

# A More "Useful" General Education Component?

Herbert Spencer's Educational Thought

Héloïse Côté



Over the past decade, several bodies have called for the general education component of college-level programs to be adapted to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: it has served the college model well to date but has been out of sync with society for the past 50 years, which compromises the value of its contribution for the years to come (Demers, 2014, p. 134). Still according to these bodies, it should be tied to utilitarian objectives<sup>1</sup> in order to stop fuelling a "waste of human resources" (Demers, 2014, p. 137), in particular by preventing students who accumulate failures on the French Exit Exam (Épreuve uniforme de français, EUF) from obtaining their diploma. These comments may be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has aggravated the labour shortage in several fields.<sup>2</sup> How can we train the workers needed by Quebec society more quickly, if not by rethinking the EUF<sup>3</sup> and, more broadly, by redefining general education so that it equips individuals to respond to contemporary social and economic challenges (Demers, 2014)? Far from being new, this question deserves to be revisited today precisely because the context of the pandemic leads it to be asked with increased acuity.

However, revising the general education component of college programs can lead to a slippery slope. In order to understand what that slope entails, it is necessary to go back to the foundations of the discourse on the alignment of education with biological and social adaptation and to examine its key ideas. Specifically, the thinking of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) will be examined. Although this author is out of the limelight in the field of education, he developed a program

aimed at enabling individuals to perform all the activities necessary to satisfy their needs, following a precise order that he established, well before Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) proposed his own hierarchy. Spencer thus became the champion of Darwin's evolutionism applied to education, and his book *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (1860) left its mark on the Western educational landscape (Batho, 2018; Minois, 2006), particularly by influencing authors who put forward an education of immediate social utility, including John Dewey (Batho, 2018; Egan, 2002). Looking at Spencer's educational ideas thus allows us to critically examine the discourse advocating a better adaptation of general education to socio-economic imperatives, by going back to its very foundations.

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<sup>1</sup> See, on this topic, Guy Demers (2014) and the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, *Les répercussions de l'introduction d'un cours d'histoire du Québec dans la formation générale commune de l'enseignement collégial*, Québec, Gouvernement du Québec, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> The pandemic may have exacerbated labour shortages, particularly because many people retired early and immigration was halved (Greiner, 2021)..

<sup>3</sup> These changes may involve allowing the use of Antidote writing assistance software, as was done in May 2020, with an "extraordinary" increase in the EUF success rate as a result (Larin, 2021).

Before we begin this analysis, we briefly introduce the man behind the ideas.

## Some biographical references

Herbert Spencer was born in Derby, England. His father, a schoolteacher, was a follower of the ideas of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), who was, in turn, strongly influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). This helped to form Spencer early on in educational matters (Ottavi, 2014). As a philosopher, he is best known for his contribution to the theorization of scientific sociology (Poyer, 1911) and for suggesting that individual organisms, humanity included, are subject to competition, to the struggle for life, in light of the selection of the fittest (Ottavi, 2014, p. 2).<sup>4</sup> His educational thought will be detailed below.

## The importance of science

In *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical*, Spencer criticizes the education of his time, which, through its content (fine arts and literature), would provide little nourishment for human activities, fulfillment of basic needs and preparation for the social roles of parent, worker and citizen (Spencer, 1911).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, education would serve first and foremost to subjugate others "by the accumulation of wealth, by style of living, by beauty of dress, by display of knowledge or intellect" (Spencer, 1911, p. 7). Spencer proposes instead to base education on science, the most useful knowledge according to him, since it affects all facets of human existence, including art,<sup>6</sup> since it constitutes both the method and the content of education, and since it allows society to progress, to evolve, and individuals to know themselves and the world, and evolve also. The latter must develop their sense of observation as a priority and, in the educational process, be led to do their own research, to see for

themselves the consequences of their discoveries (Ottavi, 2014). Spencer thus puts forward an active learning process from the simple to the complex, where the student becomes a scientist, and this in an era when education would present definitions and rules rather than letting the learner discover them: "what with making the pupil a mere passive recipient of other's ideas, and not in the least leading him to be an active inquirer or self-instructor" (Spencer, 1911, p. 39). The influence of Pestalozzi<sup>7</sup> is evident, as Spencer wants to begin to develop the child's faculty of observation through lessons in things, to introduce them to concrete facts before abstract truths (Poyer, 1911). It should be noted that the idea of the student as a person engaged in research rather than a recipient for the thoughts of others echoes general education, which includes getting individuals to solve problems and to think critically (MEES,<sup>8</sup> 2017). Thus, at first glance, Spencer's words do not seem to be in opposition to general education, but what about its contents?



<sup>4</sup> As Dominique Ottavi (2014) writes, Spencer influenced Charles Darwin, who borrowed from him the idea of the "survival of the fittest" in *Origins of the Species*.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, although in Spencer's time, debates about compulsory education were ongoing and the author did not concern himself with college education as it exists in Quebec today, his criticism of an education centred on the fine arts and the humanities is no less acute and can find echo today in the words of those who accuse general education of not being adapted to contemporary issues.

