

## Humanizing Education in the Community College

Terry O'Banion

\*Note:

This is an Original Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in The Journal of Higher Education on November 1971, available at <https://doi.org/10.2307/1980544>.

In 1964 Mario Savio launched the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in a dramatic outburst of pent-up frustration over the quality of the educational experience. He described it as a machine designed to grind the bones of students to make societal bread. He said: There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart that you can't take part; you can't even tacitly take part, and you've got to put your bodies on the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machines will be prevented from working at all.<sup>1</sup> The student revolution has continued, but the educational machine has not changed a great deal.

In March, 1970, a group of concerned students attended the annual convention of the American College Personnel Association (an association especially committed to student development) in St. Louis, and requested that the association address itself to a number of relevant issues of concern to students. In a Statement of Principle the students in 1970 echoed Mario Savio's description of education in 1964:

The new "multiversity" is a factory that turns out scientists, technicians, and managers to meet the demands of an increasingly cybernated production system. . . . The university has prostituted itself- it has become a service station to the military and the large corporations, where students are supposed to plug in, receive some high-octane fuel (knowledge), and drive off, without a map of life, to fit into a slot in some bureaucratic arrangement.<sup>2</sup>

These two statements describe education as some students see it in the university, but it is a description that fits the community college just as well. The community college is an American social invention and represents the ingenuity that Americans invest in mechanical contrivances. The community college is based on a production model of education, and the plan is for each community to have its own hometown factory. From this educational factory, bright, new, young technicians are purchased for business and industry. Transfer students come off the assembly line well-packaged for the university. For those who are not trained as technicians or who have not prepared for the university, the community college becomes a receiving station, holding the surplus merchandise until it can be "cooled out" and mysteriously distributed to other social alchemists for their experimentation. The production model also offers repair services for a sizable adult population through a continuing education program-tighten a loose part, repair a broken piece, install a new component, add a little cultural polish, and the old girl is ready to be plugged back in for another five years.

The community college has become one of the most useful instruments of our production-oriented society. Indeed, many community colleges even take the names of successful producers, Kellogg Community College in Michigan for Kellogg cereals, and the most obvious of all, Henry Ford Community College in Michigan. The community college is the Horatio Alger of higher education, our own homegrown darling. Feed him well and he will turn out bigger and better products. One community college president described the production model very clearly in a recent conversation with the writer: "We have to gear our products to what the university will buy."

The United States Congress has also come to recognize the great value of the community college in terms of our production-oriented society. Federal support for community colleges has increased significantly during the past five years, and a national community college bill insuring two years of free higher education for everyone is just a matter of time. The mission of that education was well expressed in a March, 1970, statement by President Nixon:

Two-year community colleges and technical institutes hold great promise for giving the kind of education which leads to good jobs and also for filling national shortages in critical skill occupations. Costs for these schools are relatively low, especially since there are few residential construction needs. A dollar spent on community colleges is probably spent as effectively as anywhere in the educational world.<sup>3</sup>

This is a statement straight from Poor Richard's Almanac: a penny saved is a penny earned. The production of community college graduates is cheap and therefore good.

The community college is primarily a factory, a production model of education in which students are turned out to fit industry or the university or are stored away until they simply evaporate. In the opinion of the writer the major issue confronting the community college in the 1970's is whether or not the community college will continue as a model of production or whether the community college will be redirected as an educational institution that is responsive to some other kinds of human needs. There is no doubt that the community college can continue in great favor as a production model; even if it responds to other human needs it will probably still be necessary for the community college to retain some aspects of the production model. But if the community college continues primarily as a production model, then it will continue, along with most other levels and kinds of education, to function in an antilife, dehumanizing way with students and with faculty and staff.

