

The North American Attitude

Some young people seem to think that, as Walt Disney's grasshopper so clearly expressed it, "the world owes me a livin' ". This infuriates me. Now this fury may merely be the result of advancing age or softening of the brain; in any case I would hope that this attitude is uncommon among Dalhousie students. But it exists, if not in its more vicious form, at least in the milder form of lack of appreciation for conditions as they are in twentieth century Canada. Such an attitude could only have arisen in a wealthy society that sets a high value on material things, such as we have in North America. The son of the Chinese coolie and the son of the Indian peasant know through firsthand experience that "in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou earn bread". But in a complex society like our own, where childhood is prolonged and for the most part sheltered, simple economic facts are hard to discern and easy living appears the natural state of men. Our movies, our popular novels and magazine stories and our television foster this attitude. Every young man drives his own car (or his father's), raids the ice-box whenever he is hungry (or thinks he is) and appears to have nothing more to do than attend a pep-rally or lounge around the cafeteria; every girl has a wardrobe of expensive clothes, thinks of nothing but dances and beaux and has no more intellect than a sparrow; hard-ship and heroism are reserved for remote times (the pioneers) or remote places like Korea or the Arctic.

This is a very superficial view of the modern world, which requires of us just as much hard work and earnest endeavour as the world ever did. How to reduce the incidence of this attitude is one of the educational problems of our age.

Now, one of the reasons for this "world owes me a livin'" attitude is that things are much too easy for the bright children in our schools, and sometimes in university. Many of those children never learn to do a hard day's work because they are never asked to. This condition arises out of the absurd North American notion that all children are alike, and this despite the fact that North Americans like the late L. M. Terman have made it as certain as anything can be in educational matters that there exist very wide innate differences in ability among children (and adults too). It is astonishing to anyone who knows the facts how impaired the notion of equality is and how reluctant teachers and others are to recognize the intellectual superiority (or inferiority) of some children, and how differently some superior children try to disguise their superiority in the face of public opinion that they should not be "different". The attempt to reduce all children to the same intellectual level has sometimes been deliberate; more often teachers and others have simply drifted into acceptance of the notion of intellectual equality. It is this drift which (rightly) inspired the attacks of such books as Hilda

Neatby's "So Little for the Mind" and A. E. Bestor's "Educational Wastelands". The most serious result is that many of our ablest young people arrive at the end of high school with only a fraction of the knowledge they might have acquired in mathematics, foreign languages and literature, and worse, without any training in rigorous study. It is not too much to say that some have developed positive habits of indolence. This is one of the reasons for first year failures in university and, I believe, for one of my own pet complaints which is that too small a proportion of students at Dalhousie enter the Honours courses.

The solution to this problem can only come from a re-organization of education at various levels and particularly at the junior and senior high school levels where a greater variety of courses must be provided and particularly more difficult courses for abler children. That is, there must be a two-track or multi-track system from about grade 7 or 8 up under which the intelligent will have a much stiffer course than at present and the less intelligent perhaps an easier one. At this point someone is sure to say, "But this isn't democratic!" To such I reply, "Mr. Interrogator, this is merely a catch phrase which you have picked up. Do you know what it means?" If it means that all children should be given the same education because they are all alike, it is simply untrue. If it means (as I think it does) that every child should be given a

fair chance to develop his potentialities to the full, it constitutes the strongest possible reason for a variety of courses to meet the very great divergences of ability among human beings.

There is another respect in which, it seems to me, the present educational situation needs improvement. It lies in (as I see it) a widespread neglect of the emotional and aesthetic side of human nature, in a tendency to be critical and hard-boiled, to hide your heart in the ice-box instead of wearing it on your sleeve. This neglect arises in part from an incomplete type of psychological theory widely taught in North America, in which there is no place for emotion and no explanation of its nature; partly also from the

pioneer and military tradition of the stiff upper lip. Partly it is the result of a curious abdication on the part of educational institutions for responsibility for the development of character. The result is an impoverishment of life in one of its most important and potentially rich aspects. The cure lies in the return to the classroom of sentiment (though not of sentimentality) and the recognition at all levels of the importance of the education of the emotions. At Dalhousie, for example, I would like to see more serious interest in music, perhaps the introduction of a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. Most of all I would like to see a small theatre, properly designed and fully equipped where serious dramatic work could be done.



by
PROF. A. S. MOWAT
 Head of Department
 of Education
 at Dalhousie University

The Grading System

by David Walker

The use of the grading system in the training of university students has received considerable criticism. Before assessing the merits and defects of a university training program that embodies this system as one of its characteristics, it is worthwhile to examine the purpose of a university education and then to see how well the grading system is suited to the achievement of that purpose.

In providing an education for its students a university attempts, or should attempt, to do two things in particular. It should provide a method whereby a student is enabled to increase his actual store of knowledge about certain subjects. It should also create in the individual the ability to consciously think for himself and not merely accept everything his instructors tell him. How then does the system of grading meet these two requirements?

