

Tragedy, absurdity

by Dr. James Harding
(from The Varsity)

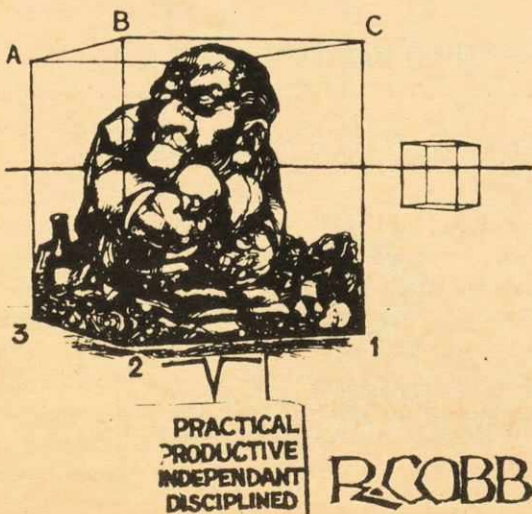
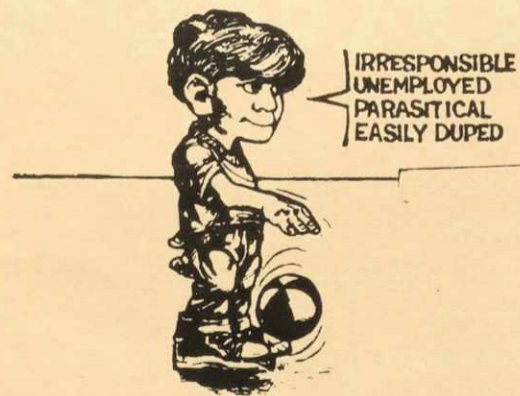
When a teacher acts in a traditional authoritarian way (e.g. giving standard assignments, essay topics and exams; scheduling "course content"; making rigid deadlines; pre-determining texts, etc.), he or she is creating a milieu having the main effect of stereotyping the behavior and experience of students (and teachers). And the stereotyping of human experience is one of the most effective means of controlling human behaviour, and of establishing a viable authoritarian scheme.

In an authoritarian setting meaning does not come from individualized experience, since such experience is abolished. Individual acts (not to be confused with the ideology of "individualism") and encounters among those acting upon each other are required for ideas to develop. Words and ideas are not the same. Words are needed to communicate ideas, but words can also be conditioned and uttered in such a way that no ideas are communicated. Thus with the destruction of individualized acts goes the destruction of ideas.

It is becoming common for conditioning terminology, extrapolated from behavioristic psychology, to be used to justify authoritarian education. This contradicts some of the actual findings about the effects of rewards and punishments on learning; but, being rationalizations, anything goes. Behaviorism is useful to authoritarian education since it ignores human experience, and the relation of much behaviour to the meaning of experience in a social situation. Appearances and observables are the basis of behaviorist theory building, and consequences are evaluated within this narrow-view of humans.

The tragedy is the tautology in the situation. Authoritarian environments (stereotyped seating, centralized technology, etc.) and authoritarian teaching create a behavioristic student who behaves so as to fit into the behavioristic models used to rationalize such approaches. However, a tautology is not an adequate description or explanation of behaviour. Experimentation is required to understand how means and consequences are related; and how alternative means have different consequences. Such experimentation with authoritarian conditions is not possible, by definition of the use of authoritarian means and reliance on authoritarian motives for learning. Experimentation would subvert the very system.

Words are learned. Ideas are destroyed. Persons become objects, and any experience that conflicts with this process is either dissociated, or turned inward as self-hatred. The word "love" will still be used. But the frightened eyes — which rarely meet — are the reality of authoritarianism in the classroom.



and joy in the classroom

REPRESSIVE TOLERANCE

For every authoritarian in our society, there are several good liberals. In the corporate society, authority is not used in a blatant way (unless it is challenged, that is). To keep people consuming, competing and sufficiently mobile to fill new and changing corporate slots, there must be freedoms from blatant authority.

