

Two Ghosts in a House of Curriculum: Visions of the Learner and Liberal Education in Current Educational Reform*

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Notions of the “learner” and “liberal education” in a “Graduation Program” recently published by British Columbia’s Ministry of Education deserve a critique. Charles Taylor argues that Western practices and institutions support notions of self-identity that are, in turn, reformulations of Lockean and Rousseauian views of the moral life. I make three points. First, the Graduation Program uncritically incorporates versions of both ethics in its description of the learner. Second, in their discussion of curriculum organization and implementation, the authors abandon the Rousseauian view and present a weak utilitarian account of the graduating pupil. And third, although the latter conception might be economically or politically useful, it is educationally fatuous, especially in light of the authors’ claim that they propose “a sound, broad, and basic liberal education.” I argue that a good liberal curriculum ought primarily to produce sophisticated conversationalists.

Les notions de “learner” et de “liberal education” dans un “Graduation Program” qui apparaissent dans une publication récente du ministère de l’Éducation de la Colombie-Britannique méritent une critique. Charles Taylor affirme que les méthodes et institutions occidentales appuient des notions d’“auto-identité” qui sont, à leur tour, des reformulations des points de vue lockiens et rousseauistes de la vie morale. L’auteur apporte trois points. D’abord, le “Graduation Program” incorpore sans critique des versions des deux éthiques dans sa description de l’apprenant. Deuxièmement, dans leur discussion de l’organisation et de l’implantation du curriculum, les auteurs abandonnent le point de vue de Rousseau et présentent un faible compte rendu utilitaire de l’élève promu. Troisièmement, bien que cette dernière conception puisse être économiquement ou politiquement utile, elle est absurde d’un point de vue éducatif, surtout à la lumière du fait que les auteurs prétendent proposer “une éducation libérale de base, vaste et solide.” L’auteur soutient qu’un bon curriculum libéral devrait surtout produire des personnes qui ont l’art de la conversation.

In *The Dialectic of Freedom*, Maxine Greene (1988) expresses profound alarm at the modern cry for freedom, a cry she believes inane because unsituated, that is, because it refutes history and solidarity, and extols pure

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self-autonomy. Paradoxically, she observes, the cry is typically uttered by those “anchored or submerged” by all that is perfectly natural in their lives, by the very certainty of *this* reality they inhabit. Greene seeks therefore to recover and affirm “the relation between subject and object, individual and environment, self and society, outsider and community, living consciousness and phenomenal world” (p. 8).

In her introduction, Greene describes the “deeply public” character of her various literary and educational studies. *The Dialectic of Freedom*, she writes, “arises out of a lifetime’s preoccupation with quest,” and has, to a great extent, involved a deliberate effort “to connect the undertaking of education . . . to the making and remaking of a public space, a space of dialogue and possibility” (p. xi). Educationalists, she argues, ought to enkindle learners’ curiosity, enlarge their capacity for inquiring into the commonsensical, the givenness of their lives. Teachers ought to be principally concerned with initiating pupils into a fruitful, productive, yet critical conversation with their life-worlds.

In what follows, I, too, undertake an educational quest of sorts, similar in kind to Greene’s. I want to identify and criticize notions of the “learner” and the “liberal school” presented in the secondary education curriculum recently drafted by British Columbia’s Ministry of Education (1990a; hereafter, the “GP” document).¹ More precisely, I’ll indicate how this reform document mistakenly conceives the “pupil” to be a consummate strategist, a rugged, spirited individualist, self-disciplined, self-contained, organized, and ambitious to a fault. Further, I’ll argue that although the conception might be economically or politically useful, it is educationally fatuous: a liberal education does not entail producing thousands of independent-minded strategists. The final section of this essay is concerned therefore with outlining an expressivist conception of the “pupil.” Drawing on Michael Oakeshott’s work, I propose that pupils are better viewed as emerging conversationalists.²

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THE MISSION STATEMENT

The purpose of the British Columbia School system is to enable learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy. (GP, p. 7)

This mission statement implies that the reform program will serve two “needs”: those of individual students and the social-economic “needs” of provincial and national communities. On first view, this is uncontentious because so *obviously* true, so commonsensical. Schools ought to sustain and promote individual flourishing and concurrently, inculcate in the young person the character and virtue of a prosperous “citizenship.”

On second thought, however, one queries the authors' use of certain words and phrases. For instance, what "individual potential" do the authors wish to see actualized? And further, in light of this educational imperative, what significance do the terms "healthy society" or "prosperous and sustainable economy" have for them?

In the Western intellectual tradition, the question of how best to fulfil the private longings of human subjects and still properly satisfy the "needs" of their communities has been long and furiously debated. In the contemporary world, this remains a basic moral-political dilemma to which there is no correct solution, just congeries of polemical ones.

