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Bah Humbug: Application of the Scientific Temper to Education for Adults

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Summary

The purpose of this paper is to discuss what I consider to be the critical role of adult education in a modern democratic society. Within this discourse I will state that the only purpose of education in a democracy is the continuation (or stimulation) of life, physically and psychologically. Throughout history education has been a useful instrument for the physical development of life but has evolved into an instrument that sustains the threat to the existence of man.

I recommend an educational solution to this predicament and have coined the not-so-original term "bah humbugism" to identify this proposed movement.

The Goal of Adult Education
A Continuous Learner

The basic goal in adult education today is to make every man a "continuous learner." As a student of adult education, I agree with the concept; but I find that what most adult educators define as a continuous learner I define as a continuously educated man, and I do not consider the two terms synonymous. In order to differentiate between a continuous learner and a continuously educated man, I will use two terms popularized by David Reisman. Reisman speaks of the "inner-directed" man as a man who has a built-in motivation, probably instilled early in life, that provides basic guidance to his behavior. In contrast he defines the "outer-directed" man as one who does not have this basic drive, who needs direction from outside sources, and who is easily swayed by outside stimuli.

I contend that a continuous learner is an inner-directed man, while what is commonly defined as a continuous learner is, in fact, an outer-directed man who is forced to continue learning by outside forces in a rapidly changing technological society.

Now, let me digress in order to introduce another point. I read with interest the accomplishments of our scientists in developing miniature communication devices called "bugs." Such devices are used to pick up signals in outer space and keep missiles on course. While thinking about the concept of a continuous learner as an inner-directed person who is continuously motivated to learn, I concluded that what such a person needs is a built-in "bug" that will motivate him to learn.

Going one step further in this analogy, it occurs to me that a continuous learner must be a person who is never really satisfied with the status quo, a person who is always seeking new ways to do things and looking for new ideas, a skeptic. Therefore, I feel that what a continuous learner needs is a built-in "bah humbugger"; therefore, the goal of adult education should be to install "bah humbuggers" in all peoples of the world.

The Goals of Education

Societal Standards

There are others who agree with this concept, but the form education takes is determined by the general standards established by society, and the advocates of "bah humbugism" are usually in the minority. If we accept the contention that the standards set by society determine its educational pattern, then we must also accept the proposition that any change in education must result from a change in society's perceived needs and standards. Because of this, a discussion of adult education must transcend our traditional understanding of education and deal with the entire cultural landscape of modern society, its perceived needs, its existing philosophies and standards, and the changed relationships of societies.

Physical Existence

In the past social standards have been based on two primary needs. The first of these needs is the need for physical existence. Man must eat and drink; therefore, he has to work. Society determines the conditions of his work and these vary from society to society throughout the world and have changed throughout history.

Physical existence was the dominant drive of primitive human development. For ages men lived in small, relatively isolated communities struggling to secure existence against the imperfectly mastered forces of their non-human environment. It was a long struggle. For hundreds of thousands of years men survived mainly by hunting. But during the Neolithic Age, some ten thousand years ago, men had sufficiently mastered the domestication of animals and the cultivation of crops so that they could live in relatively large communities; thus, more nearly securing their existence. During the course of more recent history, it became fairly certain that as far as human existence as a whole was concerned the problem of physical existence had been solved.

Today, man's struggle for physical existence has culminated in the discovery of methods for harnessing nuclear energy and placing its inexhaustible power at man's disposal. With such power, man has laid a foundation on which to achieve whatever else in his growing experience he deems necessary to completely control his physical environment.

