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ABSTRACT

For many students, the community college is the first and perhaps only place where technological and humanities instruction will be articulated. It is suggested that technology has never been far from the set of practices, usually academic, called "humanities" and the boundary between the two has long been unstable and contested. However, while technology is generally viewed as ideologically neutral, widespread business/education partnerships have imposed commercial and technological agendas and metaphors on education at the colleges. Confusion among humanities faculty over the issue has prevented a critique of commercial and technological ideologies dominant on many campuses. Partnerships with business are understandably attractive to education; the single most frequently cited benefit to such partnerships is that they provide new sources of funding. However, these partnerships also bring along such elements of the business agenda as a profit-obsessed consumerism, an alienating vocationalism, and a ruthless utilitarianism. Students become alternately the "customers" or the "products" of the business of education. This language is not particularly disturbing because it replaces humanist jargon with corporate jargon, but because it signifies the commoditization of learning. The humanities should not resort, however, to self-defensive assertions of vitality in terms of business culture or retreat to nostalgic exile. Instead, the humanities recuperated by a postmodern turn to critical, rhetorical, and historicist analysis, can expose the ideological underpinnings of consumer technoculture, rather than merely complaining about it or collaborating with it. (Contains 16 references.) (TGI)

Technological Education and the Postmodern Humanities

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Paper presented at the National Conference of the Community Colleges Humanities Association (Washington, DC, November 9-11, 1995)

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by

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For nearly six million college students (better than a third of all students in higher education) one of the United States' over 1,000 public community colleges is the first and perhaps only site where a relationship between technology and the humanities will be articulated. The context for this articulation is likely to be students' career studies at the juncture of technology and the corporate culture. As an assistant professor of English at one of Virginia's 23 community colleges, I have the opportunity to teach both traditional literature survey courses (in English, American or World Literature) and Technical Writing, and as a student of critical praxis in the classroom, seek opportunities to connect the two. Thus a couple of items have been rolling around in my head recently, which I label Exhibits A, B, and C. Exhibit A: An article from the Business section of the (Norfolk) Virginian-Pilot. If a collection of practices known as the "liberal arts" (one component of which is the "humanities") still possess a kind of cachet, to which this headline and article attest, it is only a triumph of style, in the nostalgic sense of Ralph Lauren for yachting or Banana Republic for big game hunting or J. Peterman for ranching. At our college, English--or more appropriately, perhaps, "Anguish"-- Department faculty are trundled out when the occasion calls for correctness; we are after all a "service" department. Exhibit B:

A 10th-century ivory book cover from the Kunsthistoriches Museum of Vienna, depicting Pope Gregory I (the Great) writing, while scribes copy his book for circulation, thus depicting the medieval technology of book production, what otherwise we might recognize as a form of technical writing. Separated from the context of its production and use, displayed in that temple of the 19th-century's commoditization of art, and endowed with the patina of antiquity (in other words, by chance it survived and others didn't), this artifact of technology has become "art," in quotes. Finally, Exhibit C: A line drawing of a Kaypro II computer, from the User's Guide, my first computer, purchased in 1985. Given time, this technological artifact, separated from the context of its production and use, is likely to become an object of display for its formal and compositional features, utility giving way to contemplation. In the meantime, it gathers dust in my attic. With these three exhibits, I want to suggest visually that technology has never been far from the set of practices, usually academic, that we call the "humanities" and that the boundary between the two has long been unstable and contested.

The vocational emphasis of community college culture has tended to represent technology as ideologically neutral. Furthermore, business/education partnerships, much touted throughout the Reagan-Bush years as the preeminent forum for educational reform, have imposed commercial and technological agendas and metaphors on education. Throughout the 1980s education became the scapegoat for a variety of social and economic dislocations. Unfortunately, confusion in community college academic culture, especially among faculty in the humanities, has prevented a critique of the commercial and technological ideologies dominant on many campuses. Humanities faculties typically split

between "techies" and "technophobes," the first often behaving as though technologies are disinterested and benign, the latter, as though technologies are the antithesis of humanistic ideologies.

This impasse serves neither the undergraduate students who are training for technological careers nor the larger community that the community college serves (which includes labor, management, and small business owners). Some traditions, habits, tropes and disciplines of the humanities--particularly critical, rhetorical and historicist analyses--are uniquely situated to conduct a critical reflection on education's partnerships with corporate technology and to deconstruct the ideological assumptions of technologists, as well as of their own. The postmodern turn to critical, rhetorical, and historicist analyses thus also marks the recuperation of the humanities from its modernist crisis. The "tools" of the humanities--questioning assumptions and interrogating contradictions--"position" these disciplines as distinctive "partners" in such a dialogue.

