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Workers of Citizens — Which Should the System Produce ?

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WORKERS OR CITIZENS--WHICH SHOULD THE SYSTEM PRODUCE?**M. Burbidge**

In any discussion of the future, I find myself reminded of the famous American federal bureaucrat, charged with some responsibility for preserving the environment, who said: "Why should I be concerned about posterity; what has posterity ever done for me." In a similar vein, John Maynard Keynes pointed out to a colleague who was concerned about posterity that "in the long run, we are all dead". In the twilight of my career, however, I find myself unable to avoid long run concerns about education in general, and higher education in particular. In keeping with philosophic custom, I shall point out what I take to be a crucial problem, and leave the solution to the practitioners.

The basic problem as I see it is that we have consistently confused, in theory and in practice, two quite different practices, education and training. I shall further argue that any society which attempts to combine the education of responsible citizens with the training of obedient and diligent workers will probably produce very confused workers and citizens. Good workers in autocratic workplaces do not make good citizens in a democratic society and vice versa. The problem facing Canadians is that, while their political system is ostensibly democratic, the institutions in which they work and learn are run autocratically. We shall therefore have to find some way of blending education appropriate to citizenship with training appropriate to autocratic workplaces, or give up on one or the other. The solution is unclear, the problem critical.

The distinction between education and training was identified long ago by a prime philosopher. One of Plato's most famous dialogues portrays the young aristocrat, Meno, asking, with an air of quiet desperation, that the elder Socrates tell him what learning really is. Socrates responds very much in the spirit of the Greek root of the word education; that is, to educe, to draw out from someone knowledge which is already within him. By judicious questioning, he thus draws out from Meno's slave boy, a lad who had never been taught mathematics, what amounts to the theorem of Pythagoras. He thereby claims to demonstrate that the role of the good teacher is rather like that of a midwife, who assists the mother to give birth to her offspring. The good teacher does not put knowledge into a student, who then passively records it rather like a tape recorder, to regurgitate it upon demand during the final exam. Instead, the good teacher assists the student to strive actively to give birth to knowledge which he already has or which he creates himself as the result of being prodded, questioned and challenged by the teacher.

Whenever I describe this Socratic mode of educating to my students, they tend to rather dubious about whether Socrates really is educing knowledge from the slave-boy, or whether he is using leading questions to insert the answers into the boy's brain which are then coughed up on demand. But when I ask them how they themselves would prefer to be treated, there is no hesitation. They clearly do not wish to be treated as if they were passive tape recorders, dutifully recording in their memories all that the lecturer, or the textbook, tells them. They would much prefer to be treated as active participants in the learning process, to be challenged to think for themselves and come to their own conclusions as befits free men and women. They reject the notion that their brains are analogous to computers, and much prefer the view that they are capable of creative thought, which may not be totally original but which is at least their own.

This distinction between active and passive learning is crucial to that which I wish to draw between training and education. If, for example, I wish to acquire a basic skill, such as typing, as rapidly and as efficiently as possible, the best thing for me to do is to place myself completely under the control of a trainer who is skilled in typing and in the best mode of developing that skill in a novice. Efficiency will be reduced if I am prone to question the directions given by the trainer, if I persist in following my own insights into the process, or if I attempt to develop creative ways of typing. I should curb my imagination and passively accept the regimen laid down for me by the instructor. Typing is a skill I need in order to move on towards my real goal, that of writing creatively; so a little docility is in order if I am to pass on to that higher order activity. But when I do pass on, the training situation becomes inappropriate and restrictive, and an educational situation should replace it. The teacher should now assist me in learning how to write

creatively by providing me with a variety of experiences which will provoke my own free responses. The control he exercised in the training situation must be reduced and finally eliminated. I must be prepared to listen to his advice, criticism and evaluation, but I must not be bound by them. Instead, I must actively pursue goals which I have chosen for myself.

A final way of distinguishing between active and passive modes of learning lies in the kinds of attitudes each mode tends to produce. It is, of course, a mistake to think that learning is simply a matter of receiving a body of information and a set of skills. We have all learned vast quantities of information during our school, college and university careers, but most of it is gone with the wind. To make this point, ask any post-secondary students the answers to questions which they must have written out upon examination papers during their high school careers. What, for example, were the terms, crucial to Canadians, of the treaty of Paris of 1763, or of 1783? What is Pythagoras' theorem? What is the dominant feature of Boyle's Law? What is a gerund? Why does Hamlet stab Polonius? Unless they have recently been studying these details, they will be at a loss to respond.