Social Essence

The second basic need emerged as a result of the struggle for physical existence. This need is not rooted within the bodily processes, but is just as compelling. It concerns the essence of man and the human mode of life. Rather than a physical need, this is a socio-psychological need. Each society has developed an "essence" of man. These essences vary from society to society, and the educational system of each society is designed to educate people to achieve a particular essence.
Throughout history Fascists, Nazis and Communists dictatorships; monarchies; republics; and theocracies have relied heavily on education in order to establish a society consistent with their respective standards of essence. In the world today there are individuals and groups who are similarly determined to control, through outer-directed education, the standards of their society. The aim of state-supported education is to raise good Americans, or good Japanese, or good Russians, according to which nation is supporting the educational institution. The same is also true with most privately financed schools. Catholic schools are designed to educate good Catholics, Lutheran schools—good Lutherans, ad infinitum. A good graduate, one who successfully completes the courses, is a person imbued with the beliefs espoused by the particular biased educational institution that he attended.

Societies have fought to maintain their particular essence of man, but mankind has advanced to a position today that is unprecedented in history. Science and technology have brought about hitherto undreamed of possibilities for the betterment of man's life on earth but due to the varying beliefs concerning the essence of man, technology has also brought about the possibility of complete annihilation. As a result, mankind needs to reevaluate conflicting standards. Kenneth Boulding puts it succinctly, "If the human race is to survive, it will have to change its ways of thinking more in the next 25 years than it has in the last 25,000."  

A Unified Goal for Education  

With the potential of nuclear war and the destruction of the physical existence of mankind as an alternate to a peaceful solution of our conflicting standards, the basic alternative concerning the essence of man becomes simply, physical existence or physical non-existence. Since it is only to a living entity that things can be "good" or "evil," to speak of values apart from life is a gross contradiction of terms. Man must realize that although the existence of inanimate matter is unconditional, the existence of human life on Earth is no longer guaranteed.

In lower forms of animals there is no alternative in the function of the organism. Sensations are automatic responses, an automatic form of knowledge, which a consciousness can neither seek nor evade. An organism that possesses only the faculty of sensation is guided by the pleasure-pain mechanism of its body. Its life is the only standard directing its action. Within the limited range of action possible to it, it acts automatically to further its life.

However, this is not true with humans. Human life depends on presuppositions and standards that are associated with perception. Only a volitional act of consciousness, a process of thought, can assure the survival of man.

Psychologically, the alternative necessary for the physical existence of man is to think or not to think. Existentially, the choice is to be or not to be; and metaphysically, the choice is to be conscious and remain alive or not to be conscious and die. Since man has developed a means of communication, perpetrated through education to establish predetermined standards, he has the power to act toward his own destruction. Man is capable of choosing standards other than life.

Standards of organized societies powerfully affect the perceptions and resulting behaviors of their members. They are internalized by men, and as a result, become part of their self concept to the extent that many find it much harder to contemplate a change in their standards than they do loss of life. An example is the slogan, "Better dead than Red."

To the extent that a societal standard paralyzes moral judgement and leads toward possible destruction of "life," the standard is a contradiction in itself. A standard that is impossible to practice, because it prescribes irreconcilable contradictions, must be condemned. The universal standard of man on Earth and the goal of education should be—that which promotes life is "good"; that which threatens life is "evil."

The Outer-Directed Graduate  

If man has struggled to determine what standards are right, and has failed or has made honest mistakes, he can't be regarded as evil. Errors of knowledge are not breaches of morality; no proper moral code can demand infallibility. But, if in order to escape the responsibility of moral judgement, a man chooses to close his mind and in essence becomes unconscious and if he evades the issues and struggles not to know, he should be held responsible. To choose not to make a decision is a decision.

Modern education has demonstrated that outer-directed methodology is effective in developing scientific and technological knowledge concerning the many problems threatening man's physical existence. However, as we have developed men with tremendous knowledge in the scientific and technological fields, we have also developed outer-directed men. It is true that as technological advances are made and the world changes, the outer-directed man can return to school and if necessary become a continuously educated man, but when an outer-directed man is forced to seek solutions to a new problem he must look for someone to tell him the answers. John Dewey recognized this problem when he wrote, "The serious threat to our democracy is not the existence of foreign states; it is the existence within our own personal attitudes and within our own situations of conditions which have given a victory to the external authority, discipline, uniformity and dependence upon the Leader...the battle ground is here...within ourselves and our institutions."  

