● Editorial

Curriculum Change and the Humanist Movement

ARTHUR W. COMBS

IT SOMETIMES seems to those who are deeply involved in the effort to humanize our public schools as though we are engaged in a never-ending struggle to push back the waves. Each small gain seems to be made only after long periods of very hard work. Then, just as some signs of progress are visible, a new wave of mechanization, organization or nostalgia for the good old ways comes sweeping upon us making it necessary to start all over again.

Fortunately, humanists are a hearty breed. They do not give up easily. Like everyone else, however, they do need occasional support, encouragement and the knowledge that they do not labor alone. It has been helpful to me to understand our dilemma against the perspective of what is going on elsewhere in our society, for the struggle we face is by no means ours alone. It is everyone's predicament.

We have created a world whose problems can no longer be solved by ancient techniques of manipulation and control of the material world we have found so useful in the past. The problems we face today are human ones which do not respond to the accustomed ways we were brought up on. We live in a world where humanism is, not just a nice, polite sentiment, but an essential for survival. Little by little people are recognizing this and a great new humanistic movement is growing among us. Our struggle to humanize the schools, it seems to me, is but a single expression of this great force applied to education.

People Problems

For thousands of years man's greatest problems have been the control of his world. Most of his time and energy was formerly devoted to the practical problems of providing food, clothing and shelter for himself and his kinfolk, or the accumulation of wealth and its protection. But this has changed.

We have created a world capable of providing for the physical needs of everyone. The accomplishments of science have made possible a nation so affluent as to afford the incredible impertinence of an anti-poverty program! We have learned to produce material goods so well, that production is but a minor issue.

The net effect of all our advances in physical science has been to make us utterly dependent on the good will of fellow human beings everywhere. We live in the most cooperative, interdependent society the world has ever known since the dawn of history. Our most pressing problems are people problems. It is not even atomic bombs we fear but the people who might use them. The production and possession of things has become a secondary objective. Human values, beliefs, understandings and concern for themselves and each other have come center stage as the major issue of our time. As we continue to find better ways to release our energies from the necessities of physical labor, these matters must become even more pressing in the years ahead.

The dignity and integrity of man and the importance of the human spirit is no longer a pleasant concept advocated by theologians. It is a pressing necessity for all of us. We have given to every man such cheap and available power for good or evil that we must be able to count on his good intentions and respect for human life. I do not believe it is an accident that a great humanist movement is afoot in the world. It is a necessity!

A Humanist Movement

The humanist movement finds expression in many places. Internationally, it appears in the rise and independence of the underdeveloped nations, in the United Nations, the World Court, or the freedom of women. In America, it may be seen in such movements as social security, prison reform, the elimination of child labor, the provision of public schools, the successes of the labor movement, and, more recently, in medicare, unemployment insurance, anti-poverty programs, the Peace Corps, civil rights, and foreign aid. Along with this movement has come a whole new group of professions designed to facilitate the achievement of human dignity and welfare. Among these are social work, clinical psychology, psychiatry, counseling, guidance, and human relations experts of many kinds and descriptions.

It has brought us, too, a new humanistic psychology much more appropriate for education than the mechanistic approaches of a generation ago. These concepts have already been widely adopted by educators and promise much for helping to solve our teaching and learning problems in the future. I think it is important that curriculum workers should see their efforts in this perspective. Our efforts toward humanization must eventually prevail. Our schools cannot for long be out of touch with the forces at work in the society they represent.

Currently, we are caught up in a regressive wave in curriculum planning that runs directly counter to the humanistic trend going on elsewhere in our society. Psychologically, this is understandable even though it is frustrating to our efforts. At the moment everyone is concerned about education and wants something done about it. Many are certain that their particular solutions are assuredly right and proper and should therefore be adopted at once. Some of these notions have been helpful. Many others have created as many problems as they have solved. Most of the solutions advanced have dealt with content, method, and ways of organizing or presenting subject matter. Few have dealt with the human aspects of learning.

Worse still, the pressure for more and more content, organization, or slick new methods of presentation has produced in many educators, themselves, a preoccupation with objective nonhuman aspects of teaching.

Yet this is the American way. We are "a nation of contrivers." We are experts at controlling the physical world. Our country began by conquering the wilderness. Making things produce is deep in our heritage. We are immensely proud of our great corporations, monuments to our skill and proficiency in making things what we want them to be. This emphasis on manipulation and control is further reinforced in our thinking by the Protestant ethic of our religious tradition on the one hand and our current worship of science on the other.

We are tremendously impressed with the marvels science contributes almost daily. We revere its objectivity and confidently expect its methods to provide us with the answers to every problem. These influences are so embedded in our lives that it is only natural we should apply them to problems of education and expect them to produce for us in that sphere as they have elsewhere formerly. When people are confronted with the necessity for change, their natural impulse is to fall back upon the solutions which have previously proven satisfactory.

It is normal for Americans confronted with the need for a change in their public schools, therefore, to begin the process by redoubling their efforts in the same old things which have worked before. So we are faced with seemingly limitless proposals to achieve salvation through content organization, new methods and procedures for content presentation and ingenious devices for manipulating students as though they were things. We seem destined to go through this period of trying harder or more cleverly to do the things we have always done. As my good friend Donald Snygg says, "Sometimes you can sell more papers by shouting louder on the same corner, but sometimes it is better to move to another corner entirely." So it is with curriculum reform.

To Discover Meaning

For hundreds of years teachers have been gathering information and giving it to students. They have practiced and polished these arts assiduously. More recently science has provided a whole new armamentarium of electronic devices which further extend the teacher's skill in providing information.

Unfortunately, the ills of modern education are not the result of faulty transmission of information. Our failure is not in giving students information but in not *helping them discover the meaning of information so that it makes a difference in their behavior.* It is the personal human problem of helping students to discover the *meaning* of ideas that lies at the heart of our difficulties. When teachers are fired it is rarely because they do not know their subject matter. When students misbehave it is seldom because they do not know any better. Today's students are literally drowning in information. Piling on more information, more efficiently, does not solve the problem. It only compounds the problem!

The discovery of meaning is a personal matter. Learning is not a mechanical event but a human one. If we dehumanize the learning process we do so at our

peril, for the laws of learning are not suspended because they are inconvenient or because we are not aware of their existence. They go right on determining outcomes in spite of us.

The greatest problems the world faces are human problems. Learning, itself, the modern psychologists tell us, is a human process. Whatever dehumanizes our schools, fails both the school and society as well. To ignore the human aspects of learning is to destroy the efficiency of teaching on the one hand and to fail to prepare our youth for the world they must face on the other.

So we have to keep up the good fight for humanization and, fortunately, the tide of human affairs is running with us. The humanist movement is inexorable. It will not be stopped. Though habit and tradition may kick up waves of opposition from time to time, these are but surface manifestations. Working as a lobbyist years ago I came to share the respect of politicians for what they called "the ground swell of public opinion," those great tides in human affairs that are disastrous to oppose. I believe the Humanist Movement is one of those tides and it is coming in.

—ARTHUR W. COMBS, *Professor of Education, University of Florida, Gainesville; President of ASCD.*

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