Nonetheless, I think it's legitimate to ask whether the authors of the GP document have a sufficient or even the barest understanding of this debate and how it influences their views on the nature of learning or the purposes of liberal schooling. Put otherwise: do the authors more or less grasp the normative presuppositions underlying their educational mission?

It is my premise that they do not. I suggest the mission statement is the first in a series describing the nature of the "educated citizen" showing that the authors are of two minds, ethically speaking. More precisely, the reform document presents us with two conflicting versions of the "learner," versions that may be most aptly termed "romantic" and "utilitarian." But, of course, how do I use these terms? By way of explanation, I'll draw on Charles Taylor's (1985b, 1989) studies of the "making of modern identities."³

According to Taylor, a new, modern self-understanding emerges in seventeenth-century notions of the religious life. In the work of John Locke, for instance, one observes a "modern Christian consciousness" heralding the majesty and sovereignty of God and arguing thereby that the truly human life is that which has accurately discerned His purposes. For Locke, the solitary pursuit of the human person, the autonomy of the self, is of paramount importance in any authentically Christian life. Nonetheless, the personal endeavour to grasp lucidly God's intentions and then enact them obliges the individual to dwell in human community. The reasonable man understands his Christian responsibility is to conjoin with others and to "acquire through labour" the good, holy life here on earth.

Further, we find in the Calvinist doctrine a strong affirmation of the sanctity of everyday life. For instance, Taylor observes, the Reformation abjures the Catholic notion of the extraordinary, blessed life of the celibate priest because that notion implies that ordinary existence, the common world of marriage and family, is not as worthy in God's eyes. "The sanctified ordinary life is a spiritual condition," declare the reformers (p. 268); truly religious individuals must struggle arduously to live their lives in society as God deems they ought to be lived. Persons must be disciplined and deliberate in their actions and "engage the peculiar excellence" of their particular kind of being, the excellence of God-given, human reason.

In other words, Taylor argues, this version of intrinsic human nature highlights the importance of rational control. What is more, it does not extol

human desires and urges; rather, it considers them to be indistinguishable generally from the base instincts of other animate beings. Writes Taylor, “what is humanly satisfying about this life is not just that natural impulses are fulfilled, but that men in doing so are exercising their reason and affirming their autonomy. . . . This is life according to nature, in its first version, as it emerges in modern society” (p. 265).

This early conception of the utilitarian self therefore esteems a purposive rationality, the kind of reasoning enabling individuals to effect what they will, and moreover, to see “the things around [them] as potentially raw material for [their] purposes” (p. 267). Consequently, the world’s particulars are dispossessed of the intrinsic value they were seen to have in ancient and medieval cosmologies: they are useful for our purposes and our purposes alone. The rational animal effectively becomes a co-creator, an enterprising partner in God’s worldly venture.

Still, to Reform intellectuals, the “efficacy” of this kind of thought and action was not all that mattered (though it mattered tremendously). Of utmost importance to them was that their labours bore fruit: therein lay the true evidence of their autonomy, the freedom, as Taylor puts it, from “superstition and imposture” (p. 267). The very success of their instrumental stance indicated they had properly discerned God’s spiritual ambitions.

A second version of the good inward life, says Taylor, appears later in the eighteenth century, most especially in the writings of Rousseau. The French philosopher is one of the first to argue suavisly that the virtue or excellence of human persons “lies in [their] tender and noble sentiments, which flow from an undistorted or unsullied nature” (p. 269). The emphasis here is upon discerning the essence of our humanity rather than employing our faculty of reason effectively to satisfy our desires. Briefly, in stark contrast to the utilitarian, the romantic seeks to distinguish the good, human urges from the bad. As Taylor writes, Rousseau is most concerned with elucidating the quality of human motivations. He supposes that “the good man is moved by the pure voice of consciousness/nature, which truly comes from him; the bad man by heteronomous passions” (p. 270).

These two versions of “life according to nature” differ, then, in the following way. According to the utilitarian account, persons ought to exercise their reason in order to satisfy “the demands of nature, which are of themselves of no more than *de facto* worth” (p. 270). It holds in highest esteem a purposive rationality, a disenchanting attitude, and the control and autonomy such an instrumental stance provides. Romanticism, in contrast, believes that persons ought to intuit “the voice of nature, a source of pure, higher desire” within themselves, in order to live well, that is, to think, act, and feel in an authentically human way. Thus, it celebrates the virtue of a truly sentimental existence, and requires individuals reasonably grasp the essential qualities of their passions.

Still later, the Rousseauian account is adopted and extended by the Romantic-expressivist movement. Romanticism, Taylor says, comes to

understand the intuitive journey of the modern self (and “nation”) as one of both exploration and disclosure. Following Rousseau, the Expressivists believe each person possesses a unique nature which must be revealed by a passionate, inward search; but then they take a further, and vitally important, conceptual step. As Taylor (1985b) writes, on their view, “not only do we need to turn away from other-dependence and false passion,” we ought as well to “articulate what we are,” learn to elucidate publicly what we have individually recovered (p. 272).

