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Recommended Citation
Overton, Harvey (1975) "A Clockwork Course," Perspectives: Vol. 7 : No. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/perspectives/vol7/iss1/3

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A Clockwork Course
By Harvey Overton

A Fox Brush Fable (A fox brush is the tail of the fox, especially when regarded as the trophy of the hunt; I begin, then, with trophy already in hand.)

Human behavior is not capricious. If capricious, why study it? If not capricious, then caused. And if caused, then subject to investigation and understanding. Then once understood, subject to prediction and control. That which cannot be observed directly does not exist. We now know that there is no basis in fact for the belief that desires, attitudes, personality, mind, or character determine what people do. This belief belongs to an earlier era of prescientific explanation.

Education is a process of behavior modification. Successful education produces desirable behavioral changes in students. As educators we are charged with selecting those behaviors we determine to be effective and with arranging appropriate conditions for their production.

In the past, we approached this process willy-nilly, only nebulously grasping what we were about and largely unmindful of the effectiveness of the procedures we used. Our commitment to the romantic notion that there was something ineffable about the role of the teacher blinded us to the simple proposition that teaching is, after all, a matter of engineering the learning process to produce a clearly defined product that is demonstrable and measurable.

We no longer need to leave things to chance. The science of behavior has provided us with the understanding and the tools to control the learning process. We now know that one set of learning procedures will produce behaviors A, B, and C, and that another set
of learning procedures will produce behaviors D, E, and F. With control, we can predict, and with prediction we can eliminate the gross ineffectiveness that has characterized the educational enterprise ever since the Saber-tooth Curriculum.

We can now forget a career of anxious Mondays, or returning to the classroom after a week-end of fretting about how to get our students to grasp some concept in aesthetics or epistemology. Our course objectives are stated with precision. Learning is administered in graded doses, with students unfailingly advancing from stage to stage as they are positively reinforced for productive responses. As classroom managers (in another era we were called teachers) we assiduously avoid strategies producing aversive reactions, knowing that they are counterproductive. Instead, we engineer relevant contingencies that generate the behaviors that are visibly effective. And all the joyless instruments of measurement proclaim that we are good. The clockwork course is our shepherd and we shall not want.

There is a little George-and-Martha game we academics (especially humanists) play in our faculty-lounge Walpurgisnacht called “Skinning B. F. Skinner,” and I have just played it obviously to the disadvantage of the behaviorists. As the theme of this session is “The Individual Student in General Education, Threat or Opportunity?” we may ask: Is the Skinnerian formulation of education a threat to liberal education? The answer is most certainly yes if it were to be adopted as a uniform practice for all university courses, for it organizes the learning process as a closed system and in its most extreme terms denies all those qualities of mind, sensibility, and compassion that have characterized liberal learning in Western culture. If we are beyond freedom and dignity, then we are beyond any possibility of liberal education in traditional terms, for freedom and dignity are finally what liberal learning has been all about. The university itself, of course, can remain a “university” only if it remains an open community of intellectual challenge, debate, and invention. In short, a Skinnerian university would be a contradiction in terms in the same sense that George Bernard Shaw called the traditional Catholic university a contradiction in terms.

The Skinnerian notion of education as conditioned response has a place in the competing systems of thought (even though it denies the “reality of “thought”) in an open community of intellect, and courses constructed according to behaviorist principles may be appropriate

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for some kinds of learning at the university. There are, at the same time, more moderate, less messianic behaviorists from whom we can learn all kinds of useful things for the improvement of teaching.² And there are cognitive psychologists like Benjamin Bloom³ who can help us organize courses with greater clarity of purpose and with teaching patterns that contribute to developing the higher cognitive processes of analysis, synthesis, and judgment. But the possibility of the academic community accepting the behavioral course as an absolute in higher education is, I think, remote. So the threat to the individual in general education in the immediate future is not likely to come from rampant Skinnerianism. It may, however, come from a more pedestrian source—the business-management conception of the course, which shares with behaviorism the notion of the course as a closed system.