The production model dehumanizes; it takes away from the essential human quality of what it means to be a person. As Harvey Cox, the eminent theologian, says, "the tight, bureaucratic and instrumental society the only model we've known since the industrial revolution renders us incapable of experiencing the non-rational dimensions of existence. The absurd, the inspiring, the uncanny, the awesome, the terrifying, the ecstatic- none of these fit into a production- and efficiency-oriented society."<sup>4</sup> The production model requires conformity to operate efficiently- straight rows, fifty-minute hours, a five-point grading scale, and rectangular-shaped classrooms. Education is square, straight, timed, and stiff. Education, far too often, has been the process of stifling the individual urge to encounter the extent and the excitement of what it means to be a

human being. Each man sits inside himself, eager to emerge and engage in the human encounter; but few are called forth in the educational system. William Arrowsmith has said, "It is possible for a student to go from kindergarten to graduate school without ever encountering a man."<sup>5</sup> He has commented further:

The irony of the situation is enough to make strong men weep. Here, unmistakably, we have students concerned to ask the crucial questions- identity, meaning, right and wrong, the good life-and they get in response not bread but a stone. Here we have a generation blessedly capable of moral outrage . . . in a morally outrageous world. Almost without exception the response . . . to this profound hunger for education, for compelling examples of human courage and compassionate intelligence, has been mean, parochial, uncomprehending, or cold. Above all cold.<sup>6</sup>

In the dehumanizing production model of education, we have developed a society in which the old are plagued by heart attacks and the young by heartbreaks. Noncognitive capacities are flaccid and dull or frightening when they do emerge. But no man is so diminished, so emaciated, so retarded, or so psycho- logically polluted that he can escape responding to be himself, to be natural, to be more fully human when others call to him to be so and allow opportunities for him to answer that call. Community colleges can provide such opportunities, if only they will. We are at the crest of a new humanistic education, and if the community college will but rise to meet this need, this demand for human liberation, it will live up to its claim of being "the people's college."

We are beginning to move in this country away from the Protestant ethic toward the humanistic ethic, away from what is wrong with man to what is right with man, away from education as a dehumanizing production model to education as a humanizing model. The Age of Aquarius, where "peace will guide the planets and love will steer the stars," may still seem far away but it is at least within our grasp. We are beginning to realize that our utopian dreams of material abundance have been centered too much on technology and too little on human needs. The belief that advances in technology also advance the cause of world peace, elevate the nation's living standards, and provide the means for an effective education for all has been destroyed by war, pollution, and dehumanized education. The factory system model of education which once offered great hope now offers mostly despair. On all fronts, the cry for humanization is heard.

If the educational process is to be humanized so that human beings can grow and flourish, then a concern for human development must become a central focus of education. The community college as a production model will need to be restructured so that the humanization of the learning process can occur. Now is the time for experimentation and innovation in our efforts toward constructing a new humanistic model of community college education.

The following ideas are offered as possible guidelines for these efforts.

If the learning process is to be humanized, the student must become the subject matter rather than the artificially divided content which has served to structure education for hundreds of years. Too many teachers take subject matter too seriously. Their pedagogy is a desperate attempt to bend the student to the subject matter rather than the subject matter to the needs of the

student. Such practice is questionable in the most academically elite university in the country; in a community college such practice is the antithesis of its own philosophy.

The student should always be the central concern of education regardless of the subject matter; in some cases the student should be the subject matter entirely. One important development which has occurred because of this emerging belief of the student as subject matter is that courses in self-development are being organized in hundreds of community colleges. A course in self-development is a course in introspection; the experience of the student is the subject matter. Such a course provides each student with an opportunity to examine his values, attitudes, beliefs, and abilities, and gives him the chance to examine how these and other factors affect the quality of his relationships with others. In addition, he examines the social milieu the challenges and problems of the society-as it relates to his development. Finally, the course provides each student with an opportunity to broaden and deepen a developing philosophy of life. The working out of such courses has been perhaps one of the more imaginative responses to the students' demand for relevancy and meaningfulness in their educational experience.

If the learning process is to be humanized, it is necessary to remove the obstacles and barriers to learning, the peripheral hindrances that encumber students who wish to become all they are capable of becoming. The community college has borrowed a variety of educational trappings that greatly hinder and even diminish a student's move toward self-development. Testing programs, grades, and probation-suspension regulations are examples.

Before the student even comes to class, he is threatened with a testing program. Facing a battery of tests before school begins, even if used for counseling and not for admissions, is, for many community college students, a way of displaying once again the inadequacies of which they are already painfully aware. If they are not properly equipped, they are chastised by being placed in appropriate cells to breathe the tepid air they know so well. Testing is too often the process of reducing groups of students to the lowest common denominator. Many testing programs are built on the antilife philosophy that there are zeros in human nature. A testing program that attempts to discover what is right with students so that the college can provide programs to support and develop that rightness might be a yeasty and welcome development in education.

