

## Bitter roots or real books?

FRANCIS BENNION

### Humanist dilemmas II

*Francis Bennion, who is a past chairman of the Professional Association of Teachers, continues his series on moral questions with a look at how we educate our children.*

Each age mocks its predecessors' values. The present one carries this to remarkable lengths, especially in the field of education. From ancient times, every generation before this insisted that learning had to be a hard grind, for which the rewards would come only in later life. Now all is different. We have child-centred education, real books for tots to play at reading, and a disinclination to make anyone feel uncomfortable about anything. It is the child's will that counts.

But as the poet says, a boy's will is the wind's will. Girls' wills are the same. So is that all right then? In the present article, as with others in the series, I propose to bring to this dilemma some of those voices from past generations. They may help us judge whether, as we like to think, our own society really does have better ideas than they did and loftier values than theirs.

#### *Voices from the past*

The roots of education, Aristotle insisted, are bitter. Using a different metaphor, John Milton made the same point: the path of education is 'laborious at the first ascent'. In recent times, H. L. Mencken lamented that schooldays were the unhappiest in the whole span of human existence, full of dull, unintelligible tasks, new and unpleasant ordinances, and brutal violations of common sense and common decency. Yet it still seemed to him that this was inevitable.

In trying to decide whether they were all wrong, we need to look wider and consider opinions on the whole nature of the educational process.

The official assumption is that youngsters get what they want from professional teachers; but not everyone has agreed. Haggadah the Talmud writer said: 'I've learned much from my teachers, and from my colleagues more than from my teachers, and from my students more than from all'. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, perhaps with more wit than judgment: 'I pay the schoolmaster, but 'tis the schoolboys educate my son'. Igor Stravinsky said that he had learned throughout his life as a composer chiefly through his mistakes, and pursuits of false assumptions, not by his exposure to fountains of wisdom and knowledge. Beverley Nichols, educated at Marlborough and Balliol, began his autobiography with the words 'I am entirely self-taught'.

So does education by professionals really matter? There is a sense in which it can be said that we learn only what is already within us. Education means drawing out. Yet knowledge is recognition of things removed from ourselves, sometimes very far removed. It has been called salutation, not embrace. It consists not only in an affirmation of what is true, but in the negation of what is false (if the deconstructionists will allow us these concepts).

In a sense, knowledge is infinite. To command any branch of knowledge, you must master also those branches which lie *next* to it. They too have neighbours, so to know one thing you must know all. In expanding the fields of knowledge, we but widen the horizon of ignorance.

But then we are told not be afraid to admit ignorance. Milton wrote in *Paradise Regained*-

The first and wisest of them all professed  
To know this only, that he nothing knew.

**Confucius** said: when you know a thing, to hold that you know it, and when you do not know a thing, to allow that you do not know it; this is knowledge. Emerson said: If I cannot brag of knowing something, then I brag of not knowing it.

Knowing what  
thou knowest not  
is in a sense  
omniscience.

It is *safer* to brag of ignorance: then you can't be found out. But most of us would rather extend our knowledge, and for that we believe we need teachers.

### ***The art of teaching***

Shaw cruelly said: those who can, do; those who can't, teach. But often you can't 'do' without the prior contribution of the academy; even though the aim of the academy is to end your need for it. Its purpose is to help you become for life self-educating. It is the manufactory of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life that forms the secret of civilisation. Truly, the things we know best are the things we haven't been formally taught. Wilde even said that nothing worth knowing *can* be taught.

It has also been said that a teacher who wishes to teach us a truth should not *tell* it to us, but *suggest* it to us with a brief gesture, a gesture that starts an ideal trajectory in the air along which we glide until we find ourselves at the feet of the new truth.

Men must be taught as if you taught them not,  
And things unknown proposed as things forgot.

Some of today's educators think this applies above all to children. They believe children have to be first motivated, then left to educate themselves. Children learn by having their curiosity roused (though it is usually pretty strong to start with). It has been said that the art of teaching is the art of first awakening the natural inquisitiveness of young minds for the purpose of satisfying it afterwards.

Other qualities need stimulating too. **Johan Wolfgang von Goethe** said that a teacher who can arouse a feeling for one single good action, for one single good poem, accomplishes more than he who fills our memory with rows and rows of natural objects, each classified with name and form. **Virginia Woolf** said the first duty of your teacher is to hand you in each lesson a nugget of pure truth for you to wrap in the pages of your notebook - and afterwards to unwrap, and then keep always on some safe shelf.

Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it. It is more a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces that make it a living thing of the exact kind it is. Much learning comes indirectly. We are foolish to disdain the magnificent short cut of watching as *other people* make mistakes.

Perhaps the best way to put it is that education is the leading human souls to what is best, and making what is best out of them. These two objects are usually attainable together, and by the same means. The training that makes pupils happiest in themselves also makes them most serviceable to others, and most at home with the culture.

'Tis education forms the common mind,  
Just as the twig is bent, the tree's inclined.

The pupil needs to be taught to think not only of what he is learning, but of why he is learning it. Learning without full thought, said Confucius, is labour lost. But thought without full learning can expose us to pitfalls.