Now, given these two views of personhood, what might one say about the conception of the learner in the GP document?

As I stated earlier, the reform curriculum affirms contradictory moral views in its mission and goal statements. On the one hand, asserting that the learner’s “potential” ought to be developed, the authors implicitly appeal to the reader’s modern belief in the integrity of the individual life, that is, to our common understanding that the human person is a free subject, a self-determining creature whose true, noble nature is yet to be revealed. On the other hand, the mission statement declares schools must help pupils become productive citizens, that is, acquire the dispositions and abilities that allow them to contribute economically and socially. Here, at the onset, we may recognize the significance that the authors attach to romantic and to utilitarian values.

The tension is evident later, when the authors declare the principal goal of schools is to enable students to develop certain intellectual faculties, namely, the capacities to think and reason independently, creatively, and expressively, to analyze in a critical manner, to appreciate learning, and to be curious.⁴ Again, at first read, such an educational claim stands to our common sense. Most people admire autonomous, innovative thought and action, and the childlike propensity unceasingly to explore and to inquire. Herein lies a tentative answer to the question of what latent abilities in the learner the authors believe should be developed. This is a plea to allow for the curiosity and creative aspirations of the person and has a Rousseauian air.

But the romantic force of this entreaty is diminished by the contrary, utilitarian call for “experiences” that would enable pupils to become more efficacious. That is, the authors say they want individuals to become more decisive, independent-minded, and strategic in their learning. Moreover, the reform curriculum will afford them the opportunities to enhance and extend their communication skills, to “exhibit self-motivation and self-direction,” to evaluate, to assess, to be selective about their learning; in sum, students will have several chances to develop a procedural rationality and thereby ensure the success of their own educational practices and pursuits.⁵

The authors’ educational targets for the pupil are all well and good. To support purposeful, fruitful inquiries is reasonable and educationally desirable. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that individual autonomy and exploration is only recognizable because it is “situated,” that is to say, the

expressions and actions any community holds in high regard, always express—and are actions taken in light of—*certain* good(s). Hence the importance of asking what the authors mean precisely when they claim the GP will provide “experiences” that compel learners to think, to reason, and to act “independently”. What things will learners be thinking about—*how* best to compete in a fast changing world or *why* competition is so highly esteemed in a modern industrial society, *how* to be autonomous and self-reliant or *what purposes* are best served by independent-minded people? In short, what “experiences” which draw out, or help to actualize the individual’s potential? Does emphasis on procedural knowledge support the learner’s romantic exploration of the world? Moreover, what kinds of learning will pupils come to “appreciate,” and how will they express themselves after following this curriculum?

Despite this first elaboration of the mission statement, one remains uncertain as to the reasonableness and coherence of the program goals. Up until this point in the document, the authors have only provided us with an extensive, rather meaningless, set of “descriptors” for what might be termed the “educated-citizen-to-be” or graduate learner.⁶ At this early, crucial stage in their discussions, the authors consistently fail to explain the significance of the terms they employ to characterize learning at this stage. Put otherwise: they do not critically recognize or understand the conflicting notions of the modern identity with which they work and hence display a certain moral ambivalence in their account of the “pupil.” Do the authors mean to express a romantic or utilitarian conception of learning (or perhaps an original synthesis of the two)? One cannot tell, at least at this juncture.

THE ORGANIZATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GRADUATION PROGRAM

Is the authors’ educational stance more coherent in the later sections? Let’s examine the practical organization of what the authors term a “broad liberal education that contributes to [students’] development as educated citizens” (GP, p. 17). Moreover, let us consider in what ways this general, liberal focus will be complemented by “activities that relate more specifically to the [learners’] own personal post-graduation endeavours” (GP, p. 17).

First of all, the authors state, if you want to produce educated citizens, then you must engage students in a general, but critical, study of the arduous, challenging, and responsible task of living in a plurality of communities.⁷ Such an endeavour means grasping the “big picture.” This refers to the compelling, often invigorating business of learning what a healthy society is and how one’s personal life can help to sustain and perhaps improve it. The ideally educated citizen comprehends, and is able to adapt to, the “demands and expectations of a changing world.” Hence, the learner will become adept at organizing, assessing, and communicating what she knows. She will learn to produce things needed in the everyday world. Her studies will motivate, instilling in her a deep sense of security, confidence,

and trust. Further, they will enable her to become decisive, and teach her profoundly to respect herself and others.

Second, the authors believe a broad, liberal education is properly “a system of plurality of excellence” that will ideally offer the learner “a variety of *career* paths”; hence, their curriculum will permit the learner to enter “programs that are different in kind but equal in status” (GP, p. 23). In practical terms, the GP document describes five paths or options the learner can take: Exploration, Passport to Apprenticeship (PApp), Career Preparation (CP), Community-School Partnership (CSP), and University.

And what might one say about these selected options, these courses of educational conduct, and the premises from which they are derived?