Large state universities by necessity have had to adopt the corporate procedures used in the world of business. They are, after all, multi-million-dollar conglomerates with vast material resources to manage, and in the name of efficiency and economy have appropriately bureaucratized many of their functions. I am thankful that the university knows how to computerize the enrollment of students and the ordering of office supplies. The rub comes in extending the methods of business management to the process of education. Advocates of various “Program Management Systems” argue, at least implicitly, that education can be placed in a production-line format, that all university courses can be designed as units of production in which the stated learnings can be reported in quantifiable units. Also implicit in the position of the program managers is the belief that products of learning should have some visible utility to the society that supports the university. Only through a convincing demonstration of the efficiency and practicality of higher education, they argue, can we win continuing public support.⁴

Some of the arguments of the program managers are, of course, not without merit. In the name of academic freedom, we have committed unforgivable carelessness, arrogance, and indifference in higher education, and it is clear that in a time of diminishing public support, we must be accountable to our constituents. But there are those of us engaged in acts of liberal education who believe that there are quali-

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ties of mind and sensibility that do not readily lend themselves to quantification and a narrow test of utility. Moreover, liberal education by developing the mind that questions, often leads to a challenge of the very institutions that support it. If we believe with Lewis Mumford that “man is constitutionally an open system, reacting to another open system, that of nature,”5 and if we also believe, again with Mumford, that liberal education should be addressed to “the right (of students) to react as whole human beings to other whole human beings, in constant engagement with both the visible environment and the immense heritage of historical culture,”6 then we must reject the clockwork course. A truly liberal education requires courses conducted as open systems, as clear in their conception as possible, not cribbed but creatively and often spontaneously taught, courses that take into account the immense variability of students as significant individuals. We join the luckless author in the Anthony Burgess novel when he writes:

The attempt to impose upon man, a creature of growth and capable of sweetness, to ooze juicily at the last round the bearded lips of God, to attempt to impose, I say, laws and conditions appropriate to a mechanical creation, against this I raise my swordpen.7

Darkness at Noon

Another threat to the individual student in general education is the response of the university of the seventies to the campus turbulence of the sixties. The response has been for the most part a kind of darkness-at-noon dissolution of the impulse toward institutional reform triggered by the campus disturbances of only yesterday. The large university today seems to be sustaining or rapidly restoring the practices against which the youth prophets of the sixties rebelled—large classes, intense vocationalism, reduction of undergraduate education to preparation for graduate school, social detachment in the name of objectivity, increasing bureaucratization of campus life, the restoration of order as an antidote rather than as an alternative to anarchy. And in the wings from time to time we hear chanting of the ancient litanies of higher standards and tougher grading. In general education, in the name of student freedom, many institutions have returned to the chaos of the distribution system. I know of no large university programs in general-liberal education evolving in the seventies similar in


imagination, scope, and vitality to the Minnesota, Chicago, and Harvard experiments of the forties. In the student body itself there is no pulse that responds to the challenge, however flawed, of Theodore Roszak or Charles Reich. In fact, my students today consider *The Greening of America* and *The Making of a Counter Culture* to be quaint texts of another era.

The major focus of university concerns in the seventies appears to be on neutralizing undergraduate education as a value-free academic process and on expanding institutional contributions to career education. And while certain formal mechanisms for student representation and redress have been created (ombudsmen, student membership on faculty committees, for instance), the pervasive atmosphere of large university life becomes increasingly routine, bureaucratic, and legalistic. George Tooker, the American painter, has done a series of paintings on institutional dehumanization in modern society. One painting called “Government Bureau” depicts an office interior with several lines of people, backs turned to the viewer, disconsolately waiting in front of little cubicles with small peep holes, behind which fragments of pallid faces look out in glum surveillance. If you teach in a large university, as a practical measure of institutional dehumanization, walk the route that students walk in registering for classes, in transferring credits, in paying accounts, and discover for yourself the lines of people waiting disconsolately in front of little cubicles with circular peep holes.