In contrast, the attitudes towards authority, work, and learning which they absorbed during their grade school experience have been retained. And these attitudes, learned during their long years of being treated as passive trainees, were those of docility, obedience to authority, and diligence in working patiently at tasks chosen for them by others, to achieve goals of which they are only dimly aware. Such attitudes are an inevitable result of a process which emphasizes training and neglects education. They are attitudes which are highly appropriate for good, docile workers and subjects, and are much appreciated by employers, judges and politicians. They are also quite appropriate to life in an autocratic society.

In fundamental contrast, such attitudes are highly inappropriate for responsible citizens of a democratic society. I here use the term 'citizen' in the Aristotelian sense of a person as a free responsible individual who demands a right as an equal partner, to a voice in the decision making process of whatever social grouping she finds herself, in direct contrast to the term 'subject', which refers to one who does not have that right. Citizens think for themselves, are in control of their own lives, and are prepared to follow only those rules which have been derived through a cooperative process, in which they have had the opportunity to share. They refuse to obey orders delivered by an authority who does not provide reasons as to why the orders have been given, and they are prone to ask awkward questions of those who claim to be in authority over them.

In short, I should say that a learning situation devoted almost entirely to training is highly suited to the development of attitudes which are incompatible with democratic citizenship. Training develops docility and unquestioning obedience as opposed to responsibility and personal autonomy; it develops competitiveness between individuals in striving to serve the authority figure, rather than cooperativeness in working with peers to solve problems and set policy; it develops a tendency to be a passive consumer of directions, procedures and products, rather than an active creator of personal and social goals and achievements. Hence I should say that the attitudes of responsibility, creativity, and curiosity so vital to free citizens of a democracy can only be developed during active involvement in the educational experience, and are stifled in the passive training situations which prevail throughout our educational system. Our system is exceptionally good in producing good subjects and workers, highly inadequate in producing responsible citizens, and that, I maintain, is because it concentrates on training rather than upon education.

Of course, one should not lay all the blame upon the school system. Authoritarian families and social institutions beyond the school contribute to docility and obedience. And the task of developing future citizens into passive consumers of the works and artifacts produced by others has largely been taken over by the media, especially television, which is incredibly efficient in indoctrinating young and old into a lifestyle of passive consumption. In counteracting this impressive force, the school sometimes strives, inadequately I think, to develop active participation in sport, in

drama, in art, and in community service, but its efforts at developing such creative behaviour are overwhelmed by the all pervasive television screen.

It is, of course, training which predominates in our schools, colleges and universities. Plato would no doubt approve, since it was his view that a tiny minority of the population is capable of being educated. Hence he advocated an autocratic society, where the vast majority are trained to do work chosen for them by the few who were capable of being educated to the degree appropriate for philosopher kings. In contrast, we like to claim that we live in a democracy, which should entail an overriding commitment to educate everybody to be free responsible citizens in control of their own lives, and prepared to share directly or indirectly in the government of their communities. This, I maintain, we do not do very well at all. Our failure to do so jeopardizes democracy.

It is, of course, quite clear why we do not place much stress on the development of the skills and attitudes appropriate to democratic citizenship, other than in rhetorical terms. It is important to acknowledge that Canada is not a very democratic country at all, however much our leaders are prone to describe it as such. Consider that the vast majority of institutions in which Canadians spend their time are run autocratically, not democratically. Virtually all workplaces are run autocratically, with little or not involvement by workers in decisions which affect their working lives. Of course we are free to quit our jobs if we do not like them, and seek other employment. But once we find it, we find ourselves in the same position of having to obey the boss. We have virtually no freedom to participate as equals in making decisions which affect our lives in any direct manner. We do have freedom to participate indirectly in the democratic process by which the nation, the province, the municipality in which we live is operated, but our involvement is limited to a momentary choice once every four or five years to participate in the election of those who are supposed to represent us.

Perhaps this is the way it should be. If we were to somehow enhance the freedom to participate by workers in public and private enterprises, there would be a significant loss in the freedom of owners, employers, managers and bureaucrats to control those with whom they work. There might also be some loss of efficiency; we are consistently told, without much evidence, that it would really be impossible to run a company or an institution democratically; i.e. by giving those who work in it a significant say in determining goals, policies, and hiring of workers and managers. This argument has always bemused me. It is unclear why we regard democracy as essential in the running of a nation, a city or a school board, but as out of the question in running a business.

