

LEARNING FROM RENAISSANCE EDUCATION

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"American education has developed in such a way it will be the undoing of the society". These words were spoken by the late Buckminster Fuller. Fuller was a man with many interests and abilities. He was an inventor, college professor, cartographer, philosophy, naval officer, mathematician, poet, engineer, environmentalist, adviser to business and government, the holder of 25 patents, the author of 28 books, and the recipient of 47 honorary degrees (Brady, 2003).

Marion Brady, a long time educator, describes the present state and focus of the educational system that Fuller criticized:

1. "More than a century ago, when educators were impressed by the benefits of division of labor and of specialization in industry, a system for educating the young was set up that emphasized specialized subjects and courses. Today's fragmented curriculum-the ultra-departmentalization of educational institutions, the popularity of magnet schools, the growth of school-to-work programs, and the impatience of most students with courses outside their fields of interest-reflect our narrow view of the purpose of education.

2. "The products of our educational system-highly trained specialists-engage in activity that constantly increases the complexity of our way of life.

3. "Fear, suspicion, escapism, otherworldliness, conspiracy theories, demagoguery and scapegoating grow and feed on each other.

4. "Lacking a shared body of general knowledge, it becomes

increasingly difficult for us to talk reasonably and productively about public policy. We adopt a narrow perspective-a perspective often pre-shaped by partisan politics or some special interest with a hidden agenda-and throw slogans at each other.

5. "The foundations of democracy grow ever weaker. We've created-and are maintaining and reinforcing-a system of education that confuses knowledge and wisdom. [This] system's preoccupation with narrow expertise turns out citizens poorly equipped to think about-and therefore little interested in-the moral and ethical consequences of their actions." (Brady, 2003).

Much of what is going on in education today revolves around preparing students to be workers in our capitalist society. While capitalism has many economic benefits (some economic dangers, as well), it has had unintended negative consequences. And one of these negative consequences is in the field of education. Because of an overemphasis on the economy and economic issues in America, education has been diverted, or hijacked, from its best application-to encourage people to be the best human beings they can possibly be (which does include pursuing a profession). The writers want the readers to understand how this happened. They will use the writings and research of Steven Messner and Richard Rosenfeld to show how the American obsession with economic issues has harmed America in several areas, including education. Messner and Rosenfeld, in *Crime and the American Dream*, focus their attention on making a connection between America's economic focus and the higher levels of crime in America. We will use their analysis to show how education has also been affected, as Fuller and Brady have already observed.

The scope conditions for Messner and Rosenfeld's analysis are on the macro level. They sought to explain the differences in serious crime rates (including white-collar crimes) between the United States and fifteen other Western, industrialized, capitalistic countries. They document the significantly higher levels of serious crime (murder and robbery) in this

country.

Messner and Rosenfeld classify their American Dream thesis as a new version of anomic theory. They build on the work of Robert Merton. Merton subdivided culture into two parts: 1) the society's central value and goal orientations, or ends, and 2) the institutionalized means for attaining them. He posits that crime and deviance result from the malintegration or contradiction between these two elements.

By malintegration he means the expressive cultural emphasis on success goals, defined as monetary success, with corresponding diminished emphasis on legitimate means for achieving success goals, in other words, a monetary-success-by-any-means-possible mentality. Contradiction points to the unequal distribution of legitimate opportunities (means) to achieve success goals. If legitimate opportunities for financial success are blocked then illegitimate opportunities are sought. Cloward (Traub and Little, 1994, pp. 148-168) adds that the choice of illegitimate means for success is also a function of the availability of illegitimate opportunities available for an individual. One cannot choose an illegitimate means to financial success if one does not have access to illegitimate opportunities.

Merton's idea is that the goal or value of monetary success enjoys a position of prominence in the hierarchy of goals in the milieu of the United States. And so, also in the valuation of many who live in the United States. And where this valuation of monetary success exists, it results in an anomic atmosphere, an atmosphere where rules and laws are virtually powerless in restraining illegitimate activity (Traub and Little, 1994, pp. 114-148). Marco Orru (1987) adds that anomie is not merely the absence of rules and regulations but anomie is the product of a culture in which monetary success enjoys a supreme evaluative position. If monetary success is one's, or a nation's summum bonum, supreme good, then that fact alone produces an anomic condition. This anomic condition can reside in a person, a group, or a nation.

Messner and Rosenfeld posit that this monetary success goal is a chief component of the American Dream. And the American Dream is a national fixation. We pride ourselves as the place where all can strive for individual material success with the corresponding prestige and comforts such success supplies. These beliefs and evaluations of the American Dream are present in our culture. They are chief components of our culture.

