ambitions are dulled.
- Students are taught to see themselves as customers upon entry, but are miraculously transformed into products as they leave.

How can we use our classrooms to make the process of reproducing social relations transparent, not in the interest of encouraging individualistic rebellion, but in order to develop a collective interest in social transformation?

Reproduction of Ideology

- Students are conditioned to acquiesce in consumerism (I am what I own), and to build their personal identity on mass-marketed images.
- Students are driven to believe that political life is remote, corrupt and static, and that they are best served by adjusting to a culture of impotence.
- Students are encouraged to disdain public discourse and avoid public space, seeking refuge in the idiocy of private life.

How can we encourage students to test the boundaries of their existence, to probe the possibilities of shared power, to see what they can get away with?

College as a Classroom for Life

- Teachers, perhaps through sloth or perhaps through fear, often recreate hierarchical, tyrannical and exploitative teacher-student relations.
- Teachers, perhaps through sloth or perhaps through fear, model hierarchy, tyranny and exploitation in their submission to irrational managerial fiat.
- Teachers replicate the industrial system by using methods of operant conditioning and tolerating the abandonment of literacy and respect for intellectual endeavour.

How can we better make transparent the power relations in the college, encourage students to seek their own emancipation and instill a culture of learning apart from standardized “learning objectives” and disdain for communicative competence outside the domain of “texting” and “tweets”?

Sideshows

- Much is made of problems of plagiarism and academic honesty in an educational system that has long since abandoned its own academic integrity.
- Much is made of bureaucratic accountability measures that employ quantified calibrations to assess the effectiveness of inherently non-numerical teaching.
- Much is made of “student-centred” learning as code for training modules that deprive students of “self-motivated” and “self-directed” education.

How can we redirect energy from the exercise of industrial work discipline and the culture of “gotcha” to an ethic of learning as the

creative exploration of the intellect and the fulfillment of curiosity, not the rote recitation of pre-packaged, pre-digested, hermetically sealed factoids?

Technology and Teaching

- Technologically mediated education promotes recitation while repressing active engagement with the subject matter.
- Computers have no memory in the sense of chronology and context; they put data in cold storage and permit it to become randomly recombinant.
- “Distance learning is a 1st-class way to get a 3rd-rate education.” – Clifford Stoll, High-Tech Heretic.

How can we assist in the activation of imagination and creativity among students whose singular source of information and understanding is seen on an electronic screen?

Evaluation and Education

- Too many students are incapable of writing a grammatically correct sentence, much less a coherent paragraph (and see little advantage in doing so).
- Inured to multiple-choice questions that are deemed sufficient to demonstrate “mastery” of a subject, students are unable to comprehend an “essay-type” world.
- Official “critical thinking” is modeled on the “Rubik’s Cube; it is problem solving, not problem definition; it is a parlor game pretending to be thought.

How can we subvert the fetishism of quantification and standardization that hones in on obedience, repetition and the suppression of originality or even the capacity, much less the desirability, of producing a fresh variation on a familiar theme?

The Noodle Factory

In 1 October, 1976, my New York friend, Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007), gave a speech at the opening of the new library at the University of Connecticut in New London. It (the speech, not the library) was called “The Noodle Factory” (you can read the entire text in his autobiographical collage, *Palm Sunday* [New York: Delacorte, 1981], pp. 157-165). In it, he did indeed compare a library to a noodle factory. He was a little dispirited (for a change). But, although he had already pretty much lost hope for humanity, he kept some things sacred. His hopes were on a more modest scale than the redemption of our species. Perhaps we too could acknowledge our mediocrity and aspire to it. This is how he ended his speech.

... language is holy to me, which shows how little I know about holiness. Our freedom to say or write whatever we please is holy to me. It is a rare privilege not only on this planet, but throughout the

universe, I suspect. And it is not something somebody gave us. It is a thing we give to ourselves. Meditation is holy to me, for I believe that all the secrets of existence and nonexistence are somewhere in our heads – or in other peoples' heads. And I believe that reading and writing are the most nourishing forms of meditation anyone has found so far. By reading the writings of the most interesting minds in history, we meditate with our own minds and theirs as well. This to me is a miracle. The motto of this noble library is the motto of all meditators throughout all time: "Quiet, please."

Learning at Seneca is noisy; it is not meditative. Language at Seneca is vulgar; it is not holy. Freedom at Seneca is mocked; it is not cherished, nor is it used. This is because quiet, and language and freedom do not serve corporate interests.

In conclusion, if there is a Hell (which I sincerely doubt), I am sure that a wise and loving God would ask his old friend Satan to make sure that a special place was reserved therein for whosoever constructs this multiple choice question:

To what did Kurt Vonnegut compare a library?

- a computer hard drive;
- the Dead Sea scrolls;
- a noodle factory;
- a wise man's memory

I thank you for your attention.

Howard A. Doughty teaches cultural anthropology and philosophy at Seneca College in Toronto. This paper was prepared for the Seneca College Academic Forum in 2009. Professor Doughty can be reached at howardadoughty@yahoo.ca.

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