

University 'education'

The following article was originally submitted to the Nova Scotia Royal Commission on Education, Public Services and Provincial-Municipal Relations by a group of faculty members at Mount St. Vincent University and was written by Larry Fisk of MSVU's department of political studies.

Novak, that, "myth and symbol, feeling and fantasy, experience and imagination, sensitivity and sensibility are given an explicit role in the expression of ethical and political perception and action." As advocates of realism we, the faculty have for too long been calling such dimensions of human understanding mere romanticism, irrationality or self-indulgence.

IS COMPETITIVE WORK ANTI-PERSONAL?

Finally, I think the university is viciously anti-personal because of its inordinate emphasis on hard, competitive work. Success, in university circles, is seen as what I achieve 'in relation to other', what I achieve by stepping over and on my fellow students or faculty members. The emphasis on scientific realism makes all endeavors subject to the criticism of fellow students but its extension in the psychological realm is jealousy for another's achievement, secrecy surrounding a new or previously unexpressed idea, and a hulking pride over a higher grade.

The emphasis on learning about things and activities rules out an appreciation of the inner risks, development and personal growth and enlargement which might better have constituted our definition of success, and in a much less competitive way. Our emphasis on hard work done in seclusion fails miserably to appreciate how work accomplished in private is profoundly indebted to the prior accomplishments of other and the protective and critical environment of our contemporaries.

POLITICALLY REACTIONARY

Our private scholastic endeavors have as well as political significance which we seldom, if ever, recognize. In the first place what we find when we engage in research (our results) may have profound political implications, depending of course on our degree of willingness to publicize our findings, for example the discovery or measurement of an inadequate or poorly administered social service. Secondly, the kinds of questions we research will vary in political significance. If we choose a study, let's say: "A Comparative Analysis of the Longevity of Government-Issued Pencil Erasers as Utilized by a Random Sampling of Halifax Dartmouth Grade One Pupils", our findings are not likely to have too much political importance. Another question related to for example the degree of successful performance of any social or political institution or agency is bound to have more political significance. But our private research is politically relevant not only in what we find and what we question but also in how we investigate. Some forms of investigation (for example participant observation) may lead to an involvement and identification with persons being studied that a distant analysis based on sample surveys, for another example might never risk.

The methodology we employ may narrow the field of questions that we are able to ask since some could never be tackled by certain methods. Again, few researchers consider how the timing of a study may have political relevance. More students are aware of unforeseen consequences of new discoveries what with our new awareness of the environmental crisis. But all too few researchers consider the political question as to who should get the results of completed studies.

Precious little research is carried on with a view to developing a better life for forgotten minorities and issuing them with the results. What we require may be counter-research which imaginatively and stubbornly attempts to propound and develop stark new alternatives of outworn ways of doing things.

Ivan Illich calls for such research, a "research on alternatives to the products which now dominate the market; to hospitals and the profession dedicated to keeping the sick alive (the research required for a heart transplant while thousands die of amoebic dysentery) to schools and the packaging process which refuses education to those who are not of the right age, who have not gone through the curriculum, who have not sat in a classroom a sufficient number of successive hours, who will not pay for their learning with submission to custodial care, screening and certification or with indoctrination in the values of the dominant elite."

Provocative statements like Illich's above may remind academics that our quiet studies in carpeted offices do not cease, to be political just because we avoid taking sides. Our decision not to engage upon a study which would be given over to the poor for use against the existing economic and political order, far from being politically neutral is in fact politically reactionary. We fail to recognize that even our feeble attempts at neutrality are rooted in the naive assumption that the political and educational climate and institutions within which we work are also neutral and harmless, if not powerless. American academics need only reflect on the fact that 65 percent of all university research is directly or indirectly sponsored by government agencies to show the error of such an assumption.

Perhaps the larger error we make as academics is to assume that our 'politically neutral' empiricism removes us from a particular political position or commitment. What our stance does in fact is to make us full-fledged participants in the existing way of doing and seeing things. What reforms we may propound will all, in the final analysis, serve the existing social order. What is stifled within us, says Novak, is the "revolutionary, utopian, visionary impulse." We come to accept instead compromise, patience and acquiescence. We grow in capable of attacking problems in such a way as to build a significantly better system because we fail to strike with imagination and concern at the very roots of the traditional pattern and order. Our research produces reforms which are tacked on to the present social system. Yet "there is compelling evidence," says Novak, "that realistic social and political reforms do not, in fact, alter power arrangements or weaken key interest groups in our society; political symbols change, but the same elites remain in unchallenged power." What we are actually doing is concretizing or hypostatizing certain social, political, economic or educational alternatives and making them harder into reality or into the only possibilities, while fragile, faintly visible possibilities become increasingly buried by the so-called tried and true.