Three of the five options offered to learners in order that they might prepare a “broad, yet unique” and “liberal” course of study are *vocational*: the PApp, CP, and CSP. These three options are preparatory courses, training exercises in the art of productive citizenry, and serve only to prepare individuals with particular marketable skills and particular economic desires. As the authors assure us, there are several career advantages for learners who choose these pathways.⁸ But these three are not “liberal” paths of education in the sense that they encourage learners to follow a rarely trodden, that is, idiosyncratic course of educational studies. They are more aptly termed learning fast-tracks to socially appropriate, economically useful vocations.

What is worse, the remaining two paths, the University and Exploration, also slant in this direction. For instance, Jin-Ah⁹ epitomizes the highly skilled careerist. Her “very full day” is successful, and hence morally significant, the authors imply, because she is organized, decisive, self-directed, and efficacious in her efforts to become an ethnomusicologist. Again, the authors claim that Robert¹⁰ is *exploring* when, after consulting his school “profile” with his counsellor, he decides to coach a school basketball team and prepare a “fitness programme for seniors at a local retirement centre” (GP, p. 25). Robert’s *educational* choices follow, however, from his being “told” by a career inventory that he would “make a good teacher or recreational director.”¹¹

The major intent of the curriculum is to instruct pupils how to perform skilfully, rationally, and successfully in the public world. But is this a liberal curriculum? I think not. We have been presented with a vision of learner-as-entrepreneur and asked to agree that secondary education ought to be centrally concerned with ensuring pupils become socialized in the business of life. Education to some extent always involves this kind of socialization. But it is wrong to assume, as the authors do, that because “developing career objectives is a prime focus for most students in their graduation years” (GP, p. 50), educationalists ought to cater to this interest. It is wrong, too, for the authors to state baldly that because we are “living in the midst of monumental changes,”¹² it is in educationalists’ interest intellectually to prepare “educated citizens” who are consummate strategists, capable producers in a

rapidly changing world. The authors in no way adequately defend their claim that training individuals for professional careers ought to be a fundamental purpose of any liberal education. One could agree that the development of other abilities and competencies besides those linguistic and mathematical ought to be recognized and encouraged. But should a truly broad and liberal program of study deliberately set out to prepare students for specific kinds of careers? It does not follow that a truly broad and liberal “system of plurality of excellence” would have as one of its principal goals to prepare students for specific kinds of careers, to produce entrepreneurial citizens.

Further, the authors propose five options they claim are “different in kind but equal in status” (p. 23). But can these three *career* options offer the kinds of learning a properly liberal curriculum would promote? I suggest not. As presented here, the three are strongly utilitarian in character and it is likely that they would ordinarily produce individuals quite indifferent to what others have to think, feel, or do—unless, of course, the actions or dispositions of these others might be effectively utilized. As I’ve observed above, even the exemplary learner described in the University option is a woman of purpose. Jin-Ah is so tremendously composed, has such rational control over her life and desires, one doubts whether she would ever be inclined to playfully converse with, or lovingly address, another person. Jin-Ah’s actions may be purposeful, but are they wise? The intellectual freedom of this educated citizen seem quite unsituated; it utterly lacks the affective human character one cherishes and might reasonably expect to be encouraged in a properly liberal curriculum.¹³ Where is the “community of possibility” inhabited by open-minded, curious, and imaginative learners envisioned by the authors of the *Intermediate Program* document?¹⁴

Indeed, one might consider all five options equal in status because similar in kind. Each has its origin in the undefended proposition that career development is an “integral part” of any truly broad, liberal education (GP, p. 50). All are expressly concerned therefore with initiating students into vocational ways of life. Is it reasonable to call this educational development?

My final point is this. The vision of the school as a community of possibilities is compelling, but cannot be realized in the ways the authors of the GP document suggest. An individual will have intentional literacy only if she is properly engaged in educationally useful communication.¹⁵ It is thus unsettling to hear the authors claim their prescription for a new curriculum follows from this vision. As presented in the GP document, the goals of the reform initiative are educational slogans, an item-by-item record of popular expressions about teaching and learning; the authors provide no coherent notion of the learner. We are informed, for instance, that the learner will be taught among other things how to “critically think and reason,” to “communicate effectively” and “learn independently”: to echo the authors’ jargon, we have been merely presented with a list of “descriptors.” But what links

are there between critical thought and creative expression, between the ability to learn independently and the capacity to communicate effectively, between self-understanding and the public spaces of human discourse and action?

To pursue these questions would be to see schools as communities of possibilities, to comprehend the practical significance of the claim that General Studies must have as one of its primary aims the development of “literacy and communication skills.” Is the literate, educated person best conceived as a *skilled* thinker and doer? Do the authors see a difference between communication skills and communicative abilities or capacities, between, for instance, learning the explicit rules of language use and the fluent, everyday speaking of that language? How should we understand the educational significance of the phrase “the learner will be offered experiences that will enable [her or him] to ‘synthesize imagination, intellect, and emotion’” (GP, p. 10) in light of the earlier statement that learners will be asked to think and reason critically? Are these so-called “intellectual” activities connected? How might they be socially constituted, that is, initiated and sustained through the partnership of student and other?

