

Do you know what you're learning?

by Cathy McDonald

"Students should start thinking about what they are studying" is the thrust of a conference being held at Dalhousie on May 29-30. The Atlantic Canadian Student Pugwash conference will pose ethical questions on a range of controversial topics that stem from scientific discovery.

Science students rarely have to make decisions about what they do, according to Caroline Zayid, the conference organizer. The first-time conference hopes to involve students and also the Halifax public into discussions on the implications of scientific research for society.

Ethical questions concerning nuclear weapons research is a major conference topic, Zayid said. The Law of the Sea and the politics of using our oceans for military purposes comprises a second session. Speakers will discuss intelligence testing, pre-natal screening and therapeutic abortions in a session entitled 'Bioethics'.

Keynote speaker Dr. Frank Sommers is a teaching physician at the University of Toronto, and the head of the Canadian section of Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR). Sommers will talk about the possible effect of a nuclear attack on Halifax.

A probable participant in this session will be the Canadian Ambassador for Disarmament, Arthur Menzies, Zayid said.

Dr. David Roy, a geneticist from the Centre of Bioethics in Montreal, will be speaking on the issue of racial comparisons through intelligence tests. The validity of such tests has come under fire in the United States where they have been used to "prove" that blacks are less intelligent than whites.

A professor from Dalhousie's department of Psychology will explain the workings of intelligence tests and discuss their validity.

Halifax is a logical place to discuss military uses of the sea, Zayid said, as both Dalhousie scientists and military personnel are furthering Canadian strategic goals here.

The Pugwash movement, founded by Bertrand Russell and Albert Einstein at a conference in the small Nova Scotia town of Pugwash in 1957, aims to foster debate on the sources of international conflicts and the responsibilities of scientists in society.

Zayid said increasing public debate and attention has had effect on scientific research. She gave the example where scientists, worried about the implications of recombinant

DNA, had therefore stopped research in this area for a few years. It had become feasible for a gene to be inserted in a virus and grow, and scientists feared the possibility of a can-

cerous gene spreading all over the place.

A self-imposed moratorium on research was useful, Zayid said, in that it allowed a few

years for people to learn about the discovery and feel more comfortable with it. "The onus should be on scientists to take the responsibility" for recognizing potentially harmful effects of their research, she stated.

Canadian Student Pugwash was created in the fall of 1979 as a spin-off of the first student Pugwash conference held in San Diego earlier that year. In addition to the Atlantic conference, seminars are being held across the country.

Zayid said that as of yet, only a few students have filled out applications for the conference. Accommodations for out-of-town students and meals will be provided. There may be a small fee, if any, for the weekend, and interested students can pick up application forms at the student union offices, in the Student Union Building.

Student coordinators from across Canada will be meeting in the near future, to discuss the future of the organization. Canadian Student Pugwash hopes to establish a network of young social and natural scientists who are concerned about the ethical issues relevant to their work; to promote discussion and exchange of information and ideas between student and established scientists; and to encourage scientists outside the organization to discuss the ethical implications of their work.

Extracts from the Russell-Einstein Manifesto issued in London, July 9th 1955

In the tragic situation which confronts humanity, we feel that scientists should assemble in conference to appraise the perils that have arisen as a result of the development of weapons of mass destruction...

We have to learn to think in a new way. We have to learn to ask ourselves, not what steps can be taken to give military victory to whatever group we prefer, for there no longer are such steps; the question we have to ask ourselves is this: what steps can be taken to prevent a military contest of which the issue must be disastrous to all parties?...

No doubt in an H-bomb war great cities would be obliterated. But this is one of the minor disasters that would have to be faced. If everybody in London, New York and Moscow were exterminated, the world might, in the course of a few centuries, recover from the blow. But we now know, especially since the Bikini test, that nuclear bombs can gradually spread destruction over a very much wider area than had been supposed...

No one knows how widely such lethal radioactive particles might be diffused, but the best authorities are unanimous in saying that a war with H-bombs might possibly put an end to the human race. It is feared that if many H-bombs are used there will be universal death - sudden only for a minority, but for the majority a slow torture of disease and disintegration...

Here, then, is the problem which we present to you, stark and dreadful and inescapable: Shall we put an end to the human race; or shall mankind renounce war? People will not face this alternative because it is so difficult to abolish war...

There lies before us, if we choose, continual progress in happiness, knowledge, and wisdom. Shall we, instead, choose death, because we cannot forget our quarrels? We appeal, as human beings, to human beings: Remember your humanity, and forget the rest. If you can do so, the way lies open to a new Paradise; if you cannot, there lies before you the risk of universal death.

gingers

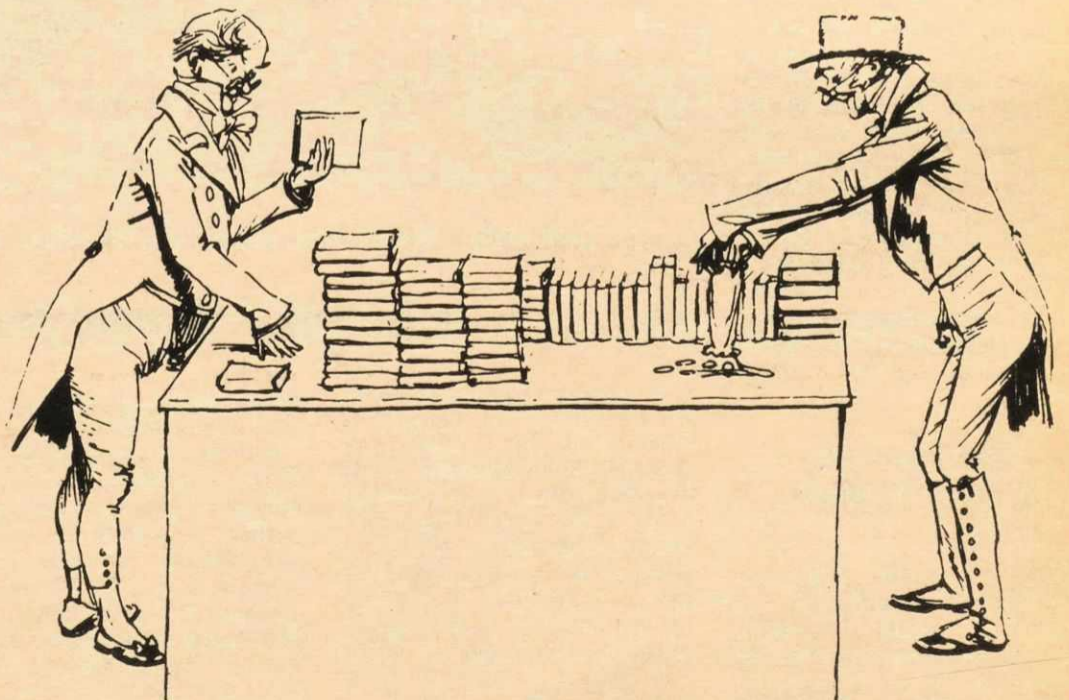
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