<sup>6</sup> The artist needs to know the material they work with as well as psychology, in order to evaluate the influence of their work on the public (Spencer, 1911).

<sup>7</sup> Rousseau is not mentioned here because Spencer is said to have had such a horror of socialism that he refused to read *Emile*, although many have pointed out similarities between his educational proposals and those of Rousseau (Egan, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Quebec Ministry of Education and Higher Education.

In this respect, Spencer classifies the main types of human activity into five levels, ranging from those that directly contribute to the preservation of the individual (medicine), those that indirectly contribute to it by satisfying the needs of existence (biology, geology, what feeds the industries), those that serve to bring up and discipline the young family (psychology), and those that enable the maintenance of social order and political relations (sociology and the natural history of society), to those activities that are employed to fill the leisure part of life, i.e., to satisfy tastes and feelings. With this program, Spencer seeks, among other things, to better prepare the younger generation for the world of work, a facet neglected, according to him, by the education of his time:

But while every one is ready to endorse the abstract proposition that instruction fitting youths for the business of life is of high importance, or even to consider it of supreme importance; yet scarcely any inquire what instruction will so fit them. (Spencer, 1911, p. 28)

The omnipresence of science, the desire to train people capable of satisfying their various needs, the desire to propose a pedagogy based on human activities and on knowledge that is useful and directly relevant to every facet of life—these are Herbert Spencer's educational ideas, aimed at achieving a specific goal, preparing people for a so-called "complete" life: "the only rational mode of judging of an educational course is, to judge in what degree it discharges such

function" (Spencer, 1911, p. 20). In this sense, Spencer would likely be highly critical of general education at the college level, even though it invites teachers to lead students to research. Indeed, from Spencer's perspective, it would be far from being designed to prepare the individual for basic needs and social roles: it would place too much emphasis on language and literature, and not enough on science, a critical viewpoint that led Spencer to be heavily criticized.

### **Aesthetic culture: to furnish leisure time?**

Indeed, relegating the fine arts and literature to the sphere of the "leisure part of life" would be tantamount to presenting them as something that is not indispensable to happiness (Ottavi, 2014, p. 7). Moreover, to set aside what is aesthetic, as Spencer does, would reduce human mental activity to the mere fact-checking (Lempert, 1997) proper to scientific thinking, which would lead to ignoring narrative thinking, the other manner in which people organize and manage their experience of the world (Bruner, 1996). More broadly, the richness and complexity of the universe, all human mental activity, consciousness and experience would be reduced to a few evolutionary principles; in such a perspective, the individual would play no significant role in social transformations (Lempert, 1997).

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Thinking of education in terms of social utility and privileging science in the name of this utility would therefore hardly be compatible with the aims of general education. Among other things, this would lead to the neglect of the creative and critical thinking needed to transform society. By the same token, status quo and adaptation would be favoured and aesthetic culture neglected. Is this really the case?

Spencer suggests that he considers aesthetic culture important:

When the forces of Nature have been fully conquered to man's use—when the means of production have been brought to perfection—when labour has been economised to the highest degree [...]; and when, therefore, man has free time at his disposal, then beauty in art and in nature will come to occupy, with good reason, a large place in all minds. (Spencer, 1911, p. 45)

Even if Spencer does not despise aesthetic culture, his words keep it in the strict sphere of leisure. How can one claim to prepare for a complete life by confining aesthetics to what someone does in their spare time? Moreover, if we follow Spencer's reasoning, many generations may never explore aesthetic culture, since it seems that we must wait until the forces of nature are subdued, the means of production perfected, etc. Yet, to lead a so-called "complete" life, it is not enough to know one's trade thoroughly, nor to be omniscient;

one must possess that set of social qualities that 17<sup>th</sup> century citizens associated with "the honest man" (Poyer, 1911, para. 7). In order to train this person, their acumen and wit, one must engage with playwrights, novelists, historians, in short, the people who have known society best (Poyer, 1911).

Thus, relying on a utilitarian discourse may lead to ignoring what precisely constitutes the contribution of general education to the development of the individual: openness to the world, creative thinking, autonomy, capacity for critical and reflective analysis, etc. The slope is slippery, dangerous, and revisiting the words of an author at the cradle of utilitarianism in education warns us against the risks of engaging in it.