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A person’s self-understanding and ideal education flourish only if the person learns freely and critically to express herself in speech and other forms of symbolic action. Pupils ought to be seen as emerging, well-educated conversationalists. My account of “conversation” and its significance in education draws on the works of Michael Oakeshott, the political philosopher.¹⁶

In “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” Oakeshott (1962) claims that “Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of [an historical] conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation” (p. 199). In our lifetimes, each of us is afforded countless opportunities to learn something about a cultural conversation “begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of the centuries.” Furthermore, Oakeshott says, by carefully “listening” to this “conversation of mankind,” we will comprehend how vital it is that all contribute something of themselves to it (p. 199).

But what is this “conversation of mankind”? It is, Oakeshott says, a “meeting-place” for “diverse idioms of utterance,” or “various modes of imagining,” the most “familiar,” authentic, and enduring of these being the poetic, scientific, moral, and practical. A plurality of voices marks civilizing conversations. “[Conversation] is impossible in the absence of a diversity of voices: in it different universes of discourses meet, acknowledge each other and enjoy an oblique relationship which neither requires nor forecasts their being assimilated to one another” (pp. 198–199). Each voice represents “an

emancipation” from the prejudices, the limited “considerabilities,” of the others; it is crucial that none falls into disrepute or becomes reified as the exemplary mode of speech and deed. If any one voice predominates, the excellences of our speech communities, the humanizing capacity symbolically to articulate, to maintain, and to remake ourselves through a diversity of familiar and unfamiliar voices, will be severely constrained if not disabled.

Oakeshott studies poetic utterance because of the popular, contemporary, and “barbaric” fascination with the “voice of argumentative discourse, the voice of science,” and the voice of “practical activity.” Our preoccupation with these eristic and instrumental voices threatens to undermine the conversation itself, writes Oakeshott (1962), quite simply because each tends toward “superbia, that is, an exclusive concern with its own utterance, which may result in its identifying the conversation with itself and its speaking as if it were speaking only to itself” (p. 201).

To resist the oppressive authority of the voice of science, Oakeshott re-describes the “quality and significance” of a human activity he says has long been dismissed as a kind of nonsensical “entertainment” offered during the “intervals of a more serious discussion”: the activity of contemplative imagining, or the fashioning and refashioning of poetic images. Oakeshott thinks poetic imagining is disdained because it lacks intentionality. It is, he explains, an activity remarkable for the absence of inference or argument, and for its indifference to matters of fact or illusion, to queries about useful or good means and ends. Briefly, poetic expressions exhibit no desiring, willing, or judging subject as do the voices of science and practical activity. “Since there is no problem to be solved, no hypothesis to be explored, no restlessness to be overcome, no desire to be satisfied, or approval to be won, there is no “*This, therefore That,*” no passage from image to image in which each movement is a step in an elucidation or in the execution of a project” (p. 221). So the voice of poetry does not morally guide us, or help us to discern “facts” and “non-facts,” nor does it represent something like “the beautiful” to us, or serve some utilitarian desire.

How is this “non-laborious” amoral voice ever distinguished from “partners of so different [and privileged] a character” as science and practical activity? The greater part of our everyday lives, admits Oakeshott, is full of practical concerns and relations; we have numerous obligations and duties to fulfil, responsibilities to be met. We are typically producers and consumers, managers and workers, and thus preoccupied and oftentimes burdened by certain interests, beliefs, and anxieties. Nevertheless, “there are relationships, still unmistakably practical, where this is not so. It is not so, for example, in love and friendship” (p. 244). The image we carry of love and friendship is “dramatic, not utilitarian,” he argues, and thus provides us a sense of the freedom which characterizes poetic utterances. Further, if authentically lived out, these relations display no moral judgement; they are remarkable for acknowledging the individual character of those loved, the uniqueness of the selves disclosed through them.

And what is learning, on his account? He writes: “the necessary condition of all that distinguishes a human being is that it must be learned.” That is, we do not naturally possess a human character at birth but rather acquire it through our learning: “the expression “human nature” stands only for our common and inescapable engagement: to become by learning” (1989, p. 20). Thus, the quality and substance of our self-understandings depends entirely upon our learning the range of expressive practices recognized in our speech communities. “We are born and grow up in a world of ideas already present and understood in various ways by those preceding us on the scene, and we must learn its features, interpret them and appropriate them to ourselves” (pp. 6–7). In sum, a “human self” only properly appears, is recognized and engaged as such by other selves, in the activity of shared expressions or imaginings. Furthermore, the behaviours or activities of any imagining self may be distinguished as an assemblage of voices, a *unique embodiment*, you might say, of the “specific modes” of language use Oakeshott has identified.

