

Futuristics

A LETTER FROM THE FUTURE

Dear Colleagues,

Back in 1975 when teachers and students met in school buildings, there was a glimmer of awareness of the magnitude and complexity of such problems as food and energy supplies and population and pollution controls. We made teaching relevant by including selected aspects of these problems that seemed to fit into the content of our disciplines and by teaching interdisciplinary or (in rare instances) problem-solving or process-oriented courses. Yet learning situations that offered humane, functional alternatives to the rigidities of the educational establishment were rare indeed. Some of us who were teaching then recall that period with mixed emotions. For you, my younger colleagues, let me try to put the events of those years into perspective.

Most of us were taken by surprise in 1980 when the entire educational establishment collapsed under the weight of its own bureaucratic superstructure. A number of events contributed to the collapse. During the economic recession, many would-be teachers emerged from college with all the right credentials and certifications, but only a few found jobs in teaching. The others, unemployed, had plenty of time to question the system. Teachers who had jobs hung on to them tenaciously. So much of their energy was sapped by their efforts to keep their jobs that there was little energy left to devise better ways of interacting with their students. Accountability ran rampant through the educational system. Expenditures were based on how much a teacher had caused the students to learn. Accounting systems tallied facts transmitted and attempts to deal with more complex levels of learning were abandoned.

By 1979 the recession had spent itself and the country was moving again. But the notion of a steady-state economy instead of a growth economy had penetrated the minds of only a few business executives. Even though there was much talk about the finiteness of our planet, the only group to make constructive use of the idea was the near-defunct space agency in its interplanetary mass transit proposal. Had they applied their thinking to a plan for use on earth, perhaps the tragedy could have been averted. For it was the energy crisis that dealt the final blow to the educational establishment.

The winter of 1980 was one of the coldest on record. By mid-January all schools requiring heat were closed. Many families from the north went to live with relatives and friends in the warmer states and en-

rolled their children in those schools. The ensuing chaos finally forced the closing of all schools, and because spring was late in coming that year it was May before all of the schools could be reopened. By that time many teachers had found other jobs.

There was optimism—or wishful thinking—that come fall, all would be well. Fall came and went for several years, and all was not well. Federal funding for education was abolished to provide unemployment compensation for teachers and other personnel rendered jobless by the school crisis. Buildings began to deteriorate. Some were sold to fledgling solar energy corporations to be converted to single-kitchen condominiums. With all the young people out of school, the demand for television increased so that other buildings were converted to broadcasting studios.

It was not until 1984 that television was tried as a means of offering the courses that had been offered in the past by schools and colleges. The effect was disastrous. Most young people had by this time experienced learning in real life situations. Some parents had even taken their children to work with them occasionally. Informal and voluntary learning situations had been created in many different places and circumstances, and, in competition with the variety of opportunities for interpersonal interaction and experiential learning, the TV programs received little attention from the intended audience. The built-in, government-controlled transmitters in the 1984 models of TV sets further discouraged their use. Because there was no way to enforce compulsory attendance, even with the transmitters, the idea of school by TV was abandoned.

Schools and colleges had lost their authority as agencies for certifying and providing credentials. Young people were learning marketable skills as apprentices. In the absence of functioning professional schools, apprenticeships were becoming available for physicians, lawyers, dentists, and teachers. Responsiveness to public need had become a much more important criterion than academic credentials for assessing performance.

The decade of the nineties has been an exciting time in education. There has been a significant reordering of priorities toward the creation of much more humane learning situations. But that is a topic for another letter. Now I must close or I shall be late for my appointment with my mentor-at-law. Many of us older citizens are really enjoying our second-career apprenticeships. I must take time to tell you more about apprenticeships soon. Meanwhile, let me know if you hear anything from the future.

Joan G. Creager, editor