These are the liberal freedoms associated with the period of free competition and private enterprise (combined as "free enterprise" to serve an ideological function in early capitalism). They are freedoms from the appearance of direct uses of authority. They are not freedoms to act creatively so as to evolve new social relationships within which new human experience, behaviour and meaning can occur. Liberal freedoms function to integrate the corporate institutions that have grown out of the productive and marketing systems of state (or neo) capitalism.



These liberal freedoms are exposed as repressive tolerance once the reality of arbitrary and undemocratic decision-making is recognized. And repressive tolerance (liberal freedoms) in the classroom are becoming the fad as education is expropriated for corporate purposes. With the corporatization (not communization or socialization) of education comes a new form of authoritarianism.

Indirect and subtle uses of undemocratic authority are deceptive. In such a setting, say a tutorial, both teacher and student can come to believe that they are in dialogue, that they are equals as people, and that a new and revolutionary kind of learning is occurring. And these myths are viable as long as students and teachers perceive what happens solely in terms of appearances. Lectures are minimized or sometimes abolished. Opinion is tolerated. Tangents on "subject matter" are even encouraged. "Free at last. Free at last."

But what are the forces acting on both teachers and students? The administrative bureaucracy goes on. It becomes more rationalized and autonomous each day. The calendar, the curricula, the departmentalization, the hierarchy and ranking, become more and more sophisticated. The bureaucracy becomes more and more unrelated, and in contradiction to the autonomy of both academics and students. The criteria of the bureaucracy, which abstracts and reduces the quality and meaning of experience into quantity, becomes more and more a replica of corporate organization and management.

The tolerance involved does not reflect greater autonomy of student and teacher to learn experimentally. It is a snow job. Instead of "you have to do it, or else," you get "it's in your best interest." More common now is "we're all in this together" which results from the co-management tactics used to cloak arbitrary controls over education. No matter what form the repressive tolerance takes, the underlying authoritarian reality remains. It is not that greater freedom exists to do things. It is rather that teachers have become more fully integrated into the bureaucratic forms — they are more bureaucrat than educator in most cases — and thus no meaningful education to contrast sharply with the bureaucratic perversion of learning exists. A good teacher is

restricted as much by a co-management institution with its repressive tolerance, as by a more traditionally authoritarian one. The grading bureaucracy shows the absurdity of repressive tolerance more than anything.

For those (whether teacher or student) with institutionalized and role identities, human encounter is often perceived as terror. The sexual dynamics that can begin to flower within repressive tolerance frighten many. "Education" is thus stereotyped as absolutely different than "therapy," and the avoidance of human encounter is rationalized.

Most teachers don't have the skills or concepts to even begin to help students (or themselves) make sense out of this process. Their heads have been conditioned to specialized languages which exclude an understanding of classroom experience and behaviour. They themselves are split: their training and roles keep their minds abstracted from the realities (including their own experience) in the classroom. Often they "put down" any behaviour that contradicts their own world-view. They are probably not even aware of their world-view. If so, they are rotten teachers.

Those teachers that don't regress may naively go on acting within the precepts of liberal freedom. They may believe that no institution affects them, or that the effect is unimportant for their teaching. In fact, their relationship with students, whatever its form, is dependent on the bureaucratic organization of rooms and courses, and the grading system, will enter into it at some point. This is not unimportant since it reflects the lack of control over approaches, content and methods of evaluation in the class.

REVOLUTION AND JOY IN THE CLASSROOM

When a student is realizing the absurdity of grades, he or she often has nothing with which to replace motivation based on authoritarian learning. And it is common for students caught in this ambiguity to begin to go through the motions (turning in papers) without any involvement whatsoever. Some believe that they are "having their cake and eating it too"! But it's not their cake. When this happens, it is necessary to challenge students with intellectual values; to challenge the student to engage in learning outside of the bureaucratic norms.



This does not mean dropping out. The bureaucracy is viable as long as those who recognize its absurdity simply drop out. What is necessary is the creation of counter values — intellectual ones to counter bureaucratic ones — in the midst of the university. Otherwise the institution is not challenged. Again this comes down to one's commitments. A commitment to learning, and to obtaining the freedom and control required is a commitment to changing the institution.

"Individualism" is what stands in the way of developing these real commitments. Because they have to students can often continue functioning —

(cont'd. on p. 12)