Lewis Mumford adds, "Certainly no one guessed that our vast gains in physical power would be accompanied by human impotence and frustrations or that these conditions in turn would be unconsciously compensated for by massive increases in demonic power, disorder, violence, and psychic disintegration. Yet all these things have been happening, before our eyes and it is fatuous to keep on thinking that there is no connection between our mechanical triumphs and our equally unparalleled human failures. The new operators of this system, the elite, now constitute a recognizable ideal type, that of Bureaucratic or Organization Man whose future dominance was predicted by the German sociologist Max Weber more than a generation ago." Such men are a product of an outer-directed educational system designed to create people that are in essence machines. They only walk, talk, and act like humans.
Behavioral mechanisms that are used within our society and conveyed to individuals through education are designed to avoid anxiety. Outer-directed education is based on the concept that the future will be like the past. A society that advocates such a method of education develops a static educational system and develops means by which established standards can be maintained. To the extent that education is used in this manner, it becomes an obstacle to learning and freedom of thought, and not a tool for expansion of knowledge. As a result, progress has only been made because of the weaknesses—not the strengths—of outer-directed education.

Although millions of people have fought and died in wars between believers of differing creeds and doctrines, the battle in education is between believers in human freedom and believers in the suppression of human freedom. The battle is between outer-directed educators who believe a democratic society can survive by outside manipulation of individuals, and inner-directed educators who believe we can maintain a free democratic society only by refusing to manipulate people and by resisting manipulation.

B. F. Skinner, a leading advocate of outer-directed education, criticizes education because there are not enough controls, and for that reason he feels education is ineffective. "The dissent which they (society) tolerate is the possible effect of other determiners of action. Since these sanctioned methods (in education) are frequently ineffective, we have been able to convince ourselves that they do not represent control at all. When they (educational methods) show too much strength to permit disguise, we give them other names and suppress them as energetically as we suppress the use of force. Education grown too powerful is rejected as propaganda or 'brain washing'; while really effective persuasion is decried as 'undue influence'; 'demagoguery'; 'seduction'; and so on. If we are not to rely solely upon accident for innovations which give rise to cultural evolution, we must accept the fact that some kind of control of human behavior is inevitable."10

Educators have become more proficient in their outer-directed methods of education. "As more and more causal relationships are demonstrated, a practical corollary becomes difficult to resist: it should be possible to produce behavior according to plan simply by arranging proper conditions. Now, among the specifications which might reasonably be submitted to a behavioral technology are these: let men be happy, informed, skillful, well-behaved, and productive.10"

For the advocates of outer-directed education, it goes without saying that any specifications toward which men are to be educated may be chosen, but once goals are chosen and we "set out on a large scale to control human behavior to the end of achieving those goals," we are locked in the rigidity of our initial choice, because such a scientific endeavor can never transcend itself to select new goals. Only subjective human persons can do that...and of course) colossal rigidity, whether in dinosaurs or dictatorships, has a very poor record of evolutionary survival.10

The outer-directed approach to education has led some educators to believe that almost anything can be accomplished in dealing with people if we are sufficiently skillful in manipulation of the proper forces at the proper time. This approach raises a problem, for it requires someone or some group that knows what goals should be attained. This approach calls for a "great Leader" to chart the proper path for the common people.

In a democracy education is controlled by the majority; therefore, the majority determines the "essence" of man. Since this is the case and since our democratic society advocates the outer-directed method of education, education has become a means by which the exceptional is always leveled down towards the average. The outer-directed man is reassured by finding himself supported by widely prevailing opinions. In this way he is able to escape into a refuge of mass indecision. This impersonal mode of mass existence causes habitual unconsciousness and results in psychological alienation.

