

Routinization of Education In America
Dr. Wilson L. Thompson

President King, Dean Noonkester, honorable guests, thank you one and all for coming together on a busy afternoon during exam week. It is a great honour and privilege to represent our faculty in Jackson at the upcoming Awards Banquet of the Mississippi Humanities Council. Let me also thank Dr. Noonkester for this unexpected award and for his enthusiastic invitation to come teach introductory sociology at William Carey College some seven years ago. It is good to have a small part in this, the inaugural year of William Carey University. Finally, let me give thanks for encouragement from my friends, colleagues, students and, not the least, my wife, Mona Ruth. Also, your patience with this pilgrim's persistent puns is appreciated.

Today, as my father used to say, we are going to "kill two rocks with one bird." First, we address the pervasive routinization which threatens education in America. Next, we will briefly consider the place of the Internet and television in education; their potential and perils. This discussion of routine in education is perforce incomplete; but it is hoped that these remarks will prompt increased emphasis on assigned reading beginning at this campus.

Formal education in this country is too often reduced to a mind-numbing routine. As a result, harried teachers in elementary and secondary schools often find themselves "teaching to the test" in compliance with legislative mandate. In universities, however, some classes may be humorously dismissed as mere academic exercises in which the professor's notes are duly copied into the students' notes *without passing through the mind of either!*

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education issued its *wake-up call* for educational reform titled "A Nation at Risk." In this official expose, we learned of international studies, using 19 tests of academic achievement, in which "American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were *last seven times*" (Emphasis added p-8). A number of educational analysts were cited, including Paul Hurd, who concluded that "We are raising a new generation of Americans that is scientifically and technologically illiterate" (p-10).

Even more troubling was the note sounded by Paul Copperman, author of The Literary Hoax. "Each generation of Americans has outstripped its parents in education, in literacy, and in economic attainment. [*But*] For the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach, those of their parents" (p-11).

The report also called attention to a sizeable decline in textbook expenditures and publishers that were *dumbing down* textbooks "to ever-lower reading levels in response to perceived market demands" (p21). And, not the least, this 1983 report noted that teachers then receiving an average annual salary of \$17,000, were generally "required to supplement their income with part-time and summer employment" (p23). This clearly stirred up popular notions that we would get better teachers if we simply paid them more. The reaction to this report was regional conferences whose recommendations included a call for higher teachers' salaries. This call turned out to be very effective.

Our nation (with notable exceptions) heeded this call. “Between 1979 and 1989, average teachers’ salaries (after inflation) rose 20 percent” as reported by economists Michael Podgursky (U. of Missouri) & Dale Ballou (U of Mass). Many Mississippi teachers missed this gravy train. Sadly, pay raises were given across-the-board, *not for merit in teaching*. This, plus difficulties in firing the incompetent, ultimately meant that “higher pay caused the worst teachers to stay longer, because their other job prospects were poor. This reduced openings for better new teachers, who -with good skills- found other work”(From Samuelson’s “The Wastage in Education” Newsweek Aug.10, ‘98).

Robert Samuelson’s article on “Wastage in Education” accordingly concludes that “money can’t buy educational success.” He urges that principals be given authority to fire incompetent teachers (Newsweek 8-10-98). But, some have voiced their concern about *uneducated* administrators. Paul Zoch argues in the Autumn 1999 issue of *Wilson Quarterly* that we should require all “principals and superintendents to pass AP exams or their equivalents in English, calculus, a science, a non-native foreign language and history” (Our Uneducated Educators, *Wilson Quarterly* Autumn 1999).

Others, understandably, express their frustration with perennial fads in education. These fads have, in fact, plagued government-sponsored schools from their beginning under Horace Mann in Massachusetts. One of the first fads, now thankfully obsolete, was the promotion of *Phrenology* -the study of the size and shape of the cranium as an indicator of character.

Another fad using Dick, Jane and their ubiquitous mutt Spot to teach reading has been more persistent, despite phonics success to the contrary. Talk about mind-numbing routine! “Look at Spot jump. Jump, Spot, Jump.” Unhappily, the whole-word approach to reading became bureaucratically entrenched. It survived powerful assaults by critics, such as that launched by Rudolf Flesch in his 1955 publication Why Johnny Can’t Read. Some twenty-five years later, Flesch fired off a searing follow-up. In it, he complains loudly about Why Johnny Still Can’t Read (1981).

More recently, there has been a strong emphasis on self-esteem and enjoyment in learning with little regard for educational achievement. Thomas Sowell, in his 1993 study titled Inside American Education, reports on an international study that asked 13 - year olds if they were good at mathematics. Only 23 percent of the Koreans claimed to be good at math with fully 68 percent of the Americans affirming their own competence in math. Nevertheless, in actual achievement, the Koreans ranked first, while their American counterparts came in last in international comparison.

Sowell concludes that “it is not merely that Johnny can’t read, or even that Johnny can’t think. *Johnny doesn’t know what thinking is*, because thinking is often confused with feeling in many public schools. . . . The net result, as in mathematics, is that many students are *confident incompetents*, whether discussing social issues, world events or other subjects” (1993, p-4-5).

Of late, some conservative leaders have been promoting government vouchers as a way both to shore up the shaky financial base of private schools and to foster educational excellence in

government schools. Their rationale is that the ensuing competition for student-voucher dollars will be an effective tool for needed reform. Educational administrators will get the message. It is arguable as we shall see that reliance on the market place to drive educational reform is a strategy intrinsically flawed and, therefore, doomed to fail.