### **Towards a "Spencerian" turn in general education?**

However, the Western education system seems to have been in a "Spencerian" phase for quite some time, as Poyer wrote in 1911: have teachers not been encouraged for several decades to focus on student activity? Have we not turned our backs on fine arts and literature in order to integrate more science into the curriculum? Moreover, the context of the pandemic brings us even closer to Spencer's ideas: does he not advocate that "the preservation of health is a *duty*" (Spencer, 1911, p. 170) and that "knowledge which subserves direct self-preservation by preventing this loss of health, is of primary importance" (Spencer, 1911, p. 27)? The pandemic, by pushing us to resort to measures that directly support self-preservation (hand washing, wearing a mask, etc.), has reminded us of the importance of respecting

hygiene in order to avoid weakening the organism. It has also led to the prioritization of certain activities, notably by considerably reducing access to the arts.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the engagement of the education system and, more broadly, of society itself, into a "Spencerian" turn is not just a matter of rhetoric: it has indeed been initiated and even accelerated by the pandemic.

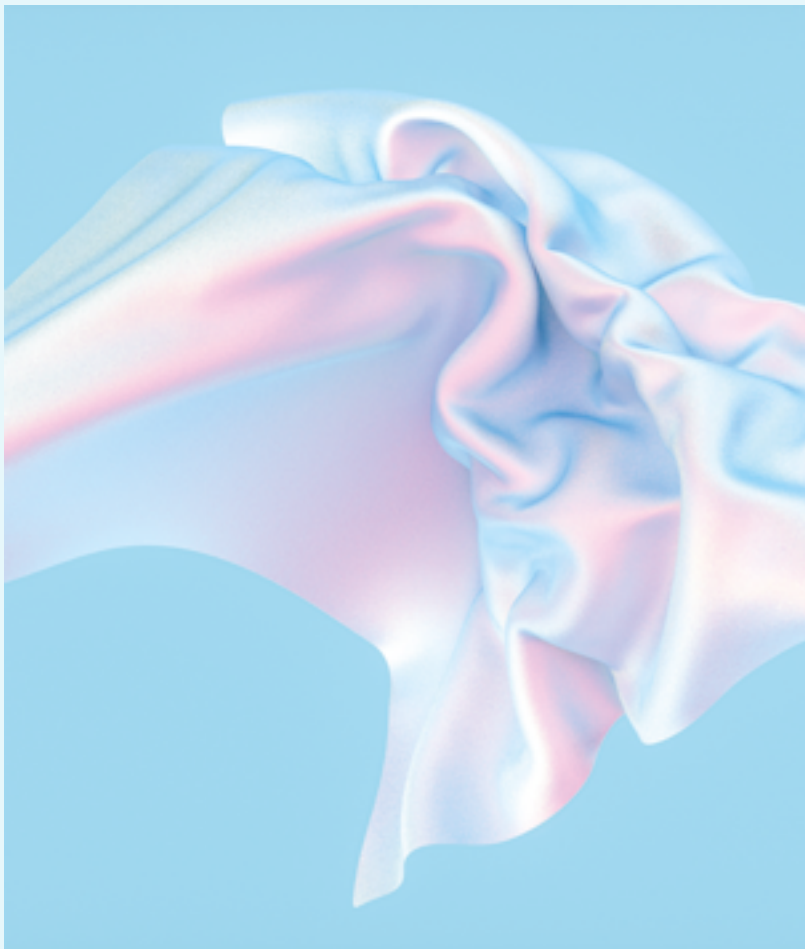
However, this acceleration makes it more necessary than ever to preserve general education. It is hardly possible to be satisfied with a "Spencerian" curriculum to develop narrative thinking, an essential tool for building one's identity and finding one's place in the world (Bruner, 1996), as well as the ability to reason critically, to solve problems and to communicate effectively, both in speaking and in writing. Literature and languages are essential for this.

<sup>9</sup> The arts are one of the areas that have been particularly affected by the health measures resulting from the pandemic (Galipeau, 2021).

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Moreover, calling for a greater adaptation of general education to current social and economic realities is tantamount to neglecting that general education teachers already care to do so (Courcy, 2021) and would, in the process, show a certain lack of knowledge of effective pedagogical practices as well as a lack of recognition of the work of teachers, which echoes another criticism of Spencer, that of having only limited experience with education (Batho, 2018). In this sense, the critical voices manifesting themselves to reform general education at the college level in the name of it being out of sync seem to

suffer from shortcomings similar to Spencer's thinking. While being dissatisfied with risking impoverished thinking, they also demonstrate limited knowledge of what people in the field are striving to implement. As a result, they threaten to deprive future generations of the richness of the marriage between science and the humanities, between preparation for working life and the development of creativity, critical thinking, and the ability to think about complexity and diversity, all of which are essential for overcoming the challenges of the present and those of an increasingly uncertain future. ─



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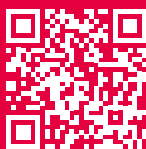
**Héloïse Côté** holds a doctorate in Educational Foundations and is a lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Université Laval in the fields of educational foundations and French didactics. Her research focuses on the question of culture in its relationship to education, a theme on which she has published several works. She is also the author of fantasy novels published by Alire as well as several short stories.

heloise.cote@fse.ulaval.ca

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