

What's Worth Knowing?

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The question raised in the title above is much on the minds of contemporary educators. The American system of education has come under attack from many quarters because it is claimed that what is taught — the knowledge dispensed — is not worth knowing. It is completely irrelevant. I called attention to such a critic, William Ewald, some time ago. Ewald claimed that students in today's educational institutions are being educated for the 1940's and 50's and not for the 1970's. Education is about 25 years behind. Such is the claim, too, of Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner in their book *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. It is to one chapter in particular in this book that I would like to make reference in this article. The fact that the title of this chapter and the title of this article are similar is not coincidental.

The problem, with today's education, claim the authors, is one of relevance. The "communication revolution" and technological progress have left in their wake all kinds of problems. There is air and water pollution, drugs, civil rights, noise, garbage and radiation. The trouble is, say the authors, our society has not kept pace with this "progress." Our schools have failed to educate the next generation to cope with this mess. Change is upon us and our people have not been told how to cope with change. We have experienced more change in the last twenty years than other civilizations have experienced in centuries, but the schools have failed us. The purpose of the book, then, of course, is to propose change in our school system.

The essence of the problem according to Postman and Weingartner is that schools and teachers have made the mistake of distinguishing between method and content and have emphasized content. The result has been that students have been told things which are not true and have been forced to believe that what they have been taught is relevant. This approach, contend the authors, must be dumped. We must listen rather to Marshall McLuhan who tells us that "the medium is the message," that is, the most important thing is not what a teacher says but what he does. What is important is not what a student learns but how he learned it. The schools must not equip the student with all kinds of facts and figures and opinions of so-called authorities but must go about the business of giving the student a method that will enable him to survive and adjust to change. The most important thing in a classroom is not what is being taught but the environment. We must create a new classroom environment.

The method to be used to do this is what Postman and Weingartner call the inquiry method. Teachers must teach the art of asking questions. Students must be taught to not rely on authorities and textbooks but must be taught how to think for themselves. The new environment would not stress that learning is being told what happened but that learning is a happening in itself. The push is for an environment that encourages students to imitate the behavior of good learners. Confidence in their ability to learn, enjoyment of problem solving, a sense of relevance, independence of judgment, and flexibility are some of the characteristics of such people.

In addition, this environment must have teachers with the right attitudes. This is most crucial. The ideal teacher for these men would have the following characteristics: 1) He never tells his students what they ought to know. 2) He uses almost exclusively the method of questioning. 3) He avoids the Right Answer approach since there are many right answers. 4) He encourages student - student interaction rather than student-teacher interaction. 5) He rarely summarizes and concludes but leaves things open-ended. 6) He develops his lessons from student responses and from student-expressed needs. 7) He poses problems rather than solutions. 8) He measures success not in quantitative but in behavioral terms.

The design of the new environment, then, would be to have a student who is taught to ask questions, to make his own definitions, to make his own meanings and a teacher who encourages and facilitates such learning. The teacher is a facilitator and not an instructor and the student is an active searcher rather than a passive receiver. The student must be equipped with a method to find answers to questions and problems which bother him. The student decides what is to be learned since obviously that is the only way that relevance will ever be attained.

That brings us to the original question of what is worth knowing. Postman and Weingartner conclude that the content of knowledge is not to be found in textbooks and course syllabi or in the opinions of so-called authorities. Rather, the content of learning ought to be determined by the student, the learner. He alone knows what he needs to know. What is worth knowing, then, depends upon who you are and where you are. The teacher, then, too, if he is to be effective, will have to zero in on these needs if his course is to be at all relevant.

What, then, do we make of this position, and how does it relate to us for we, too, need to answer this question of what is worth knowing.

First, let me make a positive comment about the book itself. To me, the book raises a question which must ever be before us: we also must be relevant in our Protestant Reformed education. We must be very aware of the needs of our students. One of the things which the authors condemn is knowledge for the sake of knowledge and we, too, would say, "Amen." But that is where the similarity ends.

What is worth knowing for us, you see, can never be determined by us. We will always select the wrong thing. We need guidance and direction from elsewhere. Man must never be set up as the measure of things. Neither, then, may man determine what is ultimately worth knowing. What we need to know comes as a command from God in his scriptures, namely, know ME! That is not an arbitrary thing but is an absolute command. Thus, when Postman and Weingartner tell us that we can decide what is good for us to know and what will allow us to survive, they are dead wrong.

And that really is what our Protestant Reformed education is all about. Protestant Reformed teachers are indeed concerned, and must be, about how you know and they are concerned with why you must know (because God commands) but they are also very much concerned with what you know. They realize that what a student really needs to know and the only thing worth knowing at all is the knowledge of God and that is what their business is, too. They impart to you the knowledge of God. All the effort expended in our schools is for that purpose alone: to tell you who God is and what He has done.

You clearly understand, then, do you not, that of ourselves we would never place this value upon the knowledge of God if it were not for the regenerating work of God in us. By grace we say that the knowledge of God is alone worth knowing and even more, by grace we say that the ultimate worth of this knowledge is life eternal (John 17:3).

This truth ought to give us tremendous impetus in our pursuit of knowledge here on earth. It ought to give you as students (and not as young people alone — we all ought to be continuing learners) the motivation to work diligently for we know that we are not concerned simply with the survival of our physical bodies but that we are concerned with acquiring that which is the most precious thing to us. That, after all, will be the essence of heaven. We will know God in the highest sense possible.

Students, then, and, for that matter, teachers as well, do not determine what is worth knowing. All such attempts must end as the attempt of Postman and Weingartner, in subjectivism and relativism. Teachers must give and students must willingly receive the *what* of the knowl-

edge of God. And that is to be found in the scriptures and in the creation, in Gods revelation to us.

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