

Patricia A. Dolan Lewis

Postman, N. *Teaching as a conserving activity*. New York: Delcorte Press, 1979.

Teaching as a conserving activity is a particularly readable book proclaiming a particularly timely philosophy. The author, better known for his co-authorship of *Teaching as a subversive activity*, is now suggesting an educational counterargument. As Neil Postman would state himself, this book would be the "vice versa" of his previous efforts.

For Postman, education is culture centered and defined by time. Today, in an era of technological change and constant innovation, education's role is to conserve tradition, to project the constant amid confusion. If however, the environment were static, then Postman suggests that education would be innovative. For Postman, education acts as a thermostat, triggering opposing forces to counterargue with current belief.

Building on the thermostat theory of education, the book considers the current information environment and proposes some solutions to present and future problems. It is based on the idea that children may learn to face the present by looking at the past.

Postman is intensely concerned with the intellectual and character development of youth. His views on education are not, therefore, specific to a particular curriculum, but refer to the entire education milieu.

Citing Plato as an early educational conservatism, Postman illustrates the need to argue against popular teaching. Plato, it seems, banished poets from the curriculum. Why?

Because Plato, like ourselves, was facing a tremendous change in the information environment. As an educator, Plato argued that poets, the transmitters of the oral tradition, were encouraging people to remain semi-literate. The young became emotionally and subjectively involved in the literature, and seldom had opportunities to critically evaluate it. It was this loss of objectivity to which Plato objected.

Postman moves quickly from Athens to America when he applies his thermostat metaphor to the television environment. He examines school and television side-by-side as contrasting communication systems and as contrasting curriculums. Television, termed the First Curriculum, makes attention subservient to content; whereas school, the Se-

cond Curriculum, makes content subservient to attention. For Postman, this is the fundamental difference between the two systems.

Specific differences between television and school resemble some of Plato's criticisms of the poets. Television's teaching style is emotional, imagistic and narrative. School's teaching style is abstract, cognitive, and expository. School's information is based on levels of complexity, but television's information is totally undifferentiated.

In analyzing the television environment, Postman repeats the research on television's effects, but pictures the impact more starkly. His conclusions make for interesting, if debatable reading.

Television is hostile to privacy because it demands novelty. As a result, television has diminished the prestige of places and occasions for secret-sharing. Television in its controlled exhibitionism has blurred the line between public and private life.

Television has immersed people in a surrogate experience, depriving them of the ability to distinguish reality from media.

These are only two of the criticisms Postman makes in Chapter Four. He concludes with the idea that school, if it refuses to mimic the biases of the electronic curriculum, can be a strong alternative teacher.

Confusing the real with the image is further defined in Postman's explanation of the technical thesis. In this succinctly written chapter, the author explains how methods or procedures can be given a validity apart from their actual meaning. He cites television as a prime upholder of the technical thesis because television rarely deals with a moral dilemma. Instead, television proposes a technical solution to every crisis. "To put it simply, God is not dead. He survives as Technique." (p. 99).

Utopian Thesis

In the Utopian thesis, Postman argues that the school should not get involved in areas which traditionally have been the domain of other institutions: sex education, motivation, ethnic pride, religion, psychotherapy. The thesis explains that transferring a family problem into a curriculum reduces the responsibility of the individual. As a result, school by taking over areas formerly

the responsibility of the church, government, family, medical profession can encourage a belief in victimization and failure. In the long run, such usurpation, will support the theory of individual powerlessness.

Postman's comments on this issue criticize the technicalization of the material through curriculum building. At no point does he argue that informal prayer or counseling is inappropriate in a school. Rather he argues against the process of institutionalizing value systems into manageable teachable component parts.

Alternative Curriculum

In the final sections of *Teaching as a conserving activity*, Postman proposes teaching subjects from an historical perspective; the philosophies of science, history, language and religion would be taught with an emphasis on classical forms. In contrast to this goal, he also proposes a course in media ecology which would transcend psychology and sociology. This course would be concerned with the technologies and techniques of communication. It would consider how information biases people's perceptions, values and attitudes.

Perhaps this is in the most interesting section of the book — the indepth outline of a new alternative curriculum. The remaining information on the classroom itself is of limited value because of the triviality of its subject matter.

The strength of *Teaching as a conserving activity* lies in its ability to analyze the current information environment and propose some startling implications for the educational community. Although written in the United States, the book is not American-centered. Its comments on the state of things apply as easily to Halifax as they do to New York.

Like most philosophies, this one is one-sided and at times, exaggerated. It is this hyperbole which allows the reader to grasp the dynamics of the argument.

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