

Comment

Comment is an opinion column open to members of the university community who wish to present an informed opinion on a topic of their selection.

Do-it-yourself education

by Jim Lotz

In 1966, I directed a study of Ottawa's Lower Town.

This area lay less than a mile away from the Parliament Buildings, and was about to undergo "urban renewal". Our research indicated that the people there, who were mainly Francophone working class, had a strong sense of community and a long tradition of mutual aid. The sociologist on the project was quite bowled over by the fact that people helped each other, and wrote his M.A. thesis on "neighbouring".

Social scientists work in a peculiar way. First they identify a "research problem". Or better still, a government agency gives them a large chunk of money to do research. The social scientists dust off their theories, and start collecting data. They talk to their colleagues, hire a few students to do participant observation or to hand out questionnaires, and then they sit down and write their reports. Saul Alinsky claimed that a social scientist was someone who spent \$30,000 to locate a whorehouse that any cab driver could have taken him to for two bucks. One of the findings of the numerous studies of the poor in Canada is that poor people don't have much money.

After a year or so, the social scientists submit reports to the government, to be used as the basis for social policy and planning. Since the research is always on the pathological aspects of society, it's little wonder that we have created enormous, expensive programmes to handle deviance in Canada, and done almost nothing to strengthen the abilities of people to handle change in a constructive and creative manner. There's a tremendous literature on what's wrong with Canada and Canadians, and almost nothing on the strengths of the country and its people.

The social scientist, once his report is submitted, and if he can resist the temptation to go grant-hunting, then settles down to write papers. Generally speaking, it takes about three or four years for these papers to appear in print—even if you know the editor of the journal. It takes about ten years to write a half-decent book. By the time the work appears in print, the situation studied has changed considerably. And the social scientist has often revised his ideas, or got some fresh data.

Recently, the Institute of Public Affairs released a report that showed that very few members of minority groups were employed at Dalhousie University. Given the lousy wages, it's hard to understand why anyone wants to work at Dalhousie. There was the usual nonsense reported from the study about the danger of "lowering

standards" by letting in "unqualified people". In theory academics receive appointments and promotion on the basis of merit, as shown by the number of publications on their *vitae*. No one ever actually reads the publications, and I have seen everything except letters to the editor listed as publications. The real basis of hiring in universities came out when some American academics stated to the Symons Commission on Canadian Studies that they did not hire Canadians, because once you let one in, they brought in their friends.

It's little wonder that social science, the universities, and things academic are in a mess. But what is to be done?

On October 13th, Homer Stevens, President of the Fishermen and Allied Workers Union spoke at Dalhousie University. He had to operate under the worst possible conditions, during the lunch hour, in the foyer of the SUB. And he was there to plead a cause. In confronting him, I asked him why he was not teaching at a university. He said that he had only Grade 11 education. But he was obviously a wise, experienced and knowledgeable person.

After we'd done our study in Lower Town, some students in the class I was teaching asked me what life was really like in Lower Town. I suppose I should have quickly read a few books on the behaviour of low-income French Canadians, but I was too lazy. I asked if the class would like to hear from a resident of Lower Town, and when they agreed, we invited a charming middle-aged woman who held the class entranced. She was fluently bilingual, and told the students how the efforts to renew the area and to create a better life for the people there were driving her up the wall.

The latest field into which the academics are jumping is labour. It won't be long before the same thing happens to Canadian workers as has happened to Indians, Blacks, the poor and even to the middle class. Their knowledge of the real world will be looted, and fed back into the curriculum in courses on "The Sociology of Labour" and "The Anthropology of Labour". Anyone who thinks this way of accumulating and disseminating knowledge is an effective method of learning should look at the field of Labour Relations in Economics. If we have all this knowledge, why don't we use it?

Is there any way of stopping this nonsense?

During the Sixties, some American universities had "Poor Professor" programmes, in which students could learn first hand what it was like to be poor and black. This idea could be picked up and expanded. Homer Stevens, if he got

off his soapbox, would be a mine of information and knowledge about the real world of work. But the success of the approach would depend upon having students select the people they want to hear. It's unwise to have professors make the selection, because they look for people who will prove their theories, push their agendas, or buttress their ideologies.

If students want to learn about labour, and the world of work, surely there is nothing to stop them starting their own seminars in the SUB. This takes some organizing, but the organizing process teaches students to be participants in the learning process, rather than consumers. Or are Canadian students going to have to wait ten years to learn how many Canadians earn their living?

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Jim Lotz, a former university professor, is now a freelance teacher, research worker, organizer, and writer.



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Lily Rosemary or the Jack of Hearts ?

To The Gazette:

Who killed Big Jim? Some say Lilly, some Rosemary, others, the Jack of Hearts.

Anxiously awaiting your answer or the thoughts of your readers. I remain, Sincerely, M. Coyle

