

Towards relevancy in education

by Jim Miller

If we take it as a given, and I do, that both educator and student are sincere about the exchange of information today, it must be asked why our system of education is often ineffective to the point of evoking cynicism.

*Well we're waiting here in Allentown
For the Pennsylvania we never found
For the promises our teachers gave
If we worked hard, if we behaved*

*So our graduations hang on the wall
But they never really helped us at all
No they never taught us what was real
Iron and coke, chromium steel*

And we're waiting here in Allentown

Billy Joel

Cynicism about our educational system exists, as Joel so eloquently points out, because a gap exists between what education proposes to do and what it delivers. The cynicism is compounded by the fact that of all our institutions, the one dedicated to the premise that knowledge

would require that I have impressive credentials. An expertise in all aspects of educational research- psychology, philosophy, foundations, and curricula would certainly be necessary. As well, I would need a thorough grasp of all disciplines of investigation current today.

Well let me now list my credentials. I am your average human being. I can remember a seven digit phone number for several minutes if I'm not distracted. I forget most of what I have read in a few months; detail beyond my comprehension frightens me. My attention span is extremely short, especially when I am not interested; and I'm always looking for simple solutions.

I won't bore you with a list of my degrees because after 14 years I'm still working on my first.

Yet I must stand up and say that our educational system has grave problems.

But surely it must be hybris for me to suggest that education's problems can be solved?

Well bare in mind that we all have brains the effective limits of which have not yet been discovered. Bare in mind as

Damn right I do!

And my point is that our educational system should be able to claim the same.

At this point I'm going to argue that there are several other basic givens to existence and any system that proposes to educate.

Basic, is the concept that we can gain knowledge that we did not have previously. An example would be the germ theory of disease which was thought nonsense until it was proven that bacteria could cause illness.

Once 'new' knowledge is discovered it can be used. In the case of bacteria, knowledge of their behavior can be used for germ warfare or preventing disease.

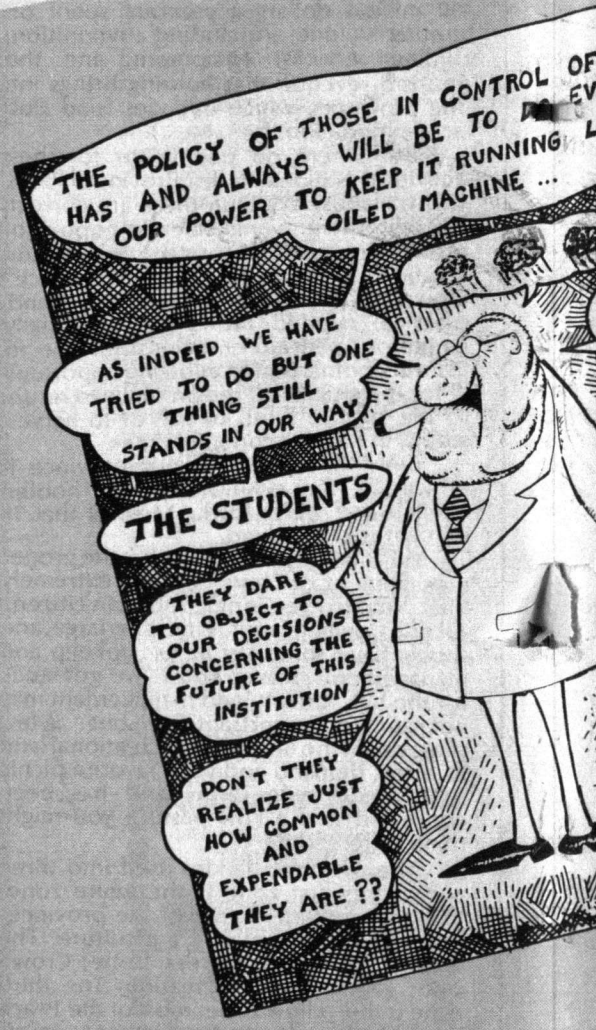
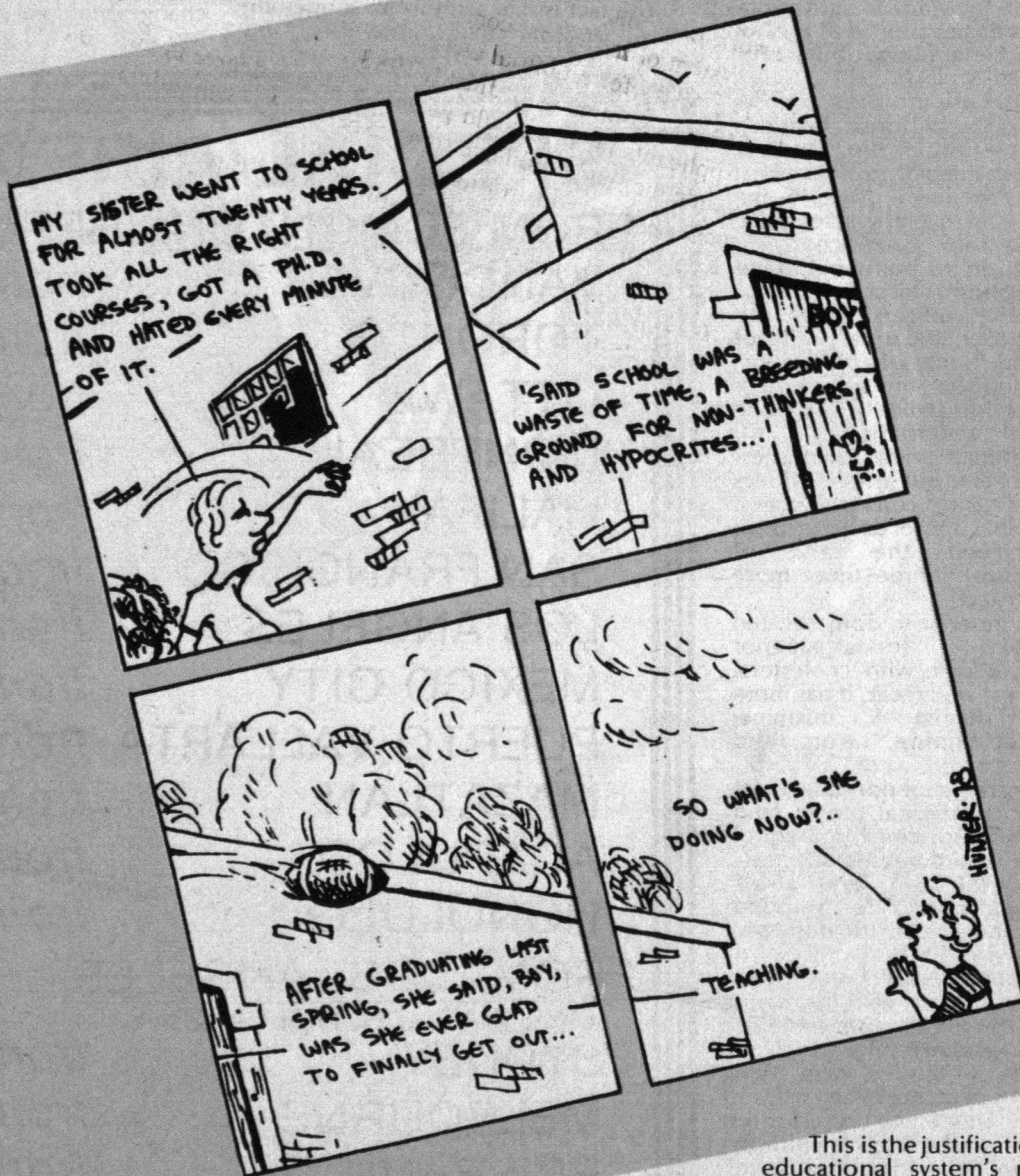
Knowledge may, at times, seem irrelevant. It might be argued that knowing that abaxial and adaxial are the two sides of a leaf will not help you read a road map, or cut down a tree for that matter.