Outer-directed education causes alienation in another manner. In an outer-directed educational setting, the student is placed in a position of being an object rather than a subject. The student is not allowed to make important subjective decisions. He can only react rather than interact with his environment. A highly industrialized society enforces the concept of man as an object rather than a subject and places him in competition with other objects in the world. Alienation is complete when man sees himself as only an object and sees other men in the same role. Since man sees himself in competition with other men and non-human objects, and since outer-directed education and a materially oriented society enforce the concept of man as object rather than subject, each outer-directed man sees himself in a conflict for control of his own personal environment. In addition, as outer-directed education has become more effective via mass media, certain manipulators have been able to control larger numbers of men, and such controls are more distant and difficult to identify. Because of the dual role of man, Freud was able to justify the conflict between the id (man) and the super-ego (other men or society) and as long as men see themselves in this man-against-man perspective, the conflict will exist.

The Inner-Directed Graduate

The continuation of this conflict is not inevitable. There is a reciprocity between outer-directed education and the alienation of man, and there is a reciprocity between inner-directed education and the freedom of man. No man can be trained to think for himself if he is told in advance what conclusions he will be permitted to reach. In addition, a man cannot have freedom if he does not truly have access to certain information. A man is free only when he has the opportunity to choose between one of many possible alternatives of action.

The methodology for educating free men and slaves cannot be the same. If I were a dictator, however, I would select the outer-directed method of education to control my subjects. The methodology that I selected would depend on what goals I establish and on what I actually believe to be the nature of man. If I viewed man as an object, then I would use an outer-directed method, and if I viewed man as a possible threat to me, I would take action to control him.

This is not to deny that people can learn in an outer-directed educational atmosphere, but the effect of outer-directed manipulation narrows perception rather...
than expanding it and forces the manipulated individual to seek a means of defense. In a democratic society these two effects are directly contrary to what we desire in an educational experience. We do not seek to narrow perceptions. Education should be designed to broaden and expand perception.

The inner-directed approach to education deals with individuals on a changing basis. Individuals are seen as a subjective learner rather than an object--as growing rather than static. The emphasis in inner-directed education is upon creation of a situation which stimulates the process of change. The inner-directed approach to education recognizes the unhappy effects of threat on individuals and seeks to avoid threat. Conflict is heightened when people feel frustrated, inadequate, or coerced into moving in directions that they do not wish to go. When human dignity and integrity are respected and valued and people are treated as though they are capable of making independent decisions, creativity, spontaneity and change result.

However, creativity and spontaneity are not automatic. There are numerous sociological and psychological studies that demonstrate that no man is free of his environment, his past, and his heredity. It is not true that each man makes himself what he is, that he alone bears the responsibility for his world, for his ideas and actions, as the existentialists imply. No man lives alone. Each man lives, acts, and thinks within a society, within a historical frame of reference, within a given environment, and that environment has been determined historically through societal standards.

Bah Humbuggism

The cantenation of outer-directed education that has bound us to our past and sustained cultural differences throughout the world can be broken. It must be broken. Adult education is the appropriate force to achieve such a revolutionary change since only adults have the ability to voluntarily change social standards...and since such a change must be voluntary.

To alleviate the threat of annihilation of mankind, adult educators must develop a generation with courage to doubt their own fragile presuppositions concerning the essence of man. This new generation that I have chosen to call bah humbuggers must develop a systematic scientific methodology for testing their own limited perceptions, must maintain an uncompromising reverence for life, and must realize the need for human freedom. The latter will be possible only when man has learned that it is not a free man that must be feared but a threatened man, that no man can be free until all men are free, and that force and coercion in any form sustains the conflict between man and creates a threatening situation that can ultimately escalate into a full-scale nuclear holocaust.

The purpose of the scientific method is to achieve the maximum accuracy of prediction. However, where the essence of man is concerned, the goal of education is not to change man to the extent where he is "predictable" but to make men creative enough to discover better methods of predicting the main manifestations of man's behavior.