Fred M. Hechinger, writing about what he calls the “academic counter-revolution” at Berkeley, has recently observed:

> Ironically, precisely a decade after the students’ initial revolt against a system they considered riddled with materialism and devoid of a sense of human values, higher education is moving full speed ahead on a course dominated by materialistic concerns and cut off from those liberal studies that, in the past, had been associated with the preservation of humanistic traditions and humane goals.8

*Welcome to the Monkey House*

If the university today seems to be in some sort of funk about its function in general-liberal education, I do not especially rejoice about its successes in the past either. As I review the literature on liberal education and read about its goals of developing rational men and women, I survey my society from the Olympia of the daily press, and I behold: a religious war in Ireland (in 1975?); a polluted atmosphere; collapsing world economies; contempt for law and order by

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its advocates; continuing acceleration of overkill in armaments among nations, while in this country we now have manufactured enough hand guns to assure that every fourth man, woman, and child can have at least one; not to mention the recent past of Belsen and Buchenwalt.

Machado de Assis, the nineteenth century Brazilian ironist, tells the story of The Psychiatrist,9 one Dr. Bacamarte, who, having received his training in analysis in Europe, returns to his Brazilian village and receives permission from the village Council to examine its citizens. By applying his criteria of sanity, Dr. Bacamarte, if necessary, can place the townspeople in his newly constructed institution for treatment called the “Green House.” By and by, Bacamarte incarcerates one-third of the village, and then half, and finally nearly everyone. Then one day, after having committed his own wife to the Green House, Bacamarte makes a radical discovery. All those people he had judged to be madmen must be “normal,” he reasons, since he had already committed four-fifths of the population. The abnormal, the really sick, he concludes, are the well-balanced, the thoroughly rational. So he releases all of his patients and locks up those he had formerly judged to be sane.

For some time now, at the National Radio Astronomy Observatory in Greenbank, West Virginia, a giant electronic ear has been turned out towards the heavens, waiting for someone to say something from out there (“How are things in Glocca Morra?”). Yes, the search for intelligent life on other planets began some time ago, despite the fact that we have still failed to find it on this one. But if we have thus far failed to find it, I believe that the search is still valid. Knowing that bandicoots and wombats still rustle branches in my family tree, I am reluctant to condemn without reservation the failures of human reason in the past. In fact, I am in some sympathy with B. F. Skinner’s argument that human society has made the long march from the caves of Lascaux to the global village only to remain in the grip of chaos and terror.

Believing that we can choose, I do choose to reject a bland, humorless, totalitarian incubation in a Walden Two,10 even if it means taking

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10 There are some measures of what happens to the arts in closed societies. For instance, in the Soviet Union no painter or sculptor of any stature has emerged since the early twentieth century abstractionists—Gabo, Pevsner, Malevitch, Kandinsky—went into voluntary exile, e.g., see Paul Sjeklocha and Igor Mead, Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). Moreover, two of the modern “new” cities—Chandigarh and Brasilia—designed as integral units with the theory that the architectural environment can redirect human behavior and bring about social change have been failures both in their behavioral intentions and as human enclaves. In fact, the shanty towns on the outskirts of Brasilia (random, perverse, yet persistent) give that city its only claim to human vitality. See Norma Evenson, Chandigarh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); also “Whatever Happened to the Grandiose Plan for Brasilia?” U.S. News and World Report (June 12, 1972), 72.
my chances with Alex and his droogs. I would prefer, at the same time, to reject Anthony Burgess’ vision of the extremes of human perversity produced by an ineffectual social response to randomness, since I honor order and fear barbarism. But freedom and necessity can, I believe, be negotiated to a more rewarding conclusion than found in either the Skinner or Burgess vision. The literature of freedom and dignity of Western culture has sustained the hope of a society of reasoning men and women, capable of compassion, joy, and grief, who do not confuse order with coercion. That hope is still worthy of our commitment. And at least one resolution of the paradox of free will versus determinism is offered in the existential posture of Albert Camus. “We can despair of existence,” Camus observes, “for we have no power over it, but not of history because the individual can make choices.” W. H. Auden puts it more succinctly in his poem on Yeats:

   In the prison of his days
   Teach the free man how to praise.

Muted Optimism

When the large state university is seen in less than Manichean terms, there is hope, there is opportunity for the student to gain a significant liberal education.

