

TRADITION AND NOVELTY IN EDUCATION

Mortimer J. Adler

A badly stated issue calls for false or extreme solutions. It is important, therefore, to correct the impression that the issue in American education today is between classicism and progressivism. Both of these names signify undesirable extremes which have exaggerated and distorted some sound elements of educational policy. Classicism names the arid and empty formalism which dominated education at the end of the last century. It emphasized the study of the classics for historical or philological reasons. It was interested in the past for the past's sake. It mistook drill for discipline. Against such classicism, the reaction which took place was genuinely motivated and sound in principle. But it went too far, and today we have an equally unfortunate extreme that, in its many forms, is called progressive education. Progressivism has become as preposterous as classicism was arid. It is so absorbed with the study of the contemporary world that it forgets human culture has traditional roots. It has substituted information for understanding, and science for wisdom. It has mistaken license for liberty, for that is what freedom is when it is unaccompanied by discipline.

If we recognize that the issue between these vicious extremes is a false one, we can avoid it by seeking the middle ground, by formulating a moderate programme which returns to whatever was vital in the system of classical education and which also retains whatever is educationally sound in the vigorous pragmatism of the progressive movement. That resolution can be achieved by combining the two factors of tradition and novelty in the right proportion and order.

William Wheel, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, made a distinction between permanent and progressive studies. The permanent studies, he said, are those which remain the same in every period of human culture, because they respond to the permanent needs of human nature, which education should aim to cultivate. Human nature, by which I mean the powers and needs of men—is constant in the sense in which man as a biological species has a constant specific nature. We are not here concerned about individual differences because education should evoke our humanity, and not develop our individuality.

The permanent studies, then, are those which cultivate the humanity of each student by disciplining his reason, that power in him which distinguishes him from all other animals. Such discipline is accomplished by the liberal arts, the arts of reading, writing and reckoning—the three R's. And since wisdom does not change from generation to generation, or even from epoch to epoch, the permanent studies include the funded wisdom of European culture as that

reposes in its great works, its great books, its masterpieces of liberal art.

The progressive studies, on the other hand, are those which change from time to time, almost from generation to generation. Such are all the natural and social sciences which have a changing content of knowledge. So, too, are all courses which are nothing but disguised surveys of current events.

The permanent and progressive studies represent the elements of tradition and novelty in the educational curriculum. Both are needed, but the permanent studies must come first, both because they are more fundamental educationally, and because they are a necessary preparation for good work in the fields of progressive knowledge. Classicism not only ignored the progressive studies, but presented the permanent ones in a degraded and sterile form. Progressivism, in its turn, has almost entirely excluded the permanent studies or, at best, has put them in the wrong place at the end of the educational process rather than the beginning.

Since the reform of contemporary education must be accomplished by curing the defects of progressivism, I shall dwell on these in greater detail, in the hope that no one will suppose I want to return to the kind of classicism we are well rid of. I would call the right educational program Traditionalism, if that name could be taken to signify the moderate position which combines both tradition and novelty in the right way.

Elementary education today is devoid of discipline. Pupils are not given fundamental training in the routines of language and mathematics; their memories and imaginations are not cultivated. For they are busily occupied with all the extra-curricular activities which in many schools have almost replaced the curriculum; or they, even at an early age, are concentrating on current events in order to get adjusted to the contemporary world in which they hope to get ahead by beating their neighbors.

Secondary and collegiate education has turned completely away from the ideal of a liberal education as cultivating the intellect by recourse to the heritage of European culture, and liberating the mind by critical training in the liberal arts. Our bachelors—even our masters—of arts are totally unacquainted with the very arts which gave their name to these degrees.


They cannot read, write or speak their own language well, much less any other, and it follows that they cannot think well. Nor do

they possess the leading ideas of European thought in all fields, because they have read few of the books which are the great productions of the sciences and arts. They are at best chaotically informed, and at worst full of local prejudices, with which they have been indoctrinated by textbooks, manuals and teachers. And just as college education has been degraded by the kind of students which are received from the schools, so the level of graduate and professional education has been debased by having to take students who cannot read and write and have little or no competence in the handling of ideas.

The reasons for this deplorable situation are many: the violent reaction against a bad classicism; the curricular chaos produced by the elective system; the false notion that the teacher should be guided by the pupil's interests rather than the pupil disciplined by the teacher's science and art; all of the fads and fancies of a superficial educational psychology, such as the overemphasis on individual differences, and the discarding of all formal disciplines by irrelevant research on transfer of training; the shallow pragmatism, which conceives utility in terms of biological adjustment and success rather than in terms of the perfection of man; and last, but not least, the fact, that our teachers themselves have been badly educated and thoroughly misdirected by the requirements of the existing school system and under the leadership of our teachers' colleges. A good teacher must be a liberal artist and a cultivated person. How many teachers today have had enough training in the liberal arts to be able to read? How many of them have read the great books of western culture?

The reform which is urgently required has been outlined by President Hutchins of Chicago in his *Higher Learning in America*, and is partly in operation at St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland. The curriculum of that college is worth studying. It can be obtained by writing to the dean.

That the Hutchins proposals and the St. John's program have been generally attacked and disapproved by the vested interests ruling American education, both administratively and through teachers' colleges, on the one hand, and generally applauded by parents and college graduates who remember the emptiness of their own schooling, on the other, is *prima facie* evidence of the accuracy of the diagnosis. But the case need not rest there. The various objections must and can be answered. The issue must be clarified of all irrelevancies and misunderstandings. This may not be easy because it involves such basic questions as the relation of philosophy and science, and the radical difference between man and other animals.

But it can be done so that every citizen will understand what is involved. Then the public—and, perhaps, even the teachers—must rebel against the prevailing cult of illiteracy and license in educational affairs, or know that they are choosing the alternative which leads away from democracy and liberalism, for these can be sustained and developed only by the proper cultivation of human nature, of both leaders and followers in public life. 

Although this was published in Better Schools, June 1939, it could have been written today. --MW

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