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The Other Face of Janus

By Howard A. Doughty & Lorne J. Kenney

A clever definition of insanity is that it means doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome. The adage is most often attributed to Albert Einstein. Some Americans credit it to Benjamin Franklin. Its roots may go deep into ancient China; but, whatever its provenance, it is apt in the discussion of education today.

All sorts of things seem to be going wrong from the economy to the ecology, and from ethics to education. Yet, the cry is persistently if only implicitly made: if it didn't work in the past, let's do it again—only harder!

Of course, the people urging us on don't mean that we ought to do exactly the same things as in the past. In fact, to hear them tell it, they are encouraging us to do spectacularly new things, to be on the cutting edge, take risks, innovate, review and renew. They want us to be smarter, better and quicker. They keep insisting that we "think outside the box," without even imagining that we might be playing with the wrong box.

Innovation, they suggest, should be about procedures and methods. Little thought is given to proximate, much less ultimate aims.

This little contribution invites educators to take a break. Instead of engaging in frantic, frenetic and frenzied efforts to drive the train faster toward the edge of whatever cliff awaits us, we think it might be worthwhile to look back a little—not in anger, and certainly not in sentimental nostalgia, but with a view toward getting and resetting our bearings. What is the educational enterprise to which we devote our life's work all about anyway?

We rely on two bits of excerpted writing, both over half a century old. One comes from Jack Kenney, a high school English teacher whose career in Port Colborne and Collingwood, Ontario spanned the years from 1938 to 1974. It is part of a commencement address that he gave to Grade 8 students in 1955. The other was composed for the September, 1957 issue of the *Royal Bank of Canada Monthly Letter* by James Muir, then Chairman of the Board and President of that venerable financial institution. The first gives advice to students about to enter high school. The second offers counsel to those concerned with even higher education.

Here's some of what Jack Kenney said to the young people in a school in Port Colborne, Ontario:

> I want to speak to you boys and girls about your purpose or reason for going on to high school. Some of you, no doubt, have answers to that question in vague terms of jobs and professions you wish to enter, but I am going to tell you that for the next five years each and every one of you has one purpose and one purpose only, and that purpose is the enlargement, development and training of your minds or intellects.

Jack Kenney unapologetically served up that undiluted language to Grade 8 students in its fully undiluted form (complete sentences, no PowerPoint). He went on to champion a view that has largely been lost as our schools, colleges and universities have systematically transformed themselves, allegedly in reaction to the needs of a competitive, global economy.

> One final thought on [the] question of academic achievement, and that is on the question of what I call intellectual curiosity. Some people call it 'love of learning for the sake of learning.' I shall define it as simply the desire to find out about things for the fun of knowing. This world we live in is a tremendously interesting place; it is full of things to learn about. And you, you young people right here, have opportunities to learn such as have never been offered in the whole history of civilized man. Had you lived in ancient Egypt you would have had to have been a noble's son to gain even the limited knowledge of that day, Had you lived a hundred years ago, the vast majority of you, unless you had shown promise of real ability would be finishing instead of continuing your education.

He concluded with a reference to a foreign leader, less known, perhaps, to college students today than to elementary school pupils in the 1950s.

> Abraham Lincoln so loved learning that he studied long and arduous hours, at night, too, by candlelight. But his love of learning produced the Gettysburg Address. He, and men like him, believed that no hardship was too great if knowledge was the result. We could do, in this age of easy education for all, with more of that zeal for learning, for the love of learning. Therefore, I say, take advantage of your opportunities; cultivate your books and become friends with them. They will never desert you and what they give you will be a priceless treasure to you all the days of your lives.

Now, of course, we can imagine some people responding that such thoughts, while charming and possibly inspiring in their quaint way, have little place in the no-nonsense world of contemporary college education. The stakes are too high. Mastery of vocational "skill-sets" is demanded in the ever more merciless world of business and industry. Individuals are personally responsible for their own marketability, and there can be no distraction for the luxury of knowledge for "the fun" of it. Learning is a business. It demands results, immediate measurable pay-offs, knowledge that can be put to use.

We want to argue the alternative and we want to have it both ways. In fact, we want to argue that education is in trouble if it is not *both* fun *and* practical. The "fun" associated with intellectual curiosity is the key to the most effective learning. It entails imagination, creativity and sometimes even courage. It requires an active and an open mind. It compels "essay-type" answers in a declining multiple-choice world. It disdains "teaching to the test." Paradoxically, it is also unremittingly practical. If, as our political, commercial and financial leaders insist, the future will be determined by the nimble and the analytically capable, and not by the dim-witted and repetitive, then we will have to consider re-designing the box, rather than

merely being caught thinking outside it. That takes a willingness to test the boundaries of our existence, to interrogate authority, to probe and occasionally to puncture pre-conceived ideas and conventional wisdom, and to put in play a sometimes seemingly subversive intelligence. Whenever someone pompously says: “The reality is [fill in the blank],” the response must never be to defer to what is, but to affirm that the it could be otherwise. Posing alternative possibilities and making good on them is surely necessary to enhance the quality of our lives, if not to maintain life itself.

Turning now to the most practical of men with a shrewd “head for business” and a “tough-minded” approach to life, we repeat what James Muir told his employees and customers fifty-four years ago:

> We have not enough men and women trained to take advantage of the marvelous opportunities opened up by technology in nuclear energy, electronics, aviation, medicine, chemistry, industrial production and civil engineering. Apart from these ‘practical’ shortages, we are suffering from poverty of preparation for the critical national and world duties which are falling upon us.

