

ANALYSIS

Bloom's County:

The closing of the academic mind

By ALLAN MENZIES

During six years as a TA at this university, I incessantly heard professors and fellow TA's express their frustration that the quality of "higher" education is suffering badly in the 80's. The responsibility for this is usually directed towards the career-orientation, lethargy, or moral indifference of the students, or the primary and secondary systems that are producing these students.

Yet, I'll never forget a discussion I had with a former student regarding the morality of plagiarism. When pressed, this fellow named Sid confessed that he had planned on submitting to me an essay written by his sister, who had taken the course previously. Sid further confessed that he would be graduating in two months, and in the three years of his attending York he had never written an essay himself!

Sid personifies the failure of modern "higher" education. Obviously Sid was not solely at fault. To a considerable extent, he was manifesting what cocktail conversations refer to as a "self-fulfilling prophesy," as well as "learning how to play the game." The possibility of a student receiving his BA without ever having written a paper is a terribly sad indictment of this institution, and is very suggestive of its "rules of the game."

Obviously, it is the serious student who suffers. Those who sincerely work for their degree can hardly take pride in their accomplishments when students like Sid can literally buy, borrow and steal their degrees. (Interestingly, the only standing job offer I've received in seven years of graduate school is as a black-market essay writer; the business is flourishing and the money is good.) Meanwhile, students like Sid suffer as well because they stand a good chance of never experiencing the joy of learning at all. While this sounds silly and idyllic, I should add that after the school year had ended, Sid phoned me and thanked me for forcing him to taste a little of the intrinsic satisfaction of learning. He claimed that the C he received by his own hand was more important to him than all the A's he paid a hundred or so bucks for each, and all the B's he got with borrowed papers.

As it's rolling along now, the system frustrates any hope for sincere

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and enthusiastic learning . . . and teaching. Students must sit through droning lectures by professors who have been delivering the same old words from their holy books of prepared notes for three, four and even ten years. This is not entirely the fault of the professors. Again, the problem is largely systemic because the professors' highest priority is research and publishing, as demanded by their concern for job security. Such pressure is particularly acute here where there is a concerted and increasingly successful attempt to place York on the academic map. The students' actual education assumes secondary importance due to considerable demands for the professors' attentions elsewhere, and hence the same dry lectures and depersonalization year after year. Meanwhile the TAs are (not unjustifiably) too involved in charting their 10 hours of work a week to be able to pick up the slack. It must be remembered that the TA's are students themselves, scratching and clawing for their education, and this strict budgeting of time is more a necessity than a reflection of laziness.

According to Allan Bloom, the modern university in general faces a crisis of gigantic proportions; this is not a situation that is just peculiar to York. And if we are to take Bloom literally, this crisis has probably delivered the modern university to a point beyond redemption. Bloom concludes in *The Closing of the American Mind*: "It is difficult to imagine that there is either the wherewithal or the energy within the university to constitute or reconstitute the idea of an educated human being and establish a liberal education again." These are damning words indeed, although I suspect that Bloom is more optimistic than the statement would suggest. Otherwise Bloom could not have written this book in the first place. While one might point out that the commodity value of one's CV is simultaneously fattened by a best-seller, Bloom simply demonstrates too much passion for and commitment to the ideal of education to justify such cynicism regarding his motivations and conclusions. On the contrary, Bloom's book inspires us to imagine the possibilities for a challenging and vital educational experience.

Bloom is an anachronism whose sentiments take us back to the university atmosphere of the '50s, if not the intellectual atmosphere of Athens during the time of Plato and Aristotle. At the risk of being dismissed as a "burned-out beatnik," Bloom provides a serious intellectual challenge to the North American conscience that has been conditioned by liberal democratic ideas and platitudes. Bloom resurrects the ideal of a moral education as forwarded by such classic theorists as Plato and Rousseau and is one of the more persuasive statements in this direction since Ortega's *Revolt of the Masses*, or more recently, Eazy Friedenberg's *The Disposal of Liberty and Other Industrial Wastes*.

This is to say that Bloom is asserting a position that is most disagreeable to liberal democratic sensitivity. Bloom identifies the crisis of our era as proceeding especially from the relativization of moral values as effected by liberal democracy, the failure of the family to provide a moral education, and more important to Bloom's concerns, the failure of the educational system to provide a moral education. In the latter case,

the problem is accentuated by a dominant trend towards specialization and differentiation.

Words such as "reactionary" and "conservative" would seem to apply to Bloom's idea of education, and his reaction is an appeal for a kind of intellectual elitism. Like Ortega and Friedenberg, Bloom disdains the democratization of "higher" education, and sees the intellectual community as no richer or poorer than the uneducated masses as far as general knowledge and wisdom is concerned. "When the dust settled, it could be seen that the very distinction between educated and uneducated had been leveled, that even the pitiful remnant of it expressed in the opposition between highbrow and lowbrow had been annihilated." (p. 319). Sid convinced me that the distinction between educated and uneducated was a spurious one at best.

There is much to disagree with in *The Closing of the American Mind* including, for many, the very contemplation of ideals and universals. But Bloom does not want

us to agree with him. He wants us to react and to think. We can all find points of vulnerability in Bloom's argument. Nevertheless, Bloom's primary intent is to evoke reaction and this he most certainly accomplishes. There is plenty to annoy and taunt everyone here. Any specific weaknesses like an inadequate attention to Freud or Marx, for example, are unimportant if we truly allow ourselves to appreciate in broader perspective Bloom's intention—to stimulate dialogue by raising the questions regarding the nature of things. The importance of *The Closing of the American Mind* resides not in any solutions it offers, because it really offers none, but in the questions it raises. "The questions . . . need to be addressed continually and seriously for liberal learning to exist; for it does not consist so much in answers as in the permanent dialogue."