For the purposes of this critique I am admittedly conflating business and technology. The damage this conflation may do to the nuances that distinguish each I hope will be mitigated by the proximity of both business and technology in Western society. For one thing, today the first is inconceivable without the second. And both the culture of business and the culture of technology share common assumptions, particularly an insistence on measurable results and a valorizing of utilitarian ends.

The commitments and tropes of business culture are understandably attractive to higher education. The single most frequently cited benefit of business/education

partnerships, for example, has been discovering in business and industry a new source of research funding to replace dwindling federal grants. Between federal deregulation and privatization in the 1980s and economic changes in the 1990s, federal support for academic research is not likely to rebound. For scientists, particularly in "hot" fields like biotechnology, partnerships with business have offered not only research funding but also lucrative and powerful corporate membership. Also, given the preponderance of undergraduate majors in business and career fields (with more students than in the liberal arts curricula and many more than in mathematics and the sciences), education partnerships with business offer benefits to both faculty, students, and business. (Though, paradoxically, as I write this our college has just merged two academic divisions with *shrinking* programs--Business Science and Engineering/Technology--while enrollment in our transfer programs in Liberal Arts and Sciences are growing.) Faculty have the opportunity to study business and management as it is actually practiced. Students can prepare in an academic setting that is not isolated from the "real world." Business and industry can hire new graduates who are adequately prepared and can implement timely academic research and reflection. But perhaps most significantly, the methodologies of business--empirical and positivist--seem particularly appealing to educators who already live in a consumer culture that valorizes the instantaneous and the materialistic. Thus the business emphasis on concrete results readily displaces education's traditional metaphysical tropes of the elusiveness of a "wisdom," or a "learning," which might not become apparent in the student for many years. Community college professors in the humanities, already a dislocated and marginalized realm in a postmodern consumerist culture, are as likely to seek legitimation for their

"service department" role, separated from the university's disciplinary research agenda, as they are to grumble about the decline in "real learning" or to lament the quality of our current students compared with those we "used to teach" in some prelapsarian past.

However, these same benefits also signify some serious cultural deficits in the business agenda that are seldom interrogated, including a profit-obsessed consumerism, an alienating vocationalism, and a ruthless utilitarianism. While the practical and immediate gratifications of American business culture are appealing, they are addictive and thus repress self-critique. Although promising a better standard of living, career education can enslave students to a repertoire of skills defined by business owners to make employees compliant and alienated from the ways that they are used by the managers. Business and industry seeks "problem solvers," for example, who can improve profitability, but not "problematizers" who can apply a critical praxis to the ideologies of the business culture. Community college students, often coming from lower social and economic classes, are particularly vulnerable to the appeal of an uncritical careerism. Finally, much American business culture holds to a "bottom line," its most famous trope, in which decisions are based on perceptions of usefulness. General education courses are proposed as "useful" because they make a career trainee more culturally literate and conversant with diverse cultures, thus "positioning" the future employee as a more marketable "package." Usefulness itself is gauged by a further reductionist measure: short-term profits. Thus in Virginia, the General Assembly has required that we reduce the number of credit hours for all undergraduate degree programs, ostensibly to save students from a tuition inflation (nearly 100% in the past five years at our college) brought on by the legislators' refusal to

raise revenues for higher education during the most recent recession. On that Procrustean bed, general education courses are amputated first.

In the discourse around business/education partnerships business tropes dominate the traditional language of humanism, although the partners continue to pay lip service to the "formation of the whole person" in "traditions of learning and wisdom," whatever those sliding signifiers might mean to the various constituencies employing them. In these partnerships, students are alternately the "customers" or the "products" of the "business" of education. The student's status is a signifier of economic power: students who pay their own way, like the older community college student, are "customers," while the traditional late adolescent undergraduate is a "product" for a tuition-paying parent who is the "customer." On occasion, too, the business for which the student is training is a "customer," as is society at large, since the business of America is business. Whether a "customer" or a "product" the student "buys" a repertoire of "skills." Learning then is itself another "product." The already disarticulated general education curriculum comes to read like a mail-order catalog or a cafeteria menu. In this discourse the disciplines construct diverse methodologies to define "problems" and "solve" them.[1] Faculty therefore are evaluated on "productivity," a signifier from the profit-and-loss sheet. This "productivity" is not only the standard for evaluating faculty; it is also the goal of education itself. The faculty's traditional "collegiality" is replaced by "team work," which seems synonymous until one investigates who is empowered to set the team's agenda, or, to continue the trope, who sets the "rules," names the "stakeholders" and "key players," "referees" the game, and proclaims the "winners." This masculinist language discloses an obsession with

competition, which in American business once meant a kind of intramural domestic sport, but increasingly recognizes the internationalizing of economies and cultures by seeking a competitive education that is "world class," a signifier also attached to automotive, aerospace, and other technological industries.[2]

Typically in community college organization, linked as it is to a particular geopolitical locality (a city or county, for example), the college serves a so-called "service area." In the community-based programming model developed at North Carolina State University's Academy for Community College Leadership Advancement, Innovation & Modeling (ACCLAIM), colleges are encouraged to perform "environmental scanning" in order to identify both "target publics" and "stakeholders" (Boone).