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And, voucher programs raise questions about the viability of private schools as *private* schools. Despite envisioned guarantees of institutional independence, the likely outcome of such a program would be a new tier of government schools; *public-private schools*, if you will. Such schools would no longer be truly private. In educational funding, *he who pays the piper ultimately calls the tune*.

Let me suggest that we have reached a theoretical impasse in our approach to educational reform. Business enterprises and ministries such as education operate in fundamentally different arenas of human action. Any business venture requires development of a *cost-efficient routine* designed to make a profit. A business man - say a grocer - must not confuse a ministry - say of feeding disaster victims - with the business of *selling* groceries. Such a mixing of business and ministry will quickly bankrupt grocers. Bureaucratic business routine incorporates a hierarchy of impersonal, secondary relationships that are governed by the rational, profit-loss norms of the market place.

Education ministries, however, are built on personal, primary relationships and must be ever ready to address ad hoc needs of their students and constituents. Thus, a business model which evokes a cost-efficient routine is always counterproductive in a school setting. The teacher's primary concern should be with the effectiveness of instruction. *Did the student really learn something? Did the lights go on?* After all, students are not widgets and schools are not widget factories.

Accordingly, a teacher is well-advised to avoid the seduction of routine at all costs. Douglas Wilson, a leader in the Classical School Movement, warns against routine in his monograph titled Recovering The Lost Tools of Learning. Wilson observes that there is hypocrisy in "requiring students to learn what obviously bores the teacher. It is the hypocrisy born of routine. The student reasons to himself 'Why should I learn this? So I can be bored too?'" (1991, p - 79).

An effective teacher is a *player-coach*, as it were, still personally engaged as a student of his or her academic discipline. But there is more than academics involved in classroom interaction. The teacher is being carefully scrutinized by students as a role model. This is as true at the university level as it is in elementary and secondary classrooms. As G. K. Chesterton reminds us in The Man Who Was Orthodox, "Education is implication. It is not the things you say which children respect; when you say things they very commonly laugh and do the opposite. It is the things you assume that really sink into them. It is the things you forget to teach that they learn" (1963, p - 96).

Educational reform needed to foster critical learning skills must begin with a teacher interacting with a class. This is where the rubber meets the road. Each class is an educational institution in microcosm. It consists basically of two roles, that of student and teacher. Class interaction is ordered and structured by the norms governing these respective roles. Student sub-cultures limit

what can be accomplished in a classroom, and at times are directly opposed to instruction.

High I.Q. students in inner-city schools are negatively sanctioned by their peers *not to excel* in the classroom. Still more telling are the gargantuan demands of TV and the Internet upon family time in America. Norms and folkways that formerly supported instruction in reading, writing and math have been shouldered aside by our society's obsession with electronic media. As a result, many high school graduates are simply unprepared for college. Colleges and Universities have resorted to remedial measures. At William Carey we have a university-wide English proficiency test.

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Now, let me encourage you to peruse Jenkin Lloyd-Jones's humorous account of a personal odyssey, which is available today. He asks, rhetorically, "Can seeing drive out thinking?" after five mind-numbing days of surgery-induced TV immersion in greater Los Angeles (L.A. Times, Sept. 1978). *Can seeing drive out thinking?* That is a good question.

Well recently, the media's impact upon thinking has been examined by Ball State professor Bob Papper. But, the results of his Middletown Media Studies II were inconclusive. But, one thing is sure, Lloyd-Jones' solution - pushing the off-button - is not a viable option for those involved in education at all levels. We are rushing pell-mell, post haste up the on-ramp onto the *information highway* into cyberspace. Electronic publishing and digitized class lectures open up rosy vistas of distance learning in a society dominated by routinized education.

Nevertheless, we would be well-advised to consider carefully the possibility of "pot holes" ahead. Douglas Groothuis in his reader-friendly, Soul in Cyberspace (1997) provides a helpful profile of the potential and the pitfalls of the Internet. He describes how the Internet facilitated his writing. Still, he reminds us that "the most powerful Internet search engine on the planet will not download wisdom into the human soul" (p-87). He further cautions against *virtual classrooms* because "the interpersonal dynamic is either lost or diminished" (p-151).

Many applications of computerized technology to education are rushed to the "cutting edge." We will do well to remember the "cutting edge" is also the "bleeding edge." So, we had better be prepared to underwrite development costs to debug the latest, *state-of-the-art* technology we seek to implement. Meanwhile, we must also avoid the trailing edge of obsolete, unworkable computer operating systems.

Moreover, the problem of data loss through corrupted electronic files still remains not to mention concerns about breaches of privacy and security. Further, we must come to terms with the fluid, "authorless," nature of textual information that inundates the *information highway*. This is very evident in Wikipedia's endlessly edited articles. And, let us not forget a plethora of e-mails with a vivid, *undocumented* story from an *unknown* sender *somewhere* who just swears it is true.

William Carey University has a fine library with a dedicated staff, capably headed up by Patricia Furr, whose interest in books is infectious. Let me urge my colleagues to utilize this excellent facility to enhance the outstanding learning environment we have on campus at William Carey

University. Let us challenge every student to READ, READ, READ and to WRITE.

In this way, we will be mobilized to resist routinization of education at this campus. And, our students will be emboldened to think outside the confines of stultifying political correctness. During our brief oversight of America's future leaders, let us with Kipling, "fill the unforgiving minute with sixty seconds' worth of distance run." *Better yet*, heeding Paul's counsel to the Ephesians, let us work to redeem the time, "because the days are evil." *So. .*, its time to get to work! Thanks again for coming.

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