

KICKING THE HABIT : REPLY TO



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"An unexamined University life is not worth living"-Xocrates.

Current criticisms of various aspects of University education, including the business of examinations & evaluation, reflect a growing awareness that it is getting to be high time that we considered changing the bath water in academic institutions. The more extreme positions even maintain that in the process the baby has also become too dirty and needs to be thrown out along with the bath water. However, it helps to remind ourselves that all babies ultimately get dirty so it may not be such a bad idea to stick with the one we have played with and nurtured for so long - and think more along the lines of giving it a good wash.

From metaphor to model.

A closer examination of the two prongs of evaluation as explicated by Cregier, namely as a step in the learning process and as a method of coercing and culling students, suggests the need for some logical, linguistic and psychological clarification. It is rather difficult to see how a positive step in the learning process can at the same time be viewed as a negative method of coercing and culling students. Even if it does not violate the principle of identity, it is surely confusing. What the author is actually implying but not stating in the title - is that evaluation based on coercive methods (i.e. compulsory exams, etc.) is not acceptable to him. A minor - yet necessary distinction. Even then, it is not necessary to grant that

such "coercive methods" are inherently wrong. But here the author has more than an edge since we are playing with a term that has negative connotations. Nevertheless, let me just point out that this is more an appar-

ent than a real vice. Restraints and constraints, properly applied, can and do play a very positive role in the learning situation of mice, monkeys and men (and if it will drive the point home better, this is not a uniquely Skinnerian finding either). Furthermore, evaluation cannot be a method of culling. To cull or not to cull is a post-evaluative decision.

Having disagreed with the author on those three counts, let me go on to disagreeing with him on yet another count. Evaluation by definition, is a fixing of value or worth on something or someone. Academic institutions, then have no business evaluating, since the value of a person is not contingent on academic performance. And this is not a mere fuss over a minor point, for I believe that most of the problems and disagreements derive from the connotations of this term. Since evaluation has to do with setting values - high, low, etc. - it could debase not just the educational process but also the individuals who go through with it. So I would disagree that "evaluation" of any sort is a positive step in the learning process. But let me hasten to add, although I am running ahead of my story, that examinations & grades are such steps (and very important ones at that) in the learning process.

Furthermore, I suggest that since the use of the term "evaluation" has trapped us into endless debates, we get out of this semantic muddle by not using this value-laden term at all. Unless, of course, we can be mature enough to keep the word from becoming master of our thoughts.

Again, running ahead of my story, let me just add that we can conceive of grading based on exams as a useful feedback device providing for the student a profile of his strengths and weaknesses. In turn, the student can use this self-knowledge to find out for himself an appropriate place - maybe not in the sun - but certainly in this world. A great deal of unnecessary quibbling can be saved by so conceiving of grades as approximate "guides". More about grades and their correlation to adult achievement etc. later.

An opinion by any other name (especially 'hypothesis') does not smell as sweet. My second major problem begins where Cregier's first paragraph leaves off. The author states that he has "evolved three hypotheses", and goes on to elaborate these in the next three paragraphs. The point of objection here is the use of the term "hypotheses" to represent what really are the author's well-considered opinions; thereby giving the impression that the inquiry into the problem is impartial, objective and based on the canons of logic and the scientific method. On no account whatsoever can these so-called "hypotheses" qualify as "hypothesis" - scientific or otherwise. Every single rule

of hypothesis statement has been violated. Let's state. A useful hypothesis must follow certain criteria: terms used must be unambiguous and clear. Even if the definition is not very precise, it must not be so much in meaning, such as is in the terms 'threatening, informing' at these terms' interpretation. Terms used must have referents, for exactly what must be inferred, to infer "3. the terms must be value-laden, like 'atonic, professional, punitive, etc.' hypothesis definition, becomes peculiar, and begins which it is only several possible answers. 4. a hypothesis must be On this one corner these opinions find fault as hypotheses they are assumptions guiding the intellect the evidence his opinions are at does not. So eat his cake and too - thereby tale.

Consulting evidence) without testable hypothesis sufficient - finds it hard enough to find what he is. Now let's try the author has in his "Odyssey". Just how beautiful body of empirical The author finds motion of getting brass tacks but ends up a close costs of opinion Ellul, etc. etc. I may I point the "evidence" Bakan, (who by giving your information to York University a while ago) interesting impression a scholar like is also one of enchantment criticism psychology to well with psychology scars (which acquired going traditional and evaluation us make double do all we can each psychological this point, I ended of a retrospective psychologist re-diagnosed Sir chill as one red a severe complex (pres his school ex "would he have chill without