



How schools can strike back

Two worlds are in collision in our days. The new world of images and electronics is battling the old one of language and print, and is successful on many fronts. But not yet on all of them. There are areas left where the contest is still undecided. One of them, according to Neil Postman, is education. He counts the school as among the few remaining strongholds of the pre-electronic world, and he works hard to keep it in that camp. He even proposes to use it *against* the dominant culture, as a type of countervailing or counter-cultural force. In what follows we will have a look at the strategies he suggests.

"Edutainment"

To say that the school belongs to the traditional camp is not to suggest that it remains unaffected by the media revolution. Teachers know better. On the one hand, there is the *indirect* influence of the electronic media. Students who are raised on "Sesame Street" and other television fare often have a short attention span, don't like reading, and demand immediacy, instant gratification, and entertainment. Overexposure to computer and video games, furthermore, tends to develop a pragmatic mindset: truth is not what someone tells you, or what you decide after carefully weighing the evidence for and against, but what works. Contemplation is out; activity and snap-decisions are in.

In the second place, there is of course the schools' *direct* involvement with electronics. Millions of dollars were spent a decade or so ago in an attempt to computerize schools and provide teachers with the necessary software. That first attempt at computerization was less than successful, but the policy is not being abandoned. A recent issue of the Toronto *Globe* informs us that we may expect a new generation of educational technologies to hit the market. One of many examples: Nintendo of America Inc. is moving into what it has the deplorable taste of calling "edutainment" software, and is already marketing its "Mario Paint" programme, which allows children to practice art and animation on a television screen. It is also working on a game called "Mario Is Missing!" which will teach geography and history entertainingly.

That type of effort has the support of high-ranking educational gurus, who believe that this time around a massive dose of electronic gadgetry will help solve America's educational problems. It also has the blessing of the Children's Television Workshop (the originator of such programmes as "Sesame Street") and, of course, of students, many of whom prefer computer games any day to the plodding process of formal schooling with its deferred gratification. "*With games and entertainment, kids are active and making decisions every second,*" the *Globe* article quotes an American sixth-grader as saying. "*In school, you sit there and make a decision every half-hour.*" Various educational leaders agree that education is out of sync with the modern world. Schools are becoming dinosaurs. It's time they got ready for the 21st century.

School as a countervailing force

There are still people, however, who refuse to believe that schools ought to be a mirror image of their society. Some 2000 years ago the Roman philosopher Cicero already declared that the purpose of education is not to make students conform to the ideas of their times, but rather to free them from (what he called) the tyranny of the present. Cicero still has disciples. The late Allan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, was one of them. Neil Postman is another. In 1979 he published a book entitled *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, wherein he dealt with the Ciceronian precept. He has returned to the topic in later studies, including *Amusing Ourselves to Death and Technopoly*.

The way in which the school can oppose "*the prevailing biases of the culture*," he writes, is by strengthening the traditional characteristics of its curriculum. Rather than imitating the electronic media, schools must stress language, subject-matter, work, discipline, reasoning, sequence, hierarchy and prerequisites. They must do that consistently, for the competition is severe. Children nowadays follow two curricula, Postman says. What he calls the First Curriculum is provided by media like television, films, radio and records. That curriculum has been estimated to occupy about 20,000 hours of the average student's life-span between ages 5 and 18. The Second Curriculum, provided by the schools, occupies little more than half that time.

Postman lists three additional requirements that the schools must fulfil if they are to make headway in the battle against the new ideologies.

- In the first place, while combatting the influence of the electronic curriculum, schools must accommodate the students' legitimate desire for wholeness and relevance by ensuring that the curriculum has coherence, which means that it is constructed around a unifying theme.
- Secondly, in order to counteract the modern world's present-centredness (and so to help students escape "*the tyranny of the present*"), schools must follow a historical approach in the teaching of all subjects.
- And lastly, schools must make the teaching of media literacy a part of their programme.

A unifying theme

Much has been written in recent years about the need of individuals and societies to have what is called a "grand story" or "grand narrative." The terms refer to a type of comprehensive worldview in narrative form, often based on a religious faith that allows people to make sense of their world and find meaning for their lives. It serves, among other things, to show the connections between past and present, and provides people — individually and communally — with norms, standards, and guidelines. By providing common allegiances, common assumptions, and a moral consensus, it acts as a society's cohesive force. It does all that, in most cases, by pointing to the authority, precepts, and guidance of a transcendent power. There can also be secular grand narratives, however. Marxism used to be one. So was nazism, and so were the Great American Dream and the utopian Great Societies of other nations.

Because these grand narratives unite an entire culture, they automatically provide the schools with a unifying theme. A major reason why education is in disarray, Postman suggests, is the dearth of such unifying themes in a world where Christianity is in decline and most surrogate religions and ideologies, including the faith in progress and human rationality, have collapsed. Teachers no longer know what to teach, or why, and students are given no framework to help them organize and make sense of the information glut they daily encounter. Worse, they are told that there is no such framework, because ultimately there is no meaning to life.