MORAL BANKRUPTCY

The overall style of our teaching and research with its unquestioned realism and emphasis on behavior conducted as it is with such political naivete is the source of the third evil to be found on Canadian campuses, i.e. moral bankruptcy.

Where students learn about social reality without an equal emphasis on learning from that reality, professors have the power to define reality by the reading lists they distribute, but the assigned topics of their term papers, by the approved methodologies they lecture upon, and by the content of their final examinations. The discrediting of student experience is damaging to the student personally and like a cancerous growth it sinks into the inner consciousness of students to the point where students find it ever more difficult to recognize what they themselves think and feel. But as well, this deprecation of experience eats away the basis from which students feel concern and responsibility for others. The realism of university education tends to destroy the basis upon which wisdom and morality must be founded: — that is, personal experience and intelligent reflection upon it.

Michael Polanyi, that great philosopher of science, talks about the 'tacit Dimension to human knowing: — "we know more than we can tell." We can 'recognize' a friend's face yet be unable to describe the separate features of that face. We recognize the parts of a frog, a machine or whatever because of our prior knowledge of the whole to which they belong.

The experience of the student is analagous to Polanyi's tacit dimension of knowing. The student learns better the wider his or her experience and his or her own reflection on it. If the student's own experience is downgraded, or even worse disoriented and distorted, by repeated and highly sophisticated assaults on it by faculty and students' arguments and examples the well from which the student's behavior is drawn becomes an empty shaft encrusted with self-distrust. Students come to overlook and distrust what is in themselves. They

have less within upon which to shape patterns without. Inward emptiness and moral bankruptcy is a direct result of the style of university education in the past and its continued refusal to consider seriously the emptiness it has caused in the present.

In short, university education is built on specific stories or myths about what the real world is like and how we can come to know it. Our practices and methodologies have made numbers out of persons by measuring success by grades, size, volume and control; robbed students of their self-respect by discounting their personal experience; made competing cranks out of faculty by rewarding their fiercest competitive tendencies; blinded us from our political responsibilities for changing the social order and serving the defenceless segments of the human community by encouraging secluded research for governments and business; made a virtue of passivity, caution and indecision even in times of the most dire social need; bureaucratized the wisdom of the ages; and convinced a generation of scholars that their ideals must be tailored to fit reality: — that a lack of moral commitment would somehow not only enhance scholarship but change the world for the better. For these and other reasons we can fairly add moral bankruptcy to the description of the present evils integral to university education.

CAN WE JUSTIFY OUR CONTINUED ASSOCIATION WITH UNIVERSITIES?

What we ought seriously to be questioning is how as faculty and students we can in all conscious continue to associate ourselves with a university.

We justify our staying on in a teaching position only as we struggle to re-examine the myths which undergird the university and our own understanding of them. It seems to us that the unclinking of myths is the central task of all students be they social or natural scientists, philosophers or theologians, and that the unclinking must necessarily begin with ourselves, our own training and the institutions with which we are associated.

Secondly, we believe that as faculty we can justify an extended contract with the university if our teaching practices enable students to learn from the world rather than simply about it. Hence, we teach political institutions and we practice citizenship, we open up the universities to those who want to learn; the desire to learn is their eligibility to enroll, not prerequisite courses, ability to pay or certification. We justify our attachment to the university as we detach ourselves and take our books, ideas and knowledge to be used by the larger community outside.

We should justify our research only as it becomes counter-research, that research which recognizes its political obligations and struggles to construct radical alternatives for a new society; that research which can be employed by those who most need it and seldom have access to it; the poor, the dispossessed, the politically defenceless minorities.

Thirdly, we justify our continued association with the university by struggling to build a new moral view of ourselves and our education. The brilliant psychoanalyst and social critic Ernest Becker has written a most careful treatise called *Beyond Alienation* in which he ever so thoroughly traces the gradual return of morality to the post-scientific world-view and the content of education. We hope that in what we've already said about the university's moral failures you may agree with us that we need to grapple with the moral dimension of life in the university. Certainly we need to continue our scientific and philosophic analyses and comparisons of moral positions and ethical problems. But in addition we, all of us, faculty and students alike, need to express our questions of conscience, we need to encourage intelligent commitments and consciously engage one another with our senses of social obligation and personal convictions.

It would be comforting to think that the development and living out of such convictions may yet lead to some more humane, politically aware and morally sensitive community of scholars in the future.