Giving grades in courses has often been regarded as a necessary evil—something we would all like to see done away with but something which, nevertheless, must be retained if anything at all is to be achieved. The grading system has several glaring defects. It may well prove a hindrance to brilliant students by removing the element of intellectual challenge from their courses. The grade seems to indicate that there is a limit to the amount one can know about a subject and that once one reaches a certain percentage there isn't much more to learn about a subject and therefore no need to work any more on it. To others it indicates that there is a minimum that must be learned to pass and when that minimum is reached there is no desire to learn anything further from the course.

The idea of providing grades as a stimulus to make students work is

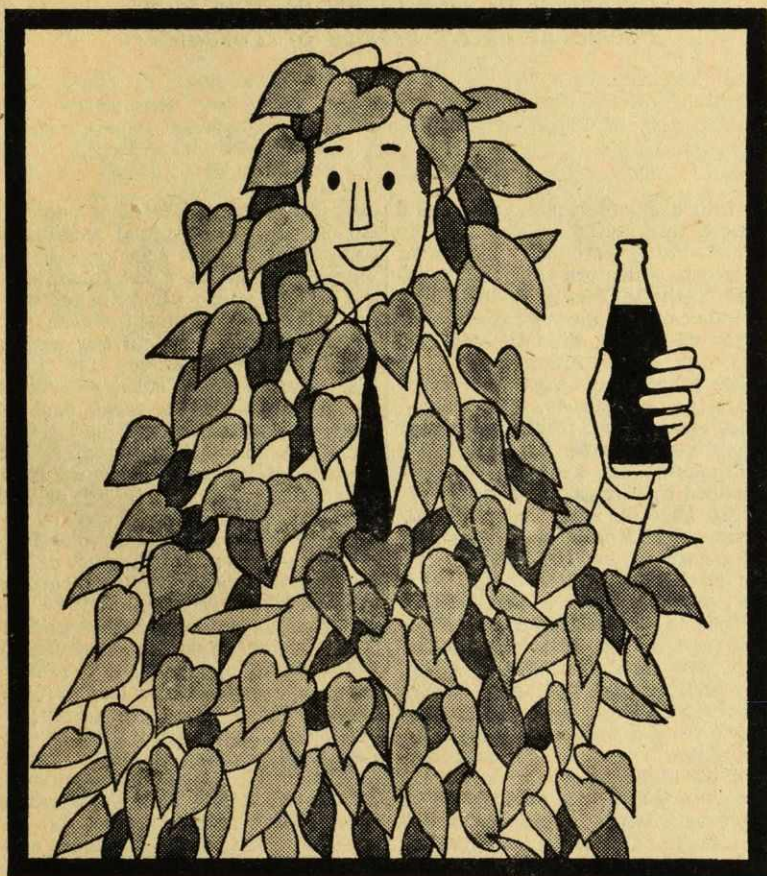
an indication that the courses of themselves are not sufficiently interesting to spur them on and that something further is needed. Moreover, the grading system is inadequate as a means of measuring a student's actual knowledge of a subject. That is because people with exceptional memories but with less actual grasp of a subject can often outdistance those whose understanding of a course is much more complete. Also, however conscientiously a marker may examine the papers passed in he will not likely be able to measure the student's learning accurately. Most courses are taught by means of the lecture. In lectures people hurriedly copy down notes, often paying little conscious attention to what the professor says. When examinations arrive they endeavour to pass back to the examiner what was said in the lecture. In most cases this is well received by the examiner and high marks are allotted to the individuals who are able to do this. The result is that the student is required to do very little thinking on his own.

These then are a few of the greater defects in a grading system. They are stumbling blocks in the way of the attainment of knowledge and the ability to think for one's self. However, the system can not be done away with. The alternative of a tutorial system whereby the student received individual help and guidance along every step of his career, while preferable, would be too great an expense to a university. To let students go on to their final year without examinations would be both innane and insane. Students are, for the most part, immature with regard to academic pursuits and without the impulse of examinations and grades they would do nothing at all. It is all very nice to speak of the search for knowledge for its own sake but few people would

do much searching if they did not know that it was required to make a certain mark.

The remedy, if indeed there is one, must be found within the system itself. It demands that the professor make his courses more interesting and stimulating. His aim throughout should be to give the student a feeling of personal achievement. He must make the student appreciate the courses for their own sake, quite independent of the necessity of mastering them in order to pass. This involves letting the student take a more central place in the lecture, it involves encouraging discussions and enquiries in which he has a chance to voice his opinions. The assignment of essays in which personal opinions and conclusions are required is also of value. In the actual setting of the examination, questions requiring the student to take a stand and to draw together the material of the course are preferable. They require some thinking and give a sense of achievement and a feeling of having gained something from the examination.

There is also a burden placed on the student to regard the course as more than a mere necessity on the road to a degree. He should prepare his work in advance of the lecture so as to get the maximum benefit from it. With this advance preparation he would better appreciate the course and be more stimulated to do his own thinking and to raise questions on points he does not understand or agree with. This two-fold co-operation of professor and student could well be the means of avoiding the over-emphasis placed on grades and examinations and help students to seek knowledge consciously with no limits imposed by the mere amount required to attain a certain mark.



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