A little learning is a dangerous thing;  
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:  
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,  
But drinking largely sobers us again.

Education, the great equalizer of the human condition, forms the balance wheel of the social machinery. Only the educated swing free: the master of mechanics laughs at force. To deprive a child of education, or allow it to deprive itself, is an abuse. Learning makes you fit company for yourself. Knowledge is power (though don't let its acquisition stunt your native initiative). The raft of knowing will ferry you to safety across turbulent floods, as helplessly you watch the ignorant innocent sink around you. All knowledge, said **Samuel Johnson**, is of some value. He added-

'There is nothing so minute or inconsiderable, that I would not rather *know it than not*.  
A desire of knowledge is the natural feeling of mankind; and every human being, whose mind is not debauched, will be willing to give all he has to get it.'

### ***Making facts our servants***

But the main part of intellectual education is not the acquisition of facts. It is the acquisition of that learning which tells us how to make facts our servants. Keats said that an extensive knowledge is necessary to thinking people, for it takes away the heat and fever; helping, by widening speculation, to ease *the burden of the mystery*.

Desire for knowledge, like thirst for riches, increases with the acquisition of it. But if we value the pursuit of knowledge, we must let the seekers free to follow wherever their search may lead. No free mind is a barking dog, to be tethered on a ten-foot chain.

So the learning child must be shown that his or her present toil piles up invisible rewards; but surely there must be toil. The roots of education need not be bitter. When they are, the aspiring student, having gnawed on the bitter roots, must wait with patience for the maturing of the fruits. There is no fruit that is not sour when still unripe.

A conscientious schoolchild may taste the bitterness of the roots, but can have little idea of the sweetness to follow. To sweeten the bitter roots of education, and lead the pupil to a glimpse of the ripe fruit he or she is destined to enjoy, is one task of the professional teacher. It may be that the bitter taste springs only from bad teaching. Aristotle also said that to learn is a natural pleasure, not confined to philosophers but common to all. To be fond of learning is to be already close to knowledge. Few successful adults were not first successful children.

The thirst to know and understand,  
A large and liberal discontent;  
These are the goods in life's rich hand,  
The things that are most excellent.

Those who don't naturally like learning can be led to like it. Virginia Woolf said that children may be ungrateful to him who instructs them unless, in the hours or in the intervals of instruction, he presents a sweet cake to their self-love . . .

Learning cannot however be an end in itself, or it leads to pedantry. Confucius held that when nature exceeds culture we have the rustic, but when culture exceeds nature we have the pedant. The ignoramus can be ruined by the flesh lusting against the spirit; the scholar by the

spirit lusting against the flesh. To spend too much time in studies is sloth; to use studies too much for ornament is affectation; to make judgement wholly by their rules is the drab humour of a shut-up pedant.

### ***Why be a teacher?***

Again it is the professional teacher who has responsibility for the avoidance of these extremes. So what makes a person take up this onerous career? It may be no more than the joy one experiences from learning oneself: he who knows, wishes to impart. Seneca's joy in learning was partly that it enabled him to teach.

What makes a good teacher? It is an art not possessed by all who practise it. Leopardi said that the greater part of the people we assign to teach our children we know for certain are not educated. Yet we do not doubt they can give what they have not themselves received, and which cannot be otherwise acquired.

It has been said that a man who knows his subject thoroughly, a man so soaked in it that he eats it, sleeps it and dreams it - this man can always teach with success, no matter how little he knows of technical pedagogy. Only one thing is needed, that he can condescend to the ignorant.

The teacher needs sympathy, for some youngsters find it very difficult to learn. For many people, learning comes slowly, bit by bit. If you do not make progress with one subject, try another. As turning the log will make a dull fire burn, so changing the subject of study may make a dull brain fire. Then see the sparks rise!

But some brains are incurably dull. A youth so thick that he can learn only by direct experience may not succeed in learning anything important even from that. You can lead a lad to problems, but you can't make him think.

The aim in education is to drive the *equivalent* of experience into inexperienced material. Yet a student may have no mind for truths to which his or her actual experience has afforded no access. If you find that you are unable yourself to learn a vital subject, at least learn who *has* learnt it. Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know how to find someone else who knows it.

The sympathetic teacher needs to encourage by counselling patience.

Not to go back is somewhat to advance,  
And men must walk, at least, before they dance.

He or she who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance: one cannot fly into flying.

Giving the young child who cannot read a real book to handle and look through may seem pointless. Better surely to get on with the job of teaching the alphabet letter by letter. Yet perhaps it can be a part of that essential task of igniting the flame of longing. Longing to know. Longing to possess the treasure that only learning and knowledge can give. The child has to be helped somehow to see and grasp *for itself* the inestimable value of this. It is programmed to do so, for the nature of a child is to be hungry for knowledge.

A childlike person is not one whose development has been arrested. It is one who has given himself or herself a chance of continuing to develop long after most adults have muffled themselves round in the cocoon of middle-aged habit and hidebound convention. Intellectual growth is the only evidence that one lives. When the life-traveller finds himself on a mental road that does not lead to other roads he must turn back - or rust forever at the end of it.