One thing is clear, however, and that is that democracy at any level, whether it be the small company or the large nation, doesn't work very well, unless the citizens or workers involved have been well educated in the skills and attitudes appropriate to democracy. And that, as I have maintained, we do not do very well at all. To some degree, this may be due to the fact that it is far easier, and far cheaper, to train students than it is to educate them. Hitler's legions were superbly trained but completely uneducated.

But I am convinced that our failure in education of citizens lies more in the fact that good democratic citizens do not make very good workers in autocratic institutions. They are, for example, much more difficult to control and to manage. They demand reasons for doing what they are told to do; they demand to be consulted when changes of a crucial nature are to be made; they want a role in selecting the administrators and managers, and a role in getting rid of them if they demonstrate incompetence. They are disrespectful of authority, if it is wielded in an autocratic manner. What autocrat would want a staff of such employees, or a school system devoted to producing them?

Admittedly, when business leaders, politicians and bureaucrats make pronouncements regarding the educational system, they appear to be confused and often contradictory. On the one hand they demand that the system move with the times and with the latest trends throughout the globe. They use catchphrases such as the need for enhanced training to allow us to compete in the global economy, for competency based training, for schools which offer meaningful prospects for employment. They emphasize that the function of the educational system is to prepare

students for gainful employment by training them for specific jobs. And during times of high unemployment, parents and students claim to want the same things.

On the other hand, if the question of education is raised, employers and parents will demand that students be assisted in developing the skills of critical thinking, of problem solving, of teamwork, and may even add, rather as an afterthought, that they should be assisted in developing skills appropriate to becoming responsible members of their communities. Admittedly, close questioning will indicate that employers at least are really interested in critical thought only when it is carried out by workers fairly high up the hierarchy--not by the ordinary workers--and then only when it is applied to problems set by the hierarchy. For example, they will want some workers at least to be adept at thinking critically in order to resolve problems in achieving the more efficient and profitable production of taco chips, pesticides or nerve gases; they will not want them to think critically about whether such products should be produced at all, or whether they will contribute to the well-being of the community as a whole and in the long run, if they are produced.

In terms of teamwork, a term much used in current management rhetoric, I assume the model preferred by managers is that of the winning team engaged in professional sport, where the players have vast enthusiasm and team spirit, wholehearted devotion and obedience to their coach, and unquestioning respect for whatever magnate happens to purchase the team. In other words, the teamwork of the successful autocracy, far removed from that of the successful democracy.

Finally it must be admitted that a good deal has been lately heard about those corporate executives who are said to practice decentralized decision making by consensus--it sounds good and I am sure it sometimes occurs, but I suspect it will only be tolerated when the decisions happen to coincide with those already made in the executive suite of the head office.

To sum up, I have argued:

- 1) That there is a crucial distinction to be made between the practices of training and of education, and that this distinction is largely to be made in terms of different attitudes and skills which accrue in each.
- 2) That the attitudes which arise from an undiluted process of training produce behaviours which are appropriate to autocratic situations in the workplace and in society, while those which arise from an educational process are vital in democratic situations.
- 3) That we, as members of a society, have a crucial decision to make. What kind of a society do we wish to bequeath to our successors? We currently skimp on education in favour of training, thus preparing students to become good workers in an autocratic society. Plato would approve of our success, although he would severely criticize as counter-productive the rhetoric we currently deliver to students on the beauties of democracy, and he would regard our current practice in permitting even minimal democratic participation on the national level as ridiculous, and inimical to stability and progress.

In contrast, I confess to being an unapologetic proponent of democracy as a way of life. I would advocate democratic control of all social institutions and workplaces, on the grounds that if democracy is supported by an appropriate educational system, it will, in the long run, prove to be not only more efficient than any autocracy, but will also prove vastly more suited to human hopes and aspirations. But that is in the long run, after we are all dead. We have a long way to go in developing a soundly democratic society, and education, not training, is the key.

If, however, we continue to proceed as we are, I suggest that there is a quotation from T.S.Eliot which seems to me to propose an appropriate epitaph to the kind of society we are currently building: " And the wind sang-- here was a decent godless people, their only monument a mile of asphalt road, and a thousand lost golf balls".