Merton, Messner, and Rosenfeld all admit that monetary success is not the only value in the United States, but that there are many values that compete for the attention and validation of the American people (p. 60). The values "playing-field" is not level, however. The scenario is not one where proponents of different metaphysical and ethical values are given their time at the podium to state their case followed by the American people deciding which ones they will adopt to give their lives meaning. The structure of our culture favors the supremacy of monetary success. "We argue that the anomic pressures inherent in the American Dream are nourished and sustained by a distinctive institutional balance of power dominated by the economy. The interplay between the core cultural commitments of the American Dream and its companion institutional balance of power results in widespread anomie, weak social controls, and, ultimately, high levels of crime" (p. 68).

Messner and Rosenfeld explain that economic dominance (in pursuit of the American Dream) is present in America because of three factors (pp. 78-83):

1. The devaluation of noneconomic institutional functions and roles. Noneconomic goals, positions, and roles are devalued in American society relative to the ends and means of economic activity.
2. The accomodation to economic requirements by other institutions. Economic conditions and requirements exert a much stronger influence on the operation of other institutions than vice versa.
3. The penetration of economic norms into other institutional domains. Things like pay for grades, economic terminology in language of education (value added, accountability), "bottom line" mentality in the polity, and the

"breadwinner" roles in family units.

Devaluation, accommodation, and penetration describe the institutional structure in American society. Therefore, the nature of the American Dream itself and the institutional dominance of the economy in this country are mutually supporting and reinforcing toward an anomic environment. Just a casual reading of the newspaper will show one that what Messner and Rosenfeld say is true. Major fraud cases and business corruption cases seem to pop up frequently, as well as the lesser theft crimes that plague our country.

But one is still left with the question, "How has America's focus on economic issues affected those who refuse to use illegitimate means for gaining wealth?" And "how has it affected the educational focus in this country?" Reread the five Brady observations above. That is how education has been affected. How is Christian education to respond? Is it "ok" to follow the lead of public education? Or, has Christian education been called to higher and better goals than merely to make its students employable?

The writers of this paper will take a look back to a time when education had nobler goals than mere employability. They will look at education in the Renaissance, the years immediately surrounding and including the 15th century.

Education was of great importance in the Renaissance as shown in the many writings on the subject. It was a time of return to an emphasis on humanities-subjects such as history, grammar, rhetoric, and poetry. A focus was directed on man-"the pleasures and pains of being human, the problems and solutions of human living" (Combee, p. 471).

The Renaissance man showed a dynamic interest in all of life, having broad competence and interests, displaying his talents in all fields. Leonard da Vinci was the "embodiment of the true Renaissance man. He could do almost everything and do it well" (Schaeffer, p. 72). That versatility was shown in da Vinci's life as a chemist, musician, architect, anatomist,

botanist, mechanical engineer, and artist.

During the Renaissance an emphasis was placed on training the whole person. The Renaissance gentleman treasured education and it was the "ideal of the period to develop the complete man and to cultivate both the arts and sciences" (Mayer, 173).

Sir Thomas Elyot in "The Book Named the Governor" speaks of God's orderly universe and equates this with a right order in learning. "In everything is order and without order may be nothing stable or permanent" (Elyot, p. 107).

Therefore, Elyot recommends that a young student begin Greek and Latin study with rules of grammar followed by the reading of Aesop's fables in Greek (which contain moral and political wisdom). He then recommends dialogues and an extensive list of poets for the student to read. The student, however, would not attain a complete understanding of the poets without first having some background in grammar.

Study must be done in a diligent, logical manner. A course in advanced writing should not be attempted without first having successfully completed courses in English grammar and composition. Thus, learning must proceed from the simple to the complex, from the concrete to the abstract. "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line" (Isaiah 28:10).

Thomas Elyot recognized the importance, impact, and necessity of the reading of good literature. "But I only desire that they have, in every of the said books, so much instruction that they may take thereby some profit" (Elyot, p. 112). The frequent reading of the writings recommended by Elyot was to cause the student to desire the things commended in the poems.

Reading is a skill necessary to every other type of learning. The student who has developed this skill to its fullest has access to all man's knowledge and can become fully aware of the many possibilities open to

him. One who can read can study God's Word for himself and, through it, learn how to live and know God's will for one's life.

After finishing a study of the recommended readings, Elyot moves the student on to learning the art of rhetoric, the goal being to speak aptly, "in an oration prepared and purposely made" (Elyot, p. 112). As Christians, the holders of light in this world, we need to be able to represent truth in a clear, undistorted manner. Therefore, the study of speech and public speaking is a necessary and vital part of a student's education, especially in a Christian school.

Thomas Elyot also speaks of proper nutrition, the proper amount of sleep, and physical exercise as being necessary components of effective study. God has given each of us a body that needs to be cared for properly if it is to function the way He intended. Continued abuse of one's body through improper nutrition, lack of sleep or lack of exercise is detrimental to learning.