To summarize, what I am saying is that we have the ability to explore our environment and gain relevant knowledge that allows us to manipulate it. The less of this knowledge we have the more we seem at the environment's mercy.

tion of the knower, that he is the best judge of what is important to learn. The student, on the other hand, instinctively feels that her education belongs to her and she is the best judge of what is useful.

A polarization of this struggle for power and authority is rampant in education today. The educational system seeks to maintain its authority, and perhaps justifiably some standards, by setting up curricula, levels of achievement, requisites and prerequisites; and systems of evaluation.

Students respond in a variety of ways to a system that places itself in a position of dominance without being able to completely deliver. Many openly question authority, relevance and course parameters and assignments. Others do all that is asked but develop an attitude of hurdle jumping instead of genuine investigation. Still others approach their work with an open mind and learn what they can. Sadly, far too many remove themselves from the system without quite knowing why.



and awareness brings power and ability, should, at times, seem so impotent.

Identifying the gap in education, the space between what is real (useful), and what is not real (and therefore not useful) is our ultimate learning challenge.

Such an investigation appears and awesome task. To be taken seriously in advancing an answer to this question

well, that all of us are functioning at about 10 per cent of our potential.

Let me remind you that our educational system is based on a premise that the student has the ability to learn whatever is being taught. If not why teach it?

Somewhat justified, can I really claim that I have satisfied myself on what is real and valid in learning and what is not? And moreover, claim that such an understanding is readily available to all who can think?

This is the justification for our present educational system's research into all aspects of life. Education strives to bring us to an awareness of those areas in which we are ignorant so we can be more effective.

A problem seems to exist, however, in that the number of things we can learn seems limitless while our capacities to handle vast amounts of information are decidedly the opposite. Since knowledge seems to have or not to have relevance, the question becomes one of what to learn.

I would say that it is this aspect of learning which brings about most conflict between educator and student. The educator feels, in representing the posi-

But for virtually all these individuals the question remains, "Why doesn't my education make me more completely effective in all that I do?"

The whole problem rests with the question of relevance. By relevance I mean knowledge that is applicable and useful. The difficulty is, neither student nor educator can predict when particular knowledge will be useful. Why? Because knowledge itself can be relevant or irrelevant depending upon circumstance. In other words there are times when it might be more important to know the two surfaces of a leaf as opposed to a knowledge of road maps (a biology exam would probably be the best example).

Earlier I stated that the knowledge of what was real (useful) could be had by anyone and was readily accessible. Now, I seem to be implying that the reality (usefulness) of knowledge is circumstan-