The challenge, he insisted, could be met only with a broader vision of education than is sometimes permitted as we focus on narrowly vocational education. Muir continued:

> A liberal education is not the mere ghostly shadow of things that some persons imagine it to be. It is real and substantial. No matter how glorified the science may be, or how practical the technology, it needs an arterial connection to basic education if it is to live. A liberal education is practical because it provides experience in formulating judgments about concrete contemporary problems.

Now, don’t get us wrong. There was no happy consensus about education in the 1950s. There never has been and we genuinely hope there never will be. Consensus implies banality, where it doesn’t imply tyranny. So, Jack Kenney and James Muir would have disagreed about some things. Muir, for example, held that “knowledge is useless unless applied.” He would certainly not have thought of it as “fun.” Nonetheless, both men insisted that knowledge was not merely instrumental, and meant only to help us get jobs and get ahead, no matter what the direction. Both saw education as linked to cultural understanding and social responsibility and democratic ideals. It was one with citizenship and civic commitment. How else to explain why the Chairman of the Royal Bank of Canada oversaw the publication of monthly economic and, yes, even philosophical essays distributed to staff and customers. Why else would Jack Kenney have repeated the mantra: “The only object is intellect”?

We offer the following observations for reflection. First, the opportunities for education and the accessibility of knowledge today make the 1950s seem almost like the ancient Egypt to which Jack Kenney referred—elitist in form and limited in content. Second, the concrete problems today, from climate change to fiscal crises, and from the exploding population bomb to clashing cultures—never mind the apocalyptic threats of war, famine and pestilence—seem even more daunting than those faced half a century ago, when naïve elementary

school children were given the preposterous advice to “duck and cover” in the event of a nuclear attack. Finally, there needs to be a serious (dare we say “adult”) discussion of education: What is it? What is it for? Who is it for?

We are rightfully anxious about a new generation that is confident in its skill in manipulating electronic communications keyboards, but seemingly incapable of composing a few coherent paragraphs. It is fair to worry about graduates who can navigate the social media, but have trouble working in complex organizations. It is disquieting to see them exhibit an apparent compassionate concern about global issues, but display a disproportionate sense of entitlement to the benefits of this society without either a recognizable work ethic or a proper understanding of how questions of equity are posed, much less successfully resolved.

Of course, it may be that these perceptions and concerns reflect more about us as qualified curmudgeons on the downside of our biological arcs than about contemporary students — in or out of college. We try not to fall victim to the conceit of age: “the older we get the better we were.” Still, we have no fear of asserting that Dr. Pangloss was wrong. Not everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. Our contemporary patterns of living and learning can be distressing, not just because of the empirical data attesting to pollution, poverty and the potential for pandemics, but also from young people themselves as they express more than the usual angst about their personal identities and anxieties about the future. We know their grasp of the fundamentals of democracy and even such simple acts as voting is weak. They are smart enough to know that they don’t know much about their culture, history and society, and it worries the better and the brighter amongst them. They know they know lots of “whats” and a few “hows,” but are ill at ease and at sea when it comes to the “whys.” They are rightly apprehensive about the fate of the world that they and their children will inhabit. Some turn sullen. Some are cynical. Some retreat into consumerism. Some can become easy targets for shallow peddlers of slogans and vapid hope.

In our collective rush to an uncertain future, therefore, it might be useful to withdraw, take a deep communal breath and ask ourselves again some fundamental questions about our own purposes. The Roman god Janus looked both to the future and to the past. We must surely look ahead in order to plot a course through approaching storms; but we are in danger of losing our direction if we ignore the wisdom of the past. It is required of us to balance both.

We inhabit a world in which almost all of us make our living by manipulating abstract symbols, as opposed to performing arduous physical labour. So, even if the technological utopia of full employment in well-paid, emotionally and intellectually satisfying work has turned out to be an illusion, and our children and their children end up less well-off than their parents and grandparents, their individual welfare and the improvement of their society will depend not on brawn but on brain. Accordingly, no knowledge or insight (theoretical or applied), no way of knowing (aesthetic, rational, empirical, emotional or intuitive) can be predismissed as “irrelevant". Indeed, we never know when the most the most abstruse factoid, the most bizarre analogue or the most obscure reference will

suddenly produce the critical insight necessary for thinking through an issue in a fresh way. Whatever contributes to mental acuity or the development of the intellect will ever be valueless. As educators, then, our task must be to encourage rigour without repressing the imagination and to demand precision without imposing limitations. Pre-packaged processes and techniques may quickly become obsolete. Inventories of information are regularly replaced. But, the principles which underlie active creativity and receptivity to the expansion of knowledge are seldom fundamentally altered, and knowing them is forever an advantage.

If, therefore, intellectual curiosity and the socially responsible application of the knowledge we generate and share are not already at the top of our list of educational priorities, we have some serious rethinking to do. At the least, we will need to rethink our tasks as adults, parents and educators. It may be hard to imagine education as intellectual curiosity, but it beats conceiving of it as a pre-packaged commodity for sale or rent to educational clients and consumers. It is also better than defining it as an investment in human resources, which makes our children into commodities themselves.

Even in the most hard-boiled economic sense, where it is assumed that the race, whether on a personal or a social level, goes to those with the most effective mental circuitry, the ability to acquire, retrieve, interpret, connect and create new knowledge is the very basis of wealth creation in the new economy. For those with greater ambition, this ability is also necessary if we as a species are to learn how to balance the will to prosperity with the need for sustainability and equity. This means an holistic understanding that will go beyond or, perhaps, strategically withdraw from technological, profit-driven globalization and the promises and perils it provides.

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In the half-century since they "team taught" a course in Canadian-American Relations, they have kept in touch in hopes of assuring themselves that they remain sane.

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