In the "Schoolmaster," Roger Ascham sets out to teach "the right way to good learning; which if they follow, with the fear of God, they shall very well come to sufficiency of living" (Ascham, p. 820). Ascham realized that a fear of God was necessary in one's life, just as Solomon did when he wrote, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7).

Right education, in Ascham's thinking, consists of: truth of religion, honesty in living, and right order in learning (this last one also stressed by Elyot who perhaps had some influence on Roger Ascham). In Ascham's mind, the art of rhetoric had top priority in education. "Ye shall surely find that whan apt and good words began to be neglected. . . than also began ill deeds to spring, strange manners to oppress good orders, new and fond opinions to strive with old and true doctrine, first in philosophy and after in religion, right judgment of all things to be perverted, and so virtue with learning is contemned and study left off. . ." (Ascham, p. 837).

Several characteristics of a proper scholar are given in "The Schoolmaster." These include: good memory, love of learning, willingness to work, desire to learn of others, and ability to ask questions. All of these are things that one can cultivate and develop in one's own character. A good student is oftentimes one who has learned to be a good student. "Wise people store up knowledge" (Proverbs 10:14).

Roger Ascham refers to Erasmus when he writes that one does not have to experience evil to know the dangers and end results of it. "Experience is the common schoolhouse of fools and ill men. Men of wit and honesty be otherwise instructed. For there be that keep them out of fire, and yet was never burned" (Ascham, p. 827). The student would do well to make a careful study of the book of Proverbs, for in it one can learn much about wisdom and the right way to live. Through study of the book, one can realize the effects of a certain type of behavior without having to physically experience it.

Ascham also makes the value of knowing the Scriptures plain. After recommending the reading of Plato and Aristotle in Greek, along with Tully in Latin, he states: "I never knew yet scholar that gave himself to like and love and follow chiefly those three authors but he proved both learned, wise, and also an honest man if he joined with all the true doctrine of God's Holy Bible, without the which the other three be but fine-edge tools in a fool or madman's hand" (Ascham, p. 837). These writings, although potentially profitable to the reader, were useless unless joined with God's truth. The student must sift through what he reads and hears and be able to discern truth from error.

Francis Bacon in his essay "Of Studies," tells of the value of study. "Crafty men condemn studies, simple men admire them, and wise men use them" (Bacon, p. 906). The book of Proverbs states much the same thing. "Fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7). "The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly" (Proverbs 15:2). The student does well to study and learn from the experiences of those wiser than oneself.

Bacon expected the student to be a well-rounded person. "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man. . .histories make men wise; poets witty; the mathematics subtile; natural philosophy deep; moral grave; logic and rhetoric able to contend" (Bacon, p. 906). Because the Renaissance man was to show ability in many areas, it was necessary for the student to be well versed in many subjects.

The student today will benefit greatly from learning as much as possible in many subjects. Not only will this help one to be a well-rounded person, but in witnessing to nonbelievers, the student is able to converse on many subjects. As Christians, we should always be seeking to learn more of God and of His creation. The world was created for man to enjoy, and learning more about it can help us appreciate it more.

Francis Bacon also wrote a work entitled "The Advancement of Learning" in which he defends human knowledge while seeking to improve it. Bacon showed a love for truth and orderliness. He stressed careful observation and a "systematic collection of information to unlock nature's secrets" (Schaeffer, p. 132).

"The Renaissance ideal of education was eloquently expressed by Sir Phillip Sidney, who combined poetic proclivities with manliness and unexcelled bravery" (Mayer. P. 176). Sidney challenges the reader to aspire to excellence, a spirit much admired during the Renaissance. In "Defense of Poesy," he defends the reading and writing of imaginative literature. This included fiction and drama, not necessarily written in verse form. "In order to live up to the Renaissance ideal of virtue, man found it necessary to develop all his interests: physical, mental, esthetic, and spiritual. Thus, there was a need for real creativity" (Mayer, p. 183).

Sidney gives many arguments for poesy. The end of it, he says, is to both teach and delight. Literature offers moral examples to the reader. Perhaps his greatest argument is that man "makes" because he is made in the image of a Maker. "But rather give right honor to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who, having made man to his own likeness, set him beyond

and over all the works of that second nature: which in nothing sheweth so much as in poetry" (Sidney, p. 608). When man "makes," he glorifies his Maker.

Literature offers man the opportunity to express who he is as an object of God's creation. Man encounters his world through emotion and God designed him to respond to experiences with feeling. The student needs to learn to express himself properly, to make himself understood through the written word.

Just as the Renaissance man, the Christian school student needs to be a well-rounded person, always seeking to know more of God's creation that he will be a more effective servant. "Be diligent to present yourselves approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Learning is a lifelong process. It does not end upon graduation when one receives a diploma, or when one gains employment. The student should be familiar with great literature, most of all the Holy Scriptures. He should learn to speak properly and purposefully to communicate effectively with others. The Christian school student needs to love study, to treasure education, and to develop an interest in all the world around him.

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