In becoming conversant then, pupils are not just socialized to a practical world, that is, quite skilled in performing a certain range of tasks and thus useful citizens to their society. Neither have they gained what some laud as a “general” education; conversationalists are not merely independent thinkers, able to think logically or deliberatively about something or someone; they are not simply courageous, patient, careful, or determined persons able as well “to read attentively and to speak lucidly.” Rather, conversationalists are those most able to “recognize and discriminate” between the several voices, the “distinct and conditional . . . idioms of human self-understanding,” found in the world, and more importantly still, those able to elucidate what they know “in terms of what it *means*” to them (emphasis in the original; pp. 38, 23).

Oakeshott hopes therefore that “we may recognize liberal learning as, above all else, an education in imagination, an initiation into the art of this conversation in which we learn to recognize the voices; to distinguish their different modes of utterance, to acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to this conversational relationship and thus to make our *début dans la vie humaine*” (p. 39). Paradoxical though it might seem, on this expressivist view, schools ought to be places where pupils learn how to author themselves even as they submit to the authority of their cultural traditions.¹⁷

Finally, Oakeshott believes the character of liberal teaching is implied by the character of learning. If pupils are to participate fully in the “great intellectual adventures” of humankind, then teachers must be capable of describing those adventures in provocative, engaging ways, in ways that “communicate something to [a] partner” rather than merely instruct or inform an “unfurnished mind” in the appropriate ways of living. Thus, the act of communication has two fundamental aspects: “instructing” or the communication of information, and “imparting” or the communication of judgement. So teachers must, on the one hand, convey “information” or the

“explicit, impersonal, useful ingredient” of human knowledge in order for the student to develop substantial skills or abilities. On the other hand, they must comprehend that this “ingredient of information . . . never constitutes the whole of what we know. Before any concrete skill or ability can appear, information must be partnered by “judgement,” “knowing how” must be added to the “knowing what” of information” (p. 53). All genuine knowledge of the world includes an element of both information and judgement.

To sum up: if she sincerely understands the responsibilities of her task, the liberal teacher will engage her pupils’ imaginations by offering them particular, remarkable ways of human acting, speaking, or thinking, ways “in which human beings have sought to identify and to understand themselves,” and thereby, help them become “inhabitants of a world composed, not of ‘things,’ but of meanings” (pp. 26, 64). In short, the good liberal teacher is aware of the contingency of her self-understandings, of the oblique way judgement is conveyed in the event of communicating some small part of what it means to live humanely. Most especially, she will befriend her students, helping them to listen, to ask, and to imagine with hope and desire.

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I follow Oakeshott in asserting that a proper education ought to be concerned with enabling pupils to speak reasonably, that is, express themselves in the traditional “idioms” of our culture. But I go one step further in claiming that, *ideally*, sophisticated conversationalists are able as well to communicate their self-understandings, visually and kinaesthetically, in a variety of non-linguistic ways. To paraphrase Nelson Goodman (1978), pupils ought to acquire more or less three “ways of worldmaking,” the oral, the visual, and the kinesthetic—a good curriculum will enable them intelligently to map time and space in these alternative ways.

In suggesting that well-educated persons are essentially sophisticated conversationalists, I am not solely concerned with the development of linguistic abilities in the narrow sense that such persons demonstrate an excellence in talking *about* things which matter to them. Rather, I suggest the excellence of conversationalists is revealed by their capacity to recognize and to articulate both new thoughts *and* feelings through a variety of symbolic activities. Hence, a well-educated person is not merely (or remarkably) someone whose intelligence is expressed verbally; for instance, she might not only be very adept philosophically but in addition, versed in symbolizing her self-understanding as carpenter, parent, or accountant.¹⁸

On this expressivist view, to be properly educated, young persons must be first carefully and deliberately drawn into different kinds of communicative action and thereby learn both how to express themselves *and be expressed as well*.¹⁹ The primacy of the dialogical means that when a person speaks to another and is heard and humanly answered, *they* are spoken, or symbolically impressed and informed: the meaning of what I say, and of

what you say, is revealed in what is between us; to echo Greene (1988), in the “making and remaking of a public space,” we disclose a freedom that is ours.

Finally, in these several symbolic engagements, young persons may be guided toward what I call an intentional literacy. That is to say, proper educational conversations will enable them existentially to realize, to practise, and to play out what the theologian Martin Buber (1965) has termed the principle of any human life—the twofold movement of distance and relation.

Briefly, in acquiring a first language persons become, to a certain extent, reflectively aware of the symbols they are using. Each of us can embody what she knows in varying degrees, to use fluently²⁰ a particular language to inform our experiences, and we are more or less conscious of our informing abilities. We all develop, in short, a primary literacy, a customary way of speaking our selves in a particular community. But although this first language, or form of life, permits reflective awareness, it confines us to its range of speech forms, partial standpoints, modes of distance, and relation. To speak, and thus to think, in any given language community means we are able expressively to range over a fairly well-defined or circumscribed symbolic territory. But we tend not to go further. As Taylor’s studies (1985a, 1989) of the “pre-modern” self make clear, one’s self-understanding/identity appears to all intents and purposes to be outwardly derived: the authority of the individual life solely emerges from an external horizon of meaning.

