Break Down The Barriers

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The short history of man's efforts to reason, above and beyond the limits set by the will to survive, is a testimony to the unshakable desire to survive stretched man's reasoning powers, but it wasn't until he gained a certain mastery of his environment that he could turn his attention from himself to the outside world. Given the minute to minute tensions attendant on survival. With this new leisure, man began to turn his mind to a new kind of work in the rather sedentary performances of gaining understanding. Slow going, this sort of activity demanded, not only absolutely, but symbolically, man learn to symbolize. He learned to lump more and more information into symbolic packages... marks in the sand, noises, movements of the body, images, words. Given the symbols, the shepherds say, mathematics is inevitable. Mathematics opened the door to measurement, to further abstraction, to further advances in the symbolic arts. What is more, the language, the common denominator to knowledge and inquiry. In bygone days knowledge was treated as a body, not as a series of distinct and separate areas of inquiry. Means of storage, etc., appeared common in all searches for truth. But, the body of knowledge grew. Symbols grew in size, abstractions became more abstract, facts multiplied geometrically. The body of knowledge had grown too big for its good health.

Gates, Locks, Keys, Chaos

Knowledge was split into smaller bodies, compartments. Compartments led to departments; departments led to fences, gates, locks, keys and chains. Scholars developed into deponents of departments. And it came to pass that departments of knowledge came to possess independent truths and values. And the gates were built.

Departmentalisation is a product of rationalization, not of diversity of knowledge. Mathematics is still used to symbolize. It is used to illustrate scientific theories, to represent law and philosophy, behavior of biologists notwithstanding: Symbolic language is still used to express abstractions and summarise information in all areas of intellectual endeavor. It is the thesis of this article that the unifying concepts that form the knowledge of each and every science constitute an integral part of the philosophy of teaching. There is unity in scientific inquiry. There is unity in all inquiry, in all knowledge.

And, of course, this article would not have been written if I thought we were unifying knowledge as we impart it. We do not think this exclusively in terms of relationships among things. For example, we teach as if memory were the ultimate virtue. We omit emphasis on learning to think and on thinking as a common way of the world, the premise, unwisely perhaps, that if we get our students to learn how to "do" we have no more job for teachers. We do not give our students guidance in determining the meaning and repeating and repeating information. They get little practice synthesising; they rarely build hypotheses; reading for fun is a much heralded summertime activity.

Pressures on students are external (tests and grades) rather than internal (curiosity and wonderment). Learning has become an art in compartmentalization rather than an art in unification. Certain modern shepherds, therefore, would do well to be aware of the educational innovations and changes of teaching curricula. One suggestion follows.

Areas Rather Than Compartments

Students entering Rine University will enroll in a University--for a University. During this time they will be sorted into groups for study and learning, categorized according to major interest areas, but they will be given ample opportunity both to define and to develop special interests.

Four major areas of study are suggested. Students will read in mathematics, science, language and philosophy. Periodically, general lectures in these areas will be presented. These lectures will be supple- mented by extensive reading lists and will be followed by seminars.

The same format will follow during the second academic year. Students will be given a degree of freedom to substitute readings in the area of their choice for mathematics, and, possibly, science. It must be made clear, at this point, that the readings in the above mentioned areas are not courses as now constituted.

The four areas of study include (at least it is intended that they do) the four basic areas of study. The view will permit students to follow their interests; seminars will provide guidance and organisation, if and when the students ask for such guidance.

The evaluation of students will involve essentially three criteria: written work, contributions to the seminars and an oral report. In addition, one of the main areas of new evaluation will be the work of the students. It will be made clear to each student that the seminars are not a test and that the report will be based on that work. The report will include the statement and defense of one or more propositions, a summary of developing interests, a fore- cast of the student's work for the future. The report will be evaluated by staff members representing several disciplines.

Formal examinations and grades will be given last rites. After all, grades are simply a mechanism for the administration of the registrar: a brief summary of his evaluation of the student. After four years each student will have accumulated some- thing. It is a shame to lose this as the result of a few numbers. The thing that other universitiees and prospective employers will be able to understand.

The third and fourth years will provide time for specific, specialization. The special interest areas can be approached in (Continued on Page 5)
(Continued from Page 2) much the same way as described for University College; i.e., infrequent, general lectures supplemented with seminars and references. Time will be available for research (laboratory and library). Time will be available for general and specific reading. Direction can be provided by tutors.

It is proposed that the above program be initiated in the form of a pilot experiment. The first group of students must include volunteers. Male students are housed en bloc in one of the men’s colleges; the female students similarly in one of the women’s colleges. The colleges are equipped with at least one reading room and one seminar room. Likewise, the participating staff must include volunteers. The staff are to be relieved of their current teaching duties.

It is proposed that monies for the above program derive from private granting agencies.

The essential ingredient of the proposed change is the attitude that students are not here for correction and that professors are not truant officers. Students can teach as well as learn, and professors can learn as well as teach. People who do not want to learn won’t learn, with or without pressure. People who do want to learn do not want to be distracted by imposed-from-without memorization. Our university has an obligation to provide books, classrooms, laboratories and teachers for its students. The teachers may or may not assume the responsibility to show by example that learning is fun. However, they will be better teachers if they do.