First, the megamachine direction of the university can be moderated. It was not brought about by pernicious people scheming to dehumanize the student body and faculty. Instead, it has been a response by busy administrators caught up in the crunch of rapidly expanding enrollments in the post-war period, and turning, appropriately in most cases, to business-management procedures to conduct the affairs of the university. But in our discussions of accountability, we should hold ourselves and our administrators accountable for the quality of collegiate life in general. We could, to be sure, get rid of all those little cubicles with the

11 Burgess, op. cit.

12 Rene Dubos writes: “Human freedom does not imply anarchy and complete permissiveness . . . Design, rather than anarchy, characterizes life. In human life, design implies the acceptance and even the deliberate choice of certain constraints which are deterministic to the extent that they incorporate the influences of the past and of the environment. But design is also the expression of free will because it always involves value judgments and anticipates the future.” So Human an Animal (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), p. 135.


spooky faces inside of them tomorrow. One dimension of general-liberal education discovered in the investigations reviewed by Philip Jacob in *Changing Values in College*¹⁵ is that students are more likely to be “liberated” from their unexamined assumptions and develop modes of inquiry characteristic of the mature mind in a collegiate atmosphere in which there are frequent informal interactions between students and faculty members in a congenial atmosphere fostering mutual respect. The resident college within the large university seems to offer some hope, particularly for today’s students who seem to be more accepting of collegiate life in general than were their counterparts in the sixties. We could, moreover, tap the talents of a whole generation of underemployed young people with appropriate advanced degrees (many of them in interdisciplinary studies) now clerking in grocery stores. By drawing on this valuable resource of creative talent now misdirected as a consequence of increasingly limited opportunities for employment in higher education, we could expand our faculties rather than reduce them and thereby enhance the prospect for smaller classes and significant personal interaction between students and teachers. We need something tantamount to a GI Bill for underemployed Ph.D.’s and M.F.A.’s.

Second, although most of the recently revised general studies programs I have received¹⁶ have discarded required core courses, they still retain the belief that there is a general studies course per se, different in content, methodology, and purpose from the entry course to a discipline which characterized earlier distribution systems. And the theory that general education should not merely occupy itself with facts but should also develop traits of mind all educated persons should share still seems to be intact. So the students of the seventies have considerable freedom in electing general education courses—in some programs over two hundred courses qualify—to meet their distribution requirements. With a sense of *deja vu*, we have completed the cycle from turn-of-the-century free elections to core courses back to free elections. Whether students will be able to combine coherent individual programs from such a dazzling array of courses all claiming to qualify as “general” remains to be seen. But if reasoned choice is itself a factor in liberal education, today’s students may gain in maturity from the burdens of freedom.


Third, academic freedom, always tenuous at best, having survived the closure of the McCarthy era and the aggravations of the sixties, seems to be enjoying an especially generous season in the sun. Since freedom to deal with ideas, always a dangerous business, is essential to liberal education, seventies' students, for the moment at least, have a privileged position.

Fourth, despite the pervasive concern with vocationalism in the state university, the response of students to certain aspects of general education is heartening. In my own university, for instance, with a program of minimal distribution requirements—essentially one of free elections—the most popular general education courses are courses in the arts. Engineering and business management students are themselves acknowledging that the satisfaction of vocational interests is not enough. I hasten to add that I do not condemn the vocational bias in the state universities, many of them with land-grant and normal-school roots. Significant vocation is, after all, essential to liberally educated people.

Metaphor of the Plague

In summation, there are some threats, there are some opportunities. Conducting liberal education, even under the best of circumstances, is one of the most difficult endeavors. Since "liberality" involves challenges to established thought and practice, it is hard to conceive of a time when those of us engaged in the vocation of general education would not in some sense be in trouble. In fact, being in trouble could be considered one measure of our success. Assuming, as I have, that the business of liberal education is to help men and women achieve their capacity for reason and compassion by confronting them with the cultural traditions that have shaped their world and to help them take from these traditions the insights and wisdom to live freely and creatively in their own times, I find some confidence in Camus' metaphor of the plague.17 Liberal education, like freedom, can never be taken for granted. It is not achieved once and for all. The forces of repression and closure will always arise to confound it, and each generation must win it anew. More important, then, than the shape of the curriculum—whether it is composed of core courses or free electives—is the continuing commitment to the idea of liberal education. I can envision no immediate future in which this idea will not be constantly twisted and bent as the megamachine tendencies of world societies continue to accelerate. Yet I do not despair of my vocation as general educator in a large state university. I can only hope that my counterpart a century hence will have as good a chance as I now have to teach free men and women "how to praise."