

A junior faculty member discusses education and how it has corrupted the learning process

Keith Mills is in his second year of teaching at York. His classification is administrative studies, with urban economics mixed in. He's been through the process of 'education' and now has become an 'educator'. This is his comment on where it failed him and is failing you.

by Keith Mills

In my student days I frequently fell into barroom arguments with an unlettered garbageman who used to insist that although "book

learnin'" had its place you really couldn't get along without the common sense derived from paying your tuition at the "School of Hard Knocks."

After some years of reflection, I have come to the conclusion that the school of hard knocks is to be found inside the university rather than outside. As a prelude to living in a high-pressure society, the university puts its inmates through a series of manufactured crises in the form of examinations, requirements and deadlines. That these crises have very little

to do with the business of learning is something most of us have now come to realize. The system is rather one of screening applicants for society. The successful hurdlers are those who can be consistently counted upon to respond appropriately to crisis. Grades are measured of the appropriateness of one's responses; a degree is a certificate of one's consistency.

Survival training

The crisis approach to education is not without its utility. Dr. Hans Selye, the Montreal physician who has done considerable research on the effects of stress on humans and other animals has found that the ability to survive extreme stress can be increased by gradual conditioning. In the same way monarchs once took small daily doses of arsenic to render themselves immune to would-be poisoners.

During the current inquiry into the Pueblo affair U.S. Navy Communications Technician Don E. Bailey, a sixteen-year veteran of the armed forces, testified that he was able to endure many of the hardships imposed by his North Korean captors because he had undergone special "survival-evasion-resistance-and-escape" training which had included one week's experience in a simulated prisoner-of-war camp under extreme physical and mental stress. Petty Officer Bailey who was one of only two Pueblo crewmen who had

Not is is undeniable that some kind of stress conditioning is prob-

ably most useful preparation for life in contemporary North American society. But in the university, we are not preparing people for warfare and so there is some question in my mind whether the university is the proper place for such conditioning. Surely the Boy Scouts or the Marines are better equipped for that.

Psych out the prof

The system of grades and competition together with the fear of failure (and in today's world failure is not an F grade but usually anything below a B — the day of the gentleman's C died with Joe College) has thoroughly corrupted the learning process. Students' greatest intellectual efforts are bent towards "psyching out" the prof (God, how I hate the word prof.) rather than learning something that will be useful beyond the final examination. There is no time to read a book or just enjoy when the examinations loom.

One of the most literate men I know, one of my former "profs", spent his first two years of college reading novels, and managed thereby to thoroughly flunk out. (He later went to another school and made it.) But as a result of that "flunkout two years" he acquired a fluency with English prose that makes him one of the few economists whose writing and lecturing do not put me to sleep.

By forcing one group (students) to compete amongst themselves for the favors of the other group (profs) the system precludes the possibility of any widespread or sustained interaction between members of these two groups based upon anything but calculated mendacity.

As a member of the group whose favors the system forces members of the other group to seek, I must discount friendly gestures, complimentary remarks, indications of interest in my courses, my ideas, my jokes, (my self, even) as — to some extent — a form of apple polishing.

Usually I repress such notions and accept student friendship at face value, for the other way lies paranoia. Those among my colleagues who prefer to avoid contact with students on any but the most "correct" and professional level do so, I'm sure out of a friendly, respectful demeanor which masks the true face of hatred, fear, or contempt.

The education gap

This also works in reverse. As a student, I remember students (myself included) who were so afraid of being thought a brown-nose by other students, that they would seldom seek out a teacher or a prof for counsel, except under the most formal and institutionally-sanctioned circumstances, and

would practically never do so out of interest in the course. I remember one prof whose course I particularly enjoyed but I was afraid to tell him so until two years after I had completed it, and he was leaving the institution. When, in other words, I was sure it would do me no good to tell him so.

A former colleague once told me that he never accepted social invitations from any but "A" students, for fear that relaxing the social distance between himself and lesser beings would compromise the integrity of his objective judgement, and thereby subvert the grading system.

Is there anything so degrading as grovelling? That's part of the system. Of course, as in the case of Pooh-Bah, the grovel can become a fine tool in the hands of a skilled groveller. Over the year, I have become somewhat a connoisseur of grovellers, and plan someday to write a paper on the subject. I find, for example, that Canadian men students are less skillful grovellers than their American counterparts. This is surely the result of natural selection, the poorer American grovellers having done their final grovel face down in a rice paddy.

The Bakan Plan

Professor David Bakan's PLAN FOR A COLLEGE separates the process of learning from the atmosphere of crisis, competition, mendacity, failure, and grovelling, and allows learning to grow naturally from curiosity interest and an honest, fruitful relationship between student and teacher. The plan is based on the assumption that students know, or are capable of at least discovering for themselves what it is they wish (or need) to learn, and, knowing that, need not be coerced to study. It goes without saying that such a plan is most liberating for students. For teachers it is equally so.

Present day educational institutions are founded upon exactly the opposite premise as the Bakan plan: that is, they assume that students do not know what it is they need to know and must therefore have a curriculum outlined for them which they must be compelled to follow. It is in the implementation of the system founded upon this premise that gives educational institutions today their authoritarian character.

The Bakan plan has authority without being authoritarian: that is, it maintains the authority of knowledge and competence without the garnish of arbitrary rules which are fundamentally relevant to the real business of learning.

And the business of learning is what universities are all about. Those who are not dedicated to it should clear out.

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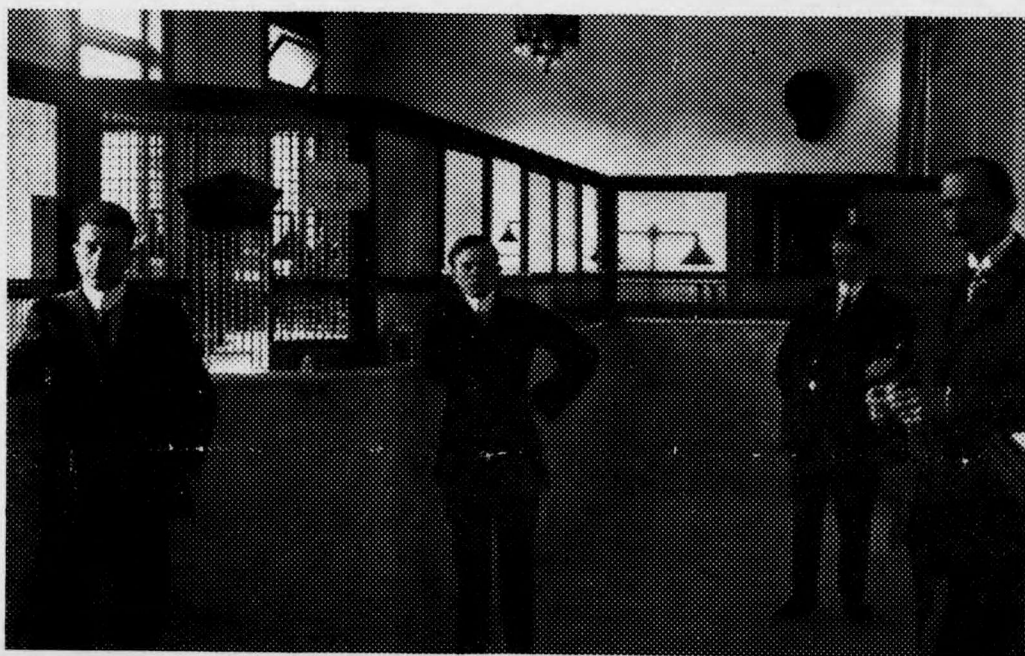
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