There is no need to give a great deal of attention to Postman's proposal for a replacement-narrative. Rejecting a number of traditional "tales," including the Christian one (which he believes does not fit today's pluralistic and multicultural world), he proposes "*The Ascent of Humanity*" — a theme that is both comprehensive and politically correct. Although not without merit, his choice, needless to say, can't be ours. It is even doubtful that it will fit the bill in secular schools. After all, our post-modern world seems to be losing faith in globalism, progress, and even in man himself. In their search for meaning people today tend to concentrate on the intimate community, the ethnic or linguistic or national group, and increasingly also on the transcendental and "spirituality," in whatever form.

Competing narratives

We may not agree with Postman's choice, but his emphasis on the need for a central narrative is to the point. Christian parents and educators have of course always been aware of its importance. It does not hurt to be reminded, however, that the Christian "narrative" must be the unifying theme, the framework, the glue that holds our schools' curriculum together, giving it coherence and meaning. Indeed, giving coherence and meaning to all of life.

The reminder is especially timely because the Christian message is under serious attack by the modern media, which peddle their own, competing narratives. Perhaps the most striking example of the devastating power of these narratives, in their competition with ancestral traditions, comes from recent experiences of North America's native peoples. We should learn from that tragic example. Mankind obviously can't live by two competing tales. Nor can our young people. It is the urgent task of educators — not just at school but also at home and in the church — to show them that there is no comparison between the Christian message and the tales produced by the modern entertainment industry, strong as the appeal of the latter may be even for Christian youngsters. Our young people have to learn what it means, in practice, that all things hold together in Christ (Colossians 1).

Remembering the past

The grand narrative, as Postman defines it, is a story of human history, usually based on a religious tradition, *"that gives meaning to the past, explains the present, and gives guidance for the future."* The competing narratives of the electronic age do not fit that definition. They are secular and stress immediacy. They may or may not express some concern for the future, but they have none whatsoever for the past. In that sense they illustrate the anti-historical bias of our entire society as it is reflected in all cultural manifestations, including education.

For as is well known, in today's schools little attention is given to the study of the past. If history is taught at all, the concern tends to be with process, not with content. "Doing history" is the fashionable thing, rather than knowing it. The story itself is irrelevant. As a result, modern society suffers from a case of collective cultural amnesia, which means, among other things, that it is unaware of the possibility that the past may have worthwhile, even life-enhancing, alternatives to current wisdoms, priorities, and practices.

Neil Postman joins Allan Bloom and other conservatives in deploring this state of affairs, and in urging reforms. Like the author of *The Closing of the American Mind*, Postman believes that a society cut off from its roots cannot but wither. And again like Bloom, he is convinced that we cannot really test the opinions and beliefs whereby our society lives unless we trace the origin of those ideas, *"in order to seek the real arguments for them."* Perhaps even more so than Bloom, however, Postman insists that in the fight against the biases of our culture history must be central to the *entire* curriculum. This means that every subject is to be taught historically: literature and art, music and mathematics, economics, politics, geography, and even science and technology. Or rather: especially science and technology. I will come back to that point.

Such a historical approach will make available to us the past's treasures of wisdom and insight, acquainting us with *"the best that has been said and done"* by our ancestors; it will provide us with examples of both what to avoid and what to emulate; and by showing the connections that tie the remotest past to the present it will remind us that a culture is an organic whole, a growing and living thing that cannot survive if its roots are cut off. As a side-effect of all that, it will teach us humility, Postman implies, by showing us that, if in certain respects we can see further than our ancestors, it is because we have the good fortune of standing on their shoulders.

Teaching in a historical context

Christian schools have always believed in the importance of the historical approach, and Christian educators perhaps don't find much that is new in Postman's arguments on this score. Maybe there isn't. I personally believe, however, that we have another case here where a reminder won't hurt. To prove the point I could refer to a variety of subjects, but restraints of space prevent that. I will limit myself to a brief outline of the merits of teaching science in a historical context.

It has long been traditional wisdom to present scientific theories (including such anti-biblical ones as evolutionism) as the inevitable and logical outcome of a totally objective scientific process. It is not difficult to see how this view enhanced the already exalted position of science in our society, nor how it made life difficult for Christians.

It is therefore good news for Christians that in recent decades secular scientists, especially philosophers and historians of science, have been showing with an abundance of evidence that the traditional picture is altogether erroneous. Science is not objective. In their research and in their choice of theories scientists are no less influenced by the prevailing worldview and by their personal beliefs and idiosyncrasies than are other mortals. Obviously it is of the greatest importance for Christian teachers — *especially* for Christian teachers — that when teaching science they include the historical context, showing how and why certain scientific theories were rejected and others adopted.

The Trojan example

And what goes for science goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for practically every other subject taught at the schools. And for those that perhaps are not yet, but should be, on the curriculum, such as the role and nature of technology, including communications technology. For, as I said earlier, the electronic revolution cannot be rolled back. Television, the computer, and related media are here to stay. We will have to learn to live with them. Our attitude, however, should be one of weariness, of suspicion even, rather than of naive and joyful acceptance. If television should indeed turn out to be the Trojan horse of western civilization, as Quentin Schultze (in *Redeeming Television*) suggests it may, then it behooves us to get to arms, rather than be found dancing in the streets like the Trojans of old.

FG Oosterhoff

© 2012

www.christianstudylibrary.org