In contrast to this primary literacy is the critical self-understanding acquired by *learning* other language forms. By learning how to thicken the distance between self and the life world, we come symbolically to trace an inward journey. Becoming critically fluent means one gains the intellectual-affective abilities that permit a more or less disenchanting view, an “outlaw” understanding, of the language world one had previously inhabited (or acquired the habits of). In effect, one develops the objectifying intelligence of a discerning subjectivity; one gains an intentional literacy. As Buber (1965) contends, this objective knowledge is essential if the person is to properly realize herself in relation; this movement into distance presupposes (though it does not guarantee) the re-cognition of association and therefore sets the stage for transforming the realm of customary life into a world of human being, a community of ethical/political possibilities. Obviously, this kind of learning has its dangers: one may actually forget that a secondary literacy is itself just another language form and thus cannot provide a perfectly ahistorical view, is nothing less than a provisional understanding of one’s world. One may become an ideologue, a devotee of a particular critical language, and neglect or refuse to place into question their own speech forms.

Schools ought to provide therefore the kinds of communicative action that produce sophisticated conversationalists. Good curricula will help persons to discriminate, as Oakeshott (1962) says, the various “distinct and

conditional idioms . . . of human self-understanding” and free them to invent or to fashion new, idiosyncratic forms of symbolic expressions in the three ways I’ve alluded to.

CONCLUSION

An education can rise no higher than the conception of the civilization that pervades it, gives it substance, and determines its purposes and direction.²¹

As I’ve argued it, the goals and philosophy of the GP curriculum are not coherently presented. In their discussion of these matters in the GP document, for instance, do the authors mean to express a romantic or utilitarian conception of the pupil? One cannot tell. Unfortunately, in the end, when they explain how it will be organized and implemented, it becomes apparent that the GP is intended to serve particular, fairly utilitarian ends that are not of central interest to what I would call a liberal educationalist. By way of response, drawing on the educational studies of Michael Oakeshott, I’ve suggested a good curriculum will be concerned with initiating and sustaining certain kinds of communicative action, or expressive practices.

My expressivist views are not refashioned romantic ones. My disparaging of the entrepreneurial turn in this curriculum is not intended to return us to romance (by the way of default). I believe a fully-fledged romantic understanding of the learner is unjustifiable if for no other reason than its hostility towards any version of the utilitarian ethic—an ethic that strongly appeals to most of us because it properly recognizes, is quite unashamed by, the technological accomplishments, or more basically, the material successes of human labour. I resist, therefore, romantic conceptions of learning that seem too high-minded, edge towards pure aestheticism. In this regard, educational theorists and practitioners alike would do well to remember Virginia Woolf’s impassioned plea in *Three Guineas* for “a ‘clean-cut’ language that addresses persons rather than aggregates,” and disrupts “the dance around ‘the poison tree of intellectual harlotry’” (quoted in Greene, 1990, p. 71). Or Amy Gutmann’s (1987) observation that “those among us who would assert their commitment to civic virtue or to individual freedom at the expense of denying the legitimacy of the other value” plead for an undemocratic education.

I’ve claimed pupils should develop an intentional literacy, becoming quite able, and not merely skilled, in speaking their world and in hearing themselves variously spoken or addressed. Moreover, I’ve suggested one does not acquire this ability in the final run, one learns it. An intentional literacy comes through education, not instruction. Certainly, literacy includes acquisition of words and grammatical devices and is a matter of becoming talented in the use or tooling of common language forms, in being properly instructed in how to put a sentence, or a kind of thought. But an intentional literacy is realized only after pupils have acquired a range of expressive habits *and* learned how to judge the forms of symbolic action they inhabit;

in other words, literate persons deliberately recognize what they mean to communicate. This is a “capacity” only properly learnt in an acknowledged community of possibilities, in the public space where one is led to communicate in diverse, fairly prescribed ways, through a range of symbolic devices. The public school ought to be such a place: that would be its principal function.

NOTES

¹ A part of the B.C. Government’s “Year 2000” curriculum reform project begun in 1989, the GP “response draft” prescribes the learner’s final years in the B.C. public school system (grades 11–12).

The “Year 2000” project includes two other “response draft” programs—the Primary (K–3) and Intermediate (4–10). In 1990, having solicited critical replies from a variety of interested parties, the Ministry of Education published a revised edition of the Primary curriculum and shortly thereafter, began implementing it in schools. Second drafts of the Intermediate and Graduation programs are forthcoming in 1992.