Education teaches you that you are not alone. But in the end, each must find his own way. Eugene O'Neill said-

'The old - like children - talk to themselves, for they have reached that hopeless wisdom of experience which knows that though one were to cry it in the streets to multitudes, or whisper it in the kiss to one's beloved, *the only ears that can ever hear one's secret are one's own.*'

Nevertheless the tree of knowledge is a comfortable and necessary retreat and shelter for us in advanced age. If we do not plant it while young it will give us no shade when old. If you as a youngster can be brought to understand that a proper old age has wisdom for its food, you will so conduct yourself that in the closing time of your life you do not lack for nourishment.

### ***Back to the present***

So much for the voices of the past. I end with two points that we wrangle about very much in the present: rote learning and child abuse.

In 1987 I engaged in a newspaper controversy over rote learning. Doreen Potts, Head of Modern Languages at Oxford's Headington School, said that insistence on this denotes the educational circus mentality, that 'drilling children to jump through paper hoops turns them into performing animals, not thinking beings'. I countered that because of the impressionable nature of the child mind, useful facts can at this age be implanted into memory in an unshiftable form. I went on-

'Then they are of service throughout life. When the dates of history are irremovably learnt, we have throughout life a means of locating important events. When arithmetical truths are so implanted, we can throughout life instantly cope with any situation involving multiplication, division, subtraction - or even differential equations. When the essentials of a foreign language are stamped on our youthful memory we can forever thereafter find our way in that language, even though we may lack fluency.'

The Head of English at The Cooper School joined in with the suggestion that I had overlooked what Charles Dickens said about rote learning in *Hard Times*. He displayed a failure, strange in a Head of English, to understand the nature of the writing of Dickens, the great (if often crude) satirist. Consider the opening words of *Hard Times*-

'Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of any service to them.'

Dickens contrasted Facts with Fancy. He was tilting at an aspect of children's education that had then got out of balance: the schools taught all Fact and no Fancy. Dickens sought to redress the balance, which is a satirist's function. In defence of Fancy, he showed the teachers of his time their error: dost thou think that thou wilt always kill outright the robber Fancy lurking within?

Today it is obvious that the shrewd and practical Dickens would write in the directly opposite sense. He would be angered by the belief that everything in education nowadays is constantly shifting, and there are no longer any facts or other materials worth committing to memory. Could relativism go further? Pity starved children of today, when their teachers believe (not all do) there is nothing whatever certain enough or important enough to be worth their while memorizing!

Dickens would have clearly perceived that the see-saw has now come down with a bump on the other side. The balance is totally against memorizing. No arithmetical tables learnt by heart. No poems or nursery rhymes. No historical dates. No rules of grammar or irregular verbs. Little left after schooldays but the hazy recollection that the teachers were, on the whole, not a bad lot. No useful deposit in the mind to draw on time and again throughout life.

If Dickens were writing *Hard Times* today he would begin his satirizing with this opening paragraph-

‘Now, what I want is, Fancy. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Fancy. Fancy alone is wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Fancy; nothing else will ever be of any service to them.’

Of course it would be a gross exaggeration; but that is the nature of satire.

Now to the subject of child abuse. As long ago as 17 October 1972 I wrote the following in *The Guardian* about advice given to members by the National Union of Teachers (NUT)-

‘The NUT advise teachers to be aloof, avoiding physical contact, and taking care never to be alone with a pupil. This is indeed ‘repellent.’ It is the ultimate in alienation, and teachers should ignore the advice. Instead they should brave the risk of rare false accusations, and keep an important human relationship on a basis of warmth and love - the only love some children are offered. It is deplorable for the NUT to state that a teacher who comforts a disconsolate child in a natural human manner is doing something criminal. The law still treats a teacher as being *in loco parentis*.’

This is still topical. It is a strange irony, in a way summing up the whole controversy discussed in this article, that in an age that puts the child at the centre of education and wants above all to ‘keep the kids happy’ we should find that a teacher is condemned who tries to take away an unhappy pupil’s distress in the most natural way possible.

### ***Conclusion***

So have the past voices helped solve the dilemma? I must leave that for each reader to judge. Whatever their conclusion, I hope they will feel that we do well, in thinking of education, not to believe that the past has *nothing* to teach us.

I have lived my life in eight decades, each very different from the others. My own childhood offered the bitter roots rather than the real books. That does not lead me to say, as some of my age do, ‘A good beating never did me any harm: look at me now!’ But perhaps it is that which does on the whole cause me to judge, on a matter where everyone must judge for themselves, that yes it was best for me to be well disciplined (though not necessarily beaten), to be given lots of homework (and lots of punishment if I failed to do it), to be made to memorize extensively, to be taught mental arithmetic, and to be instructed that adults come first and children must be polite and quiet and well-behaved.

Manners, it was said by a great educator of the fourteenth century, makyth man.

*New Humanist* Vol. 110 No. 1 (1995).