Community colleges have claimed to be student-centered institutions dedicated to helping students meet with success. But one of the most vicious educational trappings yet invented guarantees failure the punitive and primitive A-through-F grading system, which has been thought to be a universal language understood by everyone who needs to know anything about academic performance. But colleges grade differently; instructors grade differently. Two instructors grading the same student for the same course will differ. Is grading a universal language? Perhaps. But few have learned to speak it well.

The F grade is an extension of the scarlet letter and represents the wrathfulness of the Protestant ethic in that all who fail must be punished. A student is required to wear his failure on his transcript for all to see for the duration of his life. Many community colleges across the country are beginning to humanize the learning process by abandoning the F grade. Instead, they have developed A, B, and C or pass-fail systems. Some colleges have retained the D grade, since it

does indicate a low level of passing and will, on occasion, transfer to other institutions. Perhaps one day we will have the courage to move to a system that uses more meaningful and relevant indications of personal development than even A, B, and C. We should be ready to move beyond the beginning of the alphabet.

Another one of the great threats used against students has been the traditional probation and suspension system. The probation-suspension system, as it presently exists, is often a thinly disguised scheme for getting rid of unwanted students. Because of our inadequacies we have not learned to provide a good learning environment for the students on probation and suspension. We say that we have an open-door philosophy in the community college, but we continue to kick students out, semester after semester, because of our own failure. Charles C. Collins of the University of California, Berkeley, says such a practice is as ridiculous as it would be for hospitals to discharge the sick and keep the healthy.

There are many obstacles to learning that have become so accepted they go unquestioned: the lock-step curriculum, the fifty-minute class, the student desk, the semester course, the teacher in front of the class, final examinations, the rectangular classroom, the ringing bell, and the like. All of these educational trappings should be examined carefully to see if they hinder more than they help as colleges attempt to provide opportunities for students to experience their most human qualities.

Students have always been vitally concerned about what they are expected to do, specifically, in order to pass a course or receive a certain grade. Teachers, on the other hand, have displayed the unfortunate tendency to be secretive about precise requirements, fearing that spoon-feeding their students would violate the rugged competition of academe. Recently, school boards, reflecting public concern, have been asking whether teachers can account for the learning they intend to instill in their students, and if they are aware of the extent of their success or failure. What the school boards and the public call "accountability" is actually an old student question- "What are we supposed to learn?" with a new twist "How do we know that we have learned it?"

There is no teaching unless students learn. It can no longer be assumed that learning occurs simply because a teacher is present in the classroom and goes through a series of exercises for a term. It is not enough to say that teachers have taught because they have covered the subject matter. Most teaching is done through the lecture method, in which the subject matter is covered for the students a marvelous way of saying it. The important concept here is that teachers must be accountable for their teaching and must be able to show evidence that they have helped students learn.

The objectives of a course need to be specified, but not imposed. The enthusiasm for behavioral objectives could be just another giant step in the dehumanization of education if it is not coupled with a belief in the student as the subject matter. If the objectives are to be stated in terms of behavior, as they should be, they must be the student's objectives too. Course objectives should be formulated with student involvement and subject to continual reevaluation by students. Some teachers, who see their roles as presenting prepackaged information to their students, will have difficulty thinking that students could offer any valuable input to the formulation of content

objectives. But if those teachers state course objectives in terms of student behavior, they might very well be surprised how much students know about how they learn.

Related to the importance of student-related behavioral objectives is the value of self-evaluation. Evaluation need not be, and should not be, the primary responsibility of the teacher if course objectives are clearly stated in terms of student behavior. If the college can provide the kind of climate that encourages self-development, that allows the student to plan his learning objectives with his instructors, then the student should emerge as the person most qualified to know if his objectives have been achieved. If an open and honest community is to be built in the school environment, students must certainly assist in this process. But we have become a society of fools depending on others to tell us how we feel, who we are, and what we want.

If the learning process is to be humanized, the difference between student and teacher will have to become less discernible. Learning occurs when we meet ourselves and others in the process of our emerging humanity. It is an experience between and among people in which each comes to appreciate himself and others, in which each begins to grow, and in which each facilitates the growth of others. Education is not a cramming into but a leading out of.