The difference between the two approaches is critical. Reisman, Orwell, Huxley, and Fromm have described the neurotic and psychotic symptom of successful outer-directed education. They tell us that the behavior of a neurotic or psychotic person can be quite predictable because his behavior is a product of compulsive patterns and drives. A healthy person's behavior is also predictable in the sense that his behavior is integrated and consistent with his total personality, but the healthy person always expresses a unique spontaneous new element in his behavior. The psychological dehumanizing process that is evident in our industrialized culture today is not conducive to a healthy personality and is a danger to the existence of mankind. There is a real possibility that we are educating individuals to adjust, be productive and happy at the price of the loss of their Being.

The maximum possible accuracy in prediction is achieved when scientific evidence is substituted for personal perceptions and unfounded assumptions. It should be evident to most educators that much of what is taught concerning the essence of man in educational institutions is culturally determined and varies from one culture to the next. A socio-psychological study that is not cross-cultural, must be considered as culturally biased. If educators would spend more time analyzing inadequately supported research findings and spend less time "educating" people to believe the existing "facts" as they perceive them, the world would be a much safer place to live. In fact, there would be little information concerning the essence of man that could be taught by outer-directed educators.

Bah humbuggism should lead men to question what outer-directed graduates take for granted and to insist on evidential proof for even the most rudimentary "facts" that are conveyed through education to future generations.

Inner-Directed Education

If inner-directed education limits teachings concerning the essence of man because of possible cultural biases and if men seek perceptual refuge by affiliating with individuals who will re-enforce their pre-existing standards, then how can a learning situation be created without outer-directed teaching taking place? There must be a conscious effort on the part of the educator to create a learning situation while resisting the temptation to teach his own personal beliefs. Such a learning situation can be created by removing as many threats as possible while stimulating open discussion between participants in the class. The purpose of such a learning situation is to assist each member to explore ideas and discover meaning through interaction with other people.

Such a learning group does not deal with certainty, but with a mutual determination to search for personal meaning. Such a personal search entails an exploration of feelings, beliefs, doubts, fears and concerns. An attitude of bah humbuggism is created in such a group because it deals with matters that are unsolved and each individual seeks to find personal meaning to new ideas that have not previously existed in his perceptual awareness.

The composition of the group can determine the level and the complexity of the discussion. The educator and the potential group member should mutually decide what type of group would be most beneficial to the participant. Groups may be formed that consist of people of different
occupations, different religious beliefs, different nationalities, different races, or a combination of all of these. Learning groups take time to develop and it is only as the members of a group discover each other as warm, friendly people that learning can take place. Below are some suggestions that may help an educator or a participant to make a learning situation more profitable for all concerned.2

General Considerations

1. For good thinking there must be a sense of relaxation. Discussion should always be leisurely, not desultory, wandering, hastened or tense. It is more important to think slowly and thoroughly than to cover any prearranged amount of material.

2. Although all members of a learning group should feel free to contribute to the discussion and will want to share their thinking with others, it is recognized that for some people this is a difficult and trying task. No one in the group should be under compulsion to speak. Participation in a learning group is not measured by words spoken and many times a silent person may be participating more than his verbal colleagues.

3. The purpose of a learning group is to discover personal meanings. This calls for a careful examination, comparison and discussion of ideas until they fit into the self concept of each person in the group. This is best accomplished when group members are willing to express their own thinking, beliefs and feelings freely on the one hand and to listen receptively and sympathetically to other participants' ideas.

4. There may be periods of silence. Silence should not cause concern. It is a normal function of exploration and learning that occur at points when a group is thinking deeply, is in the process of changing topics, or has exhausted a particular idea.

5. Learning occurs best in an atmosphere of warmth and friendliness. Nothing causes people to "clam up" quicker than being threatened, ridiculed or humiliated. An atmosphere of acceptance and honest seeking for understanding is most conducive to learning.