Throughout this discourse the figurative language of commerce dominates. What disturbs me particularly about this language is not that it replaces humanist jargon with corporate jargon but that it signifies the commoditization of learning. In his book The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property, Lewis Hyde suggests that art exists in two economies: a market economy and a gift economy, but that what defines art is gift: "If [it is] right to say that where there is no gift there is no art, then it may be possible to destroy a work of art by converting it into a pure commodity" (xiii). Hyde attempts to construct a theory of gift exchange that would honor both the giftedness of art and the market desire for ownership (with its consequent rewards for the artist) and concludes:

> In a land that feels no reciprocity toward nature, in an age when the rich imagine themselves to be self-made, we should not be surprised to find the interior poverty of the gifted state replicated in the actual poverty of the gifted. Nor should we be

> surprised to find artists who, like Whitman and Pound, seek to speak to us in that prophetic voice which would create a world more hospitable to the creative spirit. (280).

In my experience, education and learning have been predicated on a similar gift exchange among teacher-learners and student-learners, a gift exchange that, as Hyde points out, "unlike the sale of a commodity . . . tends to establish a relationship between the parties involved" (xiv). It is probably because of these irreplaceable relationships in over two decades as an adult learner that I come to suspect the tropes of business in education.

But that cluster of activities and disciplines usually rounded up together as the "humanities" have seemed confused and puzzled by the predominance of commercial metaphors in education. At the community college, this confusion comes in part from what Dennis McGrath and Martin B. Spear, in their book The Academic Crisis of the Community College, call "the decline of the humanities." Disassembling two sections of a policy statement on the humanities from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), McGrath and Spear discover five competing agendas, practices, and pedagogies: the humanities as knowledge, as cultural recovery, as articulation of values, as cultivation of the self, and as interpretation (97-119). Furthermore, general education (in which the humanities figure importantly) "is the area of the curriculum which organizationally belongs to no one in particular, so that, as Boyer and Levine put it, 'General education . . . is the easiest place to dump those concerns that everyone agrees are serious, but for which no one seems willing to take responsibility'" (89). In other words, the humanities are to the career and technology disciplines what the education partner is to the business, industry, and

politics partners: a scapegoat substitute for critical analysis of complex social and economic problems.

Among the responses to this crisis that McGrath and Spear propose is a restructuring of the curriculum, noting that competing and incommensurable classroom ideologies remain unacknowledged and unexplored. In particular they urge reconceived introductory courses that would expose the "theoretical perspectives and methodological commitments that constitute disciplines" and decentralized writing instruction that would investigate "what disciplines do with language--with reading and writing, arguing, conversing, and understanding" (164).

Perhaps the best known cultural critic of technology is thorough-going humanist Neil Postman. In Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology, Postman recalls C.P. Snow's assertion of two cultures, but dismisses that claim, proposing instead that "the argument is not between humanists and scientists but between technology and everybody else" (xii). Although I would not share his vehemence about technology, he does accurately read the commercial dominance in education:

> . . .the United States is not a culture but merely an economy, which is the last refuge of an exhausted philosophy of education. This belief, I might add, is precisely reflected in the President's Commission Report, A Nation at Risk, where you will find a definitive expression of the ideas that education is an instrument of economic policy and of very little else. (174)

Postman issues a call for educational reform and advances the role of what he calls "the loving resistance fighter":

> A resistance fighter understands that technology must never be accepted as part of the natural order of things, that every technology--from an IQ test to an automobile to a television set to a computer--is a product of a particular economic and political context and carries with it a program, an agenda, and a philosophy that may or may not be life-enhancing and that therefore require scrutiny, criticism, and control. In short, a technological resistance fighter maintains an epistemological and psychic distance from any technology, so that it always appears somewhat strange, never inevitable, never natural. (184-185)

