

Toward the Enlightened College Graduate

Robert Pattison

Before deciding whether pigs should fly, it makes sense to ask whether they can. The same logic applies to the question, Should education civilize?

The limit of what any society can teach is what that society knows or thinks it knows; what it believes or pretends to believe; and what it does or aspires to do. The sum total of what is thought, believed, and done is a convenient way of defining civilization, and it follows that the subject matter of education, in the widest sense, is civilization itself. Education is the means whereby a civilization shares what it thinks, believes, and does—in short, shares itself—among its members.

In this sense it's redundant to ask if education can civilize—education can't do anything else but present civilization. Education does not precede civilization; it follows from it. Education does not stand on the outside looking into the structure of civilization; it's part of the fabric.

So where's the problem? The ideal education would share the entirety of its civilization with all of its members. And there is the problem: civilizations have more to impart than any one of its members can absorb, whether members are thought of as individuals or as organizations. Quarrels about education are quarrels about what portion of civilization to share, and with whom, when, and where to share it.

Education is necessarily selective and partial. It's a common fallacy, what might be called the fallacy of megalomania or of metonymy, to mistake the partial for the complete. The most obvious example of this fallacy is the confusion of formal education with the whole of education. Unless raised by wolves, no one arrives at school without a good deal of education: first-graders know most of what they will ever learn about their first language; they know something of the structure of the family, of the doctor's office, of the media, of sports, of songs, of celebrities, and of the rules on the playground. Pericles was stating a fact when he said the whole city is an education: individuals do not come to formal education at any level as clean slates; they already participate in their civilization. When formal education merely reinforces socialization or popular culture, it wastes everyone's time. Students learn without any reinforcement that the organization of any educational establishment is itself, for good or ill, one more lesson in the structure of our civilization, and popular culture is by definition what people already know. The motto of an efficient

Robert Pattison is coordinator of the English and Writing Program at Southampton College of Long Island University. Among his books is *The Great Dissent: John Henry Newman and the Liberal Heresy*, published by Oxford University Press in 1991.

educational system ought to be, "Forget about the relevant and tell me something I don't already know."

Closely allied to the megalomaniac's wasteful delusion of beginning with a clean slate and then dominating the educational process is the fallacy of instilled virtue, which assumes that students come to formal education unpossessed of moral compass, ethical foundations, or ideological bearings. It's not surprising that attempts to fill the empty vessels of students' souls with the tonic of virtue end in a good deal of spillage: those vessels are already filled with the ethical, moral, and ideological wines of our civilization.

The pedagogy of virtue cannot be distinguished from indoctrination, the opposite of education. With education there is much to learn and little time; with indoctrination, there is little to learn but many hours allotted for the task. I once taught at a religious college in a classroom next to a monk who spent the better part of his biweekly 50 minutes expatiating on the pains of hell and the certainty that his students would soon be enjoying them. The students endured his diatribes with a patience and good cheer that did credit to the civilization they already possessed. The course of formal education in the Eastern Europe under Soviet rule provides a more dramatic example of civilization persevering under a barrage of virtue. Socially or politically, these attempts to overcome the selective and partial nature of education by restricting its scope to the virtuous are pathetic or tragic; educationally, they are a waste of time, and time is short.

When Huck Finn lit out for the Territory, he was rejecting virtuous efforts to *civilize* him in favor of participation in the larger civilization he already shared. Huck's is the predicament of all formal education in open, democratic societies. What to do when the partial and selective curriculum of established opinion collides with the entrenched beliefs of the civilization at large?

The resulting clash of civilizations is still with us. For example, contemporary students have little sense of history. They can count presidents backward to Reagan or Carter, the chief executives when they were born, or in a few instances, to Kennedy, their parents' president. Once they have left the world of facts pertaining to themselves, they are adrift on a turbulent sea of dates where the Crusades jostle alongside the Civil War. This inaptitude is something more than ignorance. Invincible ignorance is a rare condition; these students have taken courses in history and almost without exception failed to attain any coherent sense of the past. The something else at work here is itself civilization, a civilization that encourages the abolition of history. The idea itself has an honorable pedigree. D'Alembert and Diderot spoke of abolishing history; John Stuart Mill has an interesting footnote on the subject. Mark Twain examines the thought in detail in *Huck Finn*: taking no stock in dead people, Huck escapes the ideological clutches of Moses and Walter Scott and acts decently. Perhaps Santayana meant to say, "Those who remember the past are destined to repeat it"; Henry Ford did say that history is more or less bunk.

In this sense, it is impossible for formal education to avoid a discussion of popular culture. Pretending that it is trivial or non-existent merely forfeits the teaching of history, and by extension from the example of history, the arts and sciences altogether. Opposition in force to popular culture is only indoctrination by another name—it doesn't work. What is left is discourse, which is itself one of the better lessons our civilization has to teach. That an advanced civilization produces complex and contradictory views of history—and of civilization itself—is cause for celebration not shame, and what Oakeshott called the conversation between these views cannot begin soon enough in the educational process.

Discussion or conversation in this sense is the richest means by which a civilization can convey itself to its members. It is partial only because time is finite: everything is available for discussion. It is abundant in subject matter and facts: there must be something to discuss. It assumes that facts raise questions, or what's a discussion for? It follows the spirit of Milton's observation that one may be a heretic in the truth and therefore dismisses as superficial those values and virtues merely acquired rather than learned. If modern education says, Come to me and I will socialize you, conversation says, You are already socialized, or we wouldn't be having this discussion. Where contemporary education says, Let us sample the results of civilization—a small sample will do, since on inspection all samples yield the same results that confirm those good values it is my business to see reflected in your behavior, discourse answers, Your behavior is your business, but have you considered Keats as a zen master?

And so to the question, can education civilize?, I would reply: In the restricted sense of propagating someone's ideas of virtue, it can try, but it will waste time in the process, and in the end it will fail. In the broadest sense, however, education can do nothing but civilize, and every civilization gets the education it deserves. This civilization deserves but little utilizes the benefits of the discourse, which is one of its best realizations.