Suggestions to the Participants

There are certain acts on the part of a participant in a learning group that can facilitate the learning situation. For that reason, the following suggestions should be advanced to the group prior to its formation.

1. Participants in a learning group should maintain an attitude of searching for personal meaning. The purpose of a learning group is to allow each participant an opportunity to find the best personal answer: not to provide an opportunity for a particular individual to convince others that his ideas are best.

2. A participant should feel free to speak whenever moved to do so, even though an idea may seem incomplete at the time it is presented. If the answers were all known there would be no point in exploring.

3. Participants should avoid introducing new issues until the issues being discussed are completely exhausted. Discussion that strays too far afield can kill the continuity of discussion.

4. Participants should cultivate the art of careful listening. Each participant should try to formulate in his own mind the gist of what the previous speaker has been saying before adding his own contribution.

5. Contributions should be brief and concise. Saying too much or introducing too many new ideas at one time may cause the participants' minds to wander so that they miss the value of what is being said.

6. Participants should be sympathetic and understanding of other participants' positions. A participant should make every effort to avoid being belligerent or threatening to other members of the group.

Ground-Rules for Learning Groups

Certain rules should be introduced by the educator at the beginning of a discussion. If the participants do not wish to abide by these rules, they should be free to negate any rules that they feel are unfair. The purpose of the following rules is to stimulate learning and to create a situation that is conducive to orderly discussion.

1. Cross-examination is not permitted. Remember that a learning group is neither a debate nor a trial and that consensus is not necessary for learning. The purpose of the group is to explore individual meanings through interaction with others; therefore, group members should not ask questions of other participants that "smack" a cross-examination or that may embarrass the speaker. When you disagree with another's idea, it is best to express what you believe and to invite comment or criticism concerning your own personal beliefs.

2. A participant should feel free to speak whenever he is moved to do so, without seeking recognition from the leader so long as someone else is not speaking. However, when many people are seeking the floor at once, a participant should look to the leader to direct the discussion.

3. A group discussion can only operate well when all members are concerned with the issues being discussed. Side conversations should be kept to a minimum because they destroy the cohesiveness of the total group.

Bah Humbug Groups

There is a different type of group that individuals may participate in if they feel that they are sufficiently prepared. The purpose of this group is to advance new ideas and to have others within the group try to find sufficient grounds for disputing these ideas. An individual who participates in this type of group should feel sufficiently secure and should be armed with a knowledge of the scientific method for justifying his own personal opinions. The purpose of this group differs from a debate in that the purpose of a debater is to convince other people of the validity of his own position and he does not necessarily have to be accurate in his argument. In a bah humbug group, individuals should be prepared to provide statistical support for their conclusions and to state accurately the underlying assumptions, limitations, and delimitations concerning their conclusions. A neophyte can become an observer in such a group without actually participating and in this manner can learn quite a bit about the procedures involved in such a scientifically oriented learning group. Neophytes feel free to ask questions concerning presentations without having to defend their own position. Experienced participants in such a group should readily accept a neophyte as a beginner and hesitate to be critical of his naiveté.

Such groups should promote the free and open
discussin of ideas. By the use of inner-directed methods, learners will be allowed to progress to the very best of their individual abilities, unfettered by social standards and pressure groups. It will make possible a variety of views and opinions and will provide a systematic and unthreatening means by which views can be challenged and possibly changed. It creates an atmosphere of freedom whereby ideas may be circulated without fear. Most significantly, inner-directed education will provide freedom from domination by vested interested groups attempting to inculcate their particular essence of man on a group or society.

Inner-directed education will eliminate the need for concern about legitimate restrictions on freedom in education and will intrinsically provide for controls. Unqualified social standards of a particular time and place in history will not prevail absolutely to the extent that the very existence of mankind is threatened.

Adult educators have the responsibility to attempt to make this the best generation in the history of mankind and the power to make it the last. A choice must be made.

References


* Note

The views expressed in this paper are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Community Services Council of Brevard County.