Postman is enough of a liberal humanist to see no apparent irony in his use of the category "natural" and decries the failure of modern secular education as a loss of a "moral, social, or intellectual center" (186). In light of postmodern theory his recommendation of Bronowski's "Ascent of Man" trope seems both quaint and ingenuous. The human narrative he desires is naively idealistic and coherent, which one might expect from an American cultural critic. However, his education reform proposal makes two points that resonate with much postmodern thought. Postman urges an education based in history, or more accurately "histories" since

> . . .histories are themselves products of culture; . . .[they are] a mirror of the conceits and even metaphysical biases of the culture that produced [them]. . .[and] the religion, politics, geography, and economy of a people lead them to re-create their r ast along certain lines. (191)

And Postman suggests that "every teacher ought to be a semantics teacher, since it is not possible to separate language from what we call knowledge" (194). Semantics for Postman

studies the uses of language, the relationships between signifiers and signifieds, and the making and interpreting of meaning.

In Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression, Herbert I. Schiller offers another persuasive critique of the expansion of business and technology. The result, he contends, has been a weakening of democracy, the privatization of information and education, and the limitation of cultural power and public expression. He proposes a new media-cultural politics as a means of resistance against the hegemony of the (inter)national information complex. This politics would make "the systemic links of the informational-cultural complex widely known and understandable to as many as possible" while analyzing and reappraising its ideological bases (166). Schiller is implicitly proposing an educational agenda to include dethroning technology, which is not to say abandoning it, but distinguishing "between using instrumentation for social ends and, as in current practice, using technology as a social end in itself" (173).

Richard A. Lanham takes a far more sanguine view of the social, technological, and theoretical changes that bring others profound grief. The chief social changes are the democratization of higher education, a growing pressure for public accountability, and a more frequently fragmented educational sequence alternating with work (a process typical of the community college student). Among the technological changes, Lanham suggests that the computer digitizes the arts, radically democratizes them, and requires a postmodern aesthetic, which he contends is a rhetorical aesthetic. Finally among the theoretical changes, Lanham proposes a revival of the classical rhetorical paideia, "an applied rather than a pure, an interactive rather than a passive, conception of the liberal arts" (39). His

proposal is not cashing in on the cultural nostalgia of Allen Bloom, E.D. Hirsch, William Bennett, and Lynne Cheney. Rather he contends that "this revival of our traditional paideia includes those parts of contemporary literary criticism and cultural studies which have rediscovered that all arguments are constructed with a purpose, to serve an interest" (40). In support he cites Terry Eagleton's "rediscovery" of rhetoric in Literary Theory: An Introduction and Gerald Graff's historicizing pedagogy. Lanham even offers a revised freshman composition program, beginning with a "bistable conceptual core" of formal and moral judgments, developing a rhetoric of the arts, and teaching the two-sided argument, a program with a core curriculum in language, arts and democratic politics (45-46).

According to critics as diverse as Dennis McGrath and Martin B. Spear, Neil Postman, Herbert I. Schiller, and Richard Lanham the humanities' critique of commercial and technological culture needs to be rhetorical and historicist. By rhetorical I take them to mean how knowledges and meanings are constructed and contested; by historicist, how that rhetorical activity occurs over time and in diverse cultures. Graff contends that higher education infantilizes students by repressing the conflicts among scholars. McGrath and Spear suggest that this repression is even more apparent among community college faculty. Since community college students are less likely to inherit dominant cultural forms from their parents (for example, networking rituals, "high culture" forms, learned dialectal patterns), their need to have technology denaturalized and consumerism problematized would seem more acute.

Because the modernist triumph of science and technology has already rendered obsolete those commitments, tactics, and strategies commonly called the "humanities," why

should we resort to self-defensive assertions of our vitality in the terms of business culture or retreat to nostalgic exile behind walls that are ivy-covered only in our fantasies? Instead the humanities recuperated by a postmodern turn to critical, rhetorical, and historicist analysis can expose the ideological underpinnings of consumer technoculture, instead of merely complaining about it or collaborating with it.[3]

Notes

1. Business and education partnerships thus tend to select specific technological problems that admit of solutions (applied science), rather than the open-ended basic scientific research. This tendency has been widely discussed and reported in the journals, for example Colleen Cordes reporting in The Chronicle of Higher Education; Ivars Peterson, in Science News; and Barbara J. Culliton, in Science.

2. A recent article in The Chronicle for Higher Education reporting the deployment in higher education of the industrial process called TQM (Total Quality Management) (Mangan) provoked both critical and clarifying letters from Robert Petersen, Homer H. Johnson, and Sarah Hanley. The letters reflect a concern with the ideologies and the related linguistic tropes of business and industry.

3. This project, of course, has already begun, exemplified for the discourse disciplines in Patricia Harkin and John Schilb's Contending with Words: Composition and Rhetoric in a Postmodern Age.

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