As a whole, the reform curriculum is avowedly “learner-focused,” aiming to recognize, to sustain, and to enlarge each individual’s means of learning. That is, the authors claim “active learning” only occurs if and when curriculum materials and methods of assessment take into account the individual’s developmental level, abilities, and interests.

² I use the term “conversationalist” in a very broad sense here. Ideally educated persons are able to communicate in various ways with other persons. To borrow Nelson Goodman’s expression, such persons know three “ways of worldmaking”: the visual, oral, and kinesthetic. They have become quite adept at using different symbolic forms to map time and space in these three ways.

³ The following discussion is drawn almost entirely from Taylor (1985b). Page numbers cited in the text are from this work. For a much more thorough argument, see Taylor (1989).

⁴ The “primary responsibility” of the school is “to develop the ability of students to analyze critically, reason and think independently, acquire basic learning skills and bodies of knowledge; to develop in students a lifelong appreciation of learning, a curiosity about the world around them, and a capacity for creative thought and expression” (GP document, p. 8). Further, the Intermediate Program likens the “world of the learner” to a wide space between the cultures of the child and adult. The learner here has a wonderlust, a deep urge to fashion his or her own way of life.

⁵ Thus, pupils are to learn how to “make considered, *effective decisions*, select and apply appropriate learning *strategies*, self-assessment *methods*, and evaluation *techniques*” (GP document, p. 10).

⁶ The sections on the goals and philosophy of the Graduate Program merely list the outstanding characteristics of certain educational things; for instance, the graduate learner is to become “critical” in thought and reason, “communicate effectively,” he is to become skilled in selecting, applying, assessing, evaluating, expressing things. But this is like pinpointing the characteristics of a horse which allow us to designate it a “horse”: “a domesticated perrissodactyl mammal, *Equus caballus*, used for draught work and riding” (*Collins Dictionary*, 1979, p. 708) and leaving it at that. My point is this: in giving a con-

ceptual account of, for instance, “critical appreciation,” one ought to indicate what one means by the term, treat the reader to a rich conceptual description of their philosophical concerns or dispositions, rather than merely offer definitions, slogans. To conceptualize in an educationally useful manner, that is to say, prescriptively, is not simply a matter of defining something; it is as well the arduous, crucially important matter of saying why and how one intends to use these terms.

- ⁷ The individual must come to recognize her place, the authors state, “within the family, the community, Canada, and the world” (GP, p. 19).
- ⁸ “Advantages for learners may include the following: qualifying for advance placement at a post-graduation institution; obtaining advance credit for studies completed in the local school; acquiring some entry-level employment skills; obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the world of work; coming into contact with potential employers; combining regular graduation with a specialty focus” (GP, p. 95).
- ⁹ Jin-Ah is the authors’ example of the kinds of choices made daily by someone in the University option. “[Jin-Ah] is a very capable student and plans to become an ethnomusicologist. Until her severe spinal cord injury four years ago, she played several instruments and hoped to be a musician for a symphony orchestra. She now has quadriplegia, is in a wheelchair, and is ventilator-dependent. . . . This morning is a very full one! Not only does she have a test in physics, an in-class assignment in history, and a lab in chemistry, but at lunch she’s meeting with the grad committee to discuss the ceremonies. After lunch, she has a quiz in math and in her spare time has a meeting with the counsellor” (GP, p. 27).
- ¹⁰ Robert is an example of someone who might pursue the Exploration option. See p. 25 of the GP document.
- ¹¹ Is good teaching analogous to organizing and directing someone’s leisure activities?
- ¹² See the *Intermediate Program* document (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1990b), p. 11.
- ¹³ See p. 27 of the GP document. The “very capable” Jin-Ah is frightening because her actions serve as a means to one particular end. The day in her life described here seems almost inhuman because it is perfectly planned, coordinated, structured to ensure she becomes an ethnomusicologist: this is not an educational adventure, this is akin to a tour of duty. It lacks signs of human intimacy, care, and compassion.
- ¹⁴ See “The Vision of Schools” in the *Intermediate Program* document (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 1990b), p. 10.
- ¹⁵ See my discussion below for a fuller description of what I mean by intentional literacy.
- ¹⁶ My discussion draws on Oakeshott (1933, 1962, 1989).
- ¹⁷ The French philosopher, Albert Camus, once remarked in an interview that “independence is the choosing of one’s own dependencies.”
- ¹⁸ I have in mind here the kind of intelligent, poetic understanding of one’s self in the world characterized by Robert Pirsig (1972), or in the Buddhist self-disclosure through gardening, archery, or tea ceremonies. See, for instance, Herrigel’s *Zen and the Art of Archery* (1981).
- ¹⁹ This idea hints again at the paradox of the human condition: within any community of speech, self-expression is both constrained and enabled.

²⁰ Again, fluency here has both an intellectual and performative sense: when I speak, I utter embodied words.

²¹ George Counts, as quoted by Lawrence Cremin (1976), p. 89.

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