It is this emphasis on dialogue that makes the possibility of a real education, as Bloom urges, so attractive and vital. Without veritable dialogue, education is inevitably reduced to an authoritarian imposition of one's will and whim upon others. With the invocation of open dialogue, the potential for a moral education could deliver us to a realization of mutual respect for alternate ideas and experiences; this is a mutual respect that the relativization of morality characteristic of modern liberal democracy has failed to nurture, according to Bloom.

In addition to dialogue, Bloom recognizes the significance of enthusiasm and commitment as absolutely essential ingredients of teaching as well as learning. Which brings me back to my initial thoughts as they pertain to Sid. While we can make token, short-range overtures to the problem of plagiarism, there is simply no replacement for passionate commitment to the educational process on the part of the teachers that could capture the imaginations of the Sids from the outset, not to mention the imaginations of the more serious students.

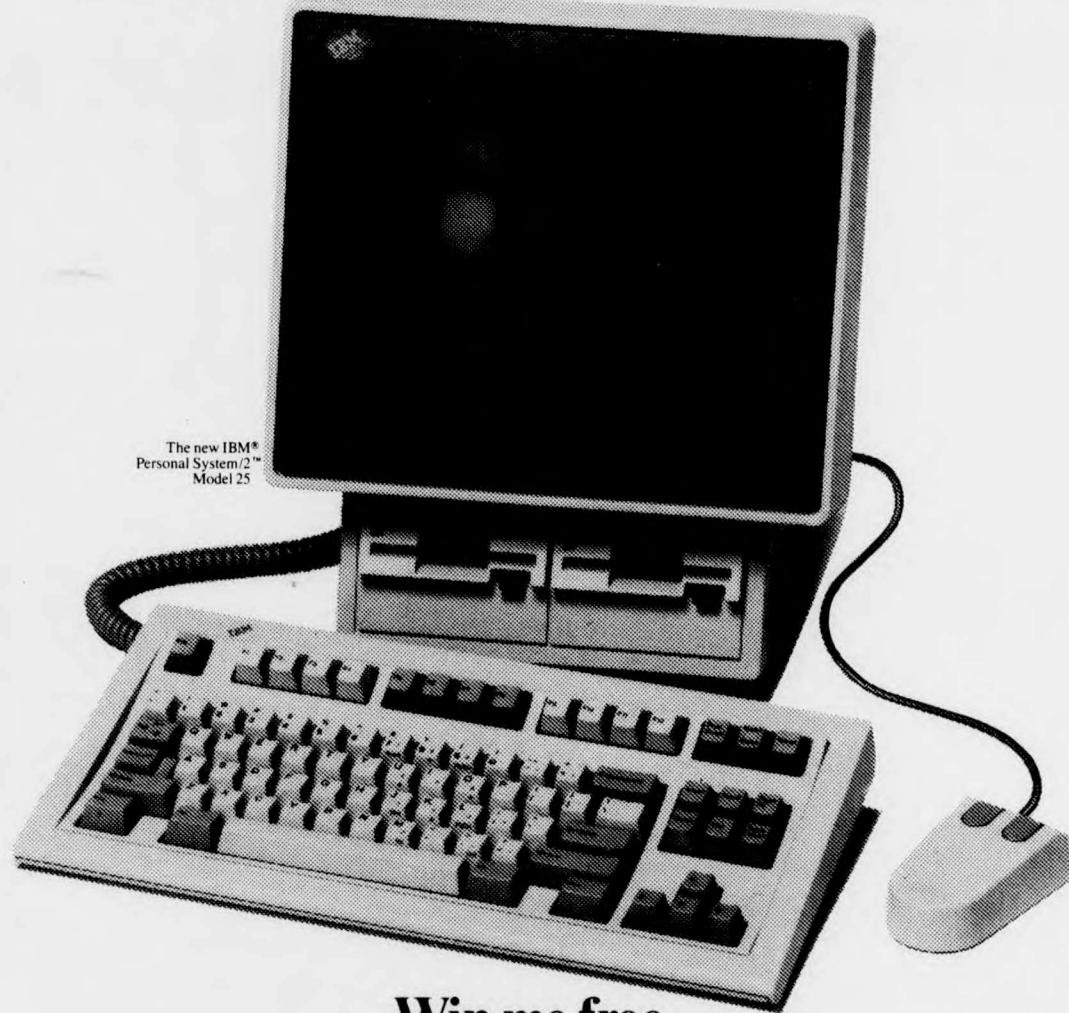
It is highly unlikely that the issues posed by Bloom will voluntarily be responded to honestly by our educa-

tors. I suspect that there will be too much insecurity and resentment felt by the academic community towards Bloom to take the book very seriously. This is because Bloom demands a complete overhaul of the

system and our ways of thinking, and such radicalism stirs up dissonance and insecurity.

Education can be exciting, vital, meaningful and challenging, even to the Sids of the world. A reading of *The Closing of the American Mind* will reveal just how much the student of today is being short-changed and deprived of the true joy of learning. This book is a potentially subversive and powerful weapon in the hands of students who are disillusioned and bored with the present scheme of things and who want value for, in most cases, their hard-earned dollar. I urge any student who may feel frustration with the present impoverished university environment to read this book, and then demand that the intellectual establishment respond to YOUR questions. Initiate a dialogue and find out just how rewarding education can be. At the same time, you'll be doing many educators a favour by rekindling their forgotten passion for the Socratic ideal of teaching which probably led them into the profession in the first place.

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