"The end focus," as April O'Connell says, "is man—that is, ourselves, our perceptions of where we live, and our journey through the world how we make it worth the effort and the suffering." She describes the humanization of the learning process as simply and as well as it has ever been described, "Education occurs when there is a meeting of persons."<sup>7</sup> If education is a meeting between persons, it follows that the teacher must be a person, not a machine who gives information, not a tyrant who reigns supreme in his own classroom, not a permissive nonentity who provides no challenge and encounter, not an insecure and frightened animal who hides behind academic rigor and discipline lest others view his weaknesses, and not a carbon copy of some earlier teacher or professor who influenced him.

A term that describes this person better than teacher or professor or instructor is that of human development facilitator. One way of describing the human development facilitator is to present an idealized prototype of him as a person. While it is helpful to have a model as a goal, it is to be understood that individuals exist in a process of becoming in which they reflect only certain degrees of attainment of these characteristics. The kind of person who is needed has been described by Abraham Maslow as self-actualizing, by Karen Horney as self-realizing, by Gayle Privette as transcendent-functioning, and by Carl Rogers as full functioning. Other humanistic psychologists have described such healthy personalities as open to experience, democratic, accepting, understanding, caring, supporting, ap-proving, loving, nonjudgmental. They tolerate ambiguity; their decisions come from within rather than from without; they have a zest for life, for experiencing, for touching, tasting, feeling, knowing. They risk involvement; they reach out for experiences; they are not afraid to encounter others or themselves. They believe that man is basically good, and, given the right conditions, will move in positive directions. They believe that every student is a gifted person, that every student has untapped potentialities, and that every human being can live a much fuller life than he is currently experiencing. They understand the secret the fox told the little prince: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."

While the model advocated in this paper is far removed from what most have experienced in education, it is, nevertheless, the kind of model we should be striving for if we are to humanize the learning experience for students. When faculty members come to experience their strength and potential as persons, moving toward self-actualization, they will learn in creative and innovative ways to take care of the peripheral problems that keep them from being effective. They will create new facilities or invent exciting ways to use the limited facilities that are available. They will learn to enlist students in their efforts to humanize the educational process and thereby increase their impact manyfold. The focus will shift from weaknesses to strengths, from what can't be done to what can be done, from what is wrong with us to what is right with us. A program with that kind of focus will nurture and challenge staff members who will develop a sense of mission, community, and commitment which will serve to stimulate development that we call humanization of the learning process. Such development is not likely to occur on a widespread basis for some time to come. But a few educators have begun to listen to the clear call from human beings in this society who wish to live more creative and fulfilling lives. The response has been in the form of a few imaginative and potent institutions. If the traditional production model is to be restructured, many more such institutions will be needed. Warren Bennis has said, "For clues to the future, we must look to the mini- societies of the communes, the experimental schools, and the imaginative little groups that flourish in the armpits of giant bureaucracies." 8

The ideal will never be reached, but it is to be hoped that community colleges will move more and more in the direction of the humanistic ethic and away from the nihilistic ethic of the production model. If community colleges continue primarily as production models of education they will serve American society in important ways. But if they do not also become humanistic models of education as well as production models, they will have missed the opportunity to respond to some of the most relevant needs now being expressed by human beings. Perhaps the community college can be many things to many people; both humanistic and production ends may be met, for they do not have to be in conflict. If the community college does not begin to pay more attention to the humanistic thrust, however, "the people's college" will be a name reserved for some institution of the future.

#### References

1. Elvin Abeles, *The Student and the University: A Background Book on the Campus Revolt* (New York: Parents' Magazine Press, 1969), p. 180.
2. The Statement of Principle appears in the working papers of the meeting.
3. The text of the President's Message on Higher Education of March 19, 1970, appears in *Higher Education and National Affairs* (American Council on Education), March 20, 1970, pp. 4-9.
4. Harvey Cox, "Religion in the Age of Aquarius," *Psychology Today*, III (April, 1970), p. 47.
5. William Arrowsmith, "The Future of Teaching," *Public Interest*, no. 6 (Winter, 1967), p. 46.

6. Ibid., P. 57

7. Terry O'Banion and April O'Connell, *The Shared Journey: An Introduction to Encounter* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 6.

8. "Organic Populism: A Conversation with Warren Bennis and T. George Harris," *Psychology Today*, III (February, 1970), P. :71.