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Isolation and Integration in Education

by PROFESSOR DAVID MUNROE

How is education coping with the "explosion of knowledge" which is a feature of the Twentieth Century? Is not increasing specialisation leading to isolation? The writer suggests how this isolation may be broken down and the field of knowledge integrated.

THE importance of the individual and the need for respecting individual differences are principles that have become widely accepted in Western society without being well understood. We take pride in the worth of the individual, tracing this concept to the early Christians. We speak of individual freedom as a sacred and peculiar tenet of democracy, recognising its origin in English Puritanism, or revolutionary France or on the North American frontier. We boast of rugged individualism, relating it in a somewhat confusing manner to capitalism and to the age of the common man. The specialist has been promoted to a position of authority in politics, in culture, in economics, in science, in industry, in education, in spite of frequent reminders that he is fallible even in the field of his specialism. For several generations we have been busily occupied with isolating certain aspects of knowledge, with pursuing our studies in depth rather than in breadth. We have spent many years in pulling the world and its peoples apart: perhaps it is time we began to put them together again.

Explosion of Knowledge

The explosion of knowledge that has occurred during the past three centuries has moved us a long way from the world in which Francis Bacon took all knowledge for his province; and we are being constantly reminded of the truth of a statement by one of his contemporaries that "no man is an island." Yet much of our preoccupation in the past three centuries, particularly in the past forty or fifty years, has been to encourage and justify intense specialisation. Whether in chemistry or cricket, genetics or golf, the amateur has given place to the professional and it is now to the specialist, the expert, that we look for authoritative answers and perfection in performance.

Part of the problem may be recognised in the patronising sophistication of the Victorian classicist. The cult of Ciceronianism which developed after the Renaissance rejected any claim to parity between classical and modern studies. The classics were not only the best, they were the *only* path to respectable scholarship, and to many other things as well. This attitude has continued. Sir Richard Livingstone has reminded us that, of the seventeen Prime Ministers of England who have served since the accession of Queen Victoria, all but four could lay valid claim to classical scholarship. Some of his readers may feel that this fact may partly explain some of the grave failures of Victorian statesmanship. But perhaps the most frank and fatuous statement of these sentiments is that of a Victorian bishop who said "The advantages of a classical education are twofold: it enables us to look down with contempt on those who have not shared its advantages, and also it fits us for places of emolument not only in this world, but in the next." This was one side of the argument. In mid-century Herbert Spenser contended that scientific studies would be more useful than the classics. His arguments were clear, and in many ways convincing, but he took a position at the opposite extreme and many of his supporters showed comparable intolerance. So the battle lines were drawn and the conflict has continued.

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Isolation and Control

Sir Charles Snow, in his Rede Lecture of 1959, spoke trenchantly about the need for a truce or a treaty. He deplored the lack of a common language by which the scientist and the humanist may communicate with one another. This warning is carried even further by Dr. Robert Oppenheimer who points out that the isolation is evident not only between the men representing each group at the top, but also within each group itself, since the research worker very often cannot speak easily to the teacher or to the man in the street. He pleads for the creation of some channel through which specialised knowledge may be conducted into a "common pool", and he believes that this has been done more successfully in England than in North America. From these two warnings the perils of isolation of various fields of knowledge seem perfectly clear. Fragments have not only become detached, they have developed such awkward proportions that they cannot now be fitted into a recognisable whole. When this happens man has become the slave of the knowledge he sought to master.

Another aspect of isolation is seen in the tradition that education is a privilege which must or may be restricted to certain social classes or to certain cultural or racial groups. This concept had the blessing of the Greeks, and the opinions of Plato and Aristotle have been woven into the very fabric of European thought. In contrast to the Hebrew tradition, which prescribed a minimum level of education for everyone, the Greeks isolated the polite from the vulgar, the free man from the slave. The one might claim the right to an education: the other not.

Throughout the Middle Ages, this tradition prevailed in a slightly different form in Europe, where the worlds of the knight, the scholar and the guildsman were separate and the distinction was reinforced by the barrier between the liberal studies and vocational training. It was only after the Protestant Reformation, when literacy became a requirement for church membership, that the attitude was modified and class discrimination was slightly reduced. New influences appeared during the Industrial Revolution and the class structure had to be adjusted to the redistribution of wealth and power. Repercussions were evident in almost all the Western countries. Education was offered to various groups on a strictly individual basis. There were schools for the rich and the poor, the mechanic and the rustic, boys and girls, for the political and professional elite and for the masses. Thus education was used to support and solidify isolation of group from group.

The perils of this practice are perfectly apparent. Restrictions are seldom self-imposed, almost always they are an attempt by a privileged minority to restrict the freedom of a larger group. The boundaries are always difficult to determine and they are even more difficult to maintain. They are an attempt to establish a "status quo" and this isolation becomes more and more vulnerable as we are faced with crises like an explosion of knowledge, an explosion of population and a technological revolution.

The barriers of subject and class, of knowledge and social structure are legacies of the past; those that spring from political motives are, in the field of education at least, of more recent origin. Mass education is a modern phenomenon and it is only in recent years that its power has been fully recognised. The responsibility of the state as the only agency with adequate financial resources to provide education for all its citizens gives rise to the temptation that each state will attempt to create its own narrow framework for education, using this to spread its own propaganda. Prussia was the first of the modern European states to perfect this technique. France developed a similar pattern in the 19th century. Other governments have done likewise, the Nazi and Communist states most successfully of all. In each instance isolation of this kind has been based on rigid control, the substitution of propaganda for free inquiry, and a desperate effort to insulate the citizen against outside influences. When this is attempted on a large scale by several states there is obvious danger both because it promotes rivalry and misunderstanding but even more because it seeks to fetter rather than free the minds of men.

Counters to Isolation

Fortunately there have been other movements which have in some measure consistently counteracted the forces of isolationism. There were the Sophists in ancient Greece who were prepared to teach anything to anybody, so long as they were paid to do so. They were accused of being mercenaries and charlatans, and many of them probably were; yet they must have done a great

deal to unify knowledge and to put it within the reach of the average citizen. And then there were the great medieval universities, teaching the seven liberal arts in Latin and attracting their students from all over Europe. They also did much to unify knowledge and, except in a few instances, while they did little to increase or extend it, they contributed to a tradition of sturdy independence which neither king nor bishop could challenge lightly. This has remained part of our heritage today and one would hope that we might find the sort of leadership we need today in our universities, where freedom is linked with a bold attempt, not only to extend knowledge, but to unify, to synthesise, to intepret, to apply it.

There are dangers, of course. The violation of the German universities in the nineteen-thirties by Nazi ruthlessness stands as a warning of what can happen when universities fall prey to political or ideological control. The university must maintain its right to admit its members, both staff and students, on their intellectual and moral merits without discrimination for race, religion or politics. And, with the increasing need for financial support from governments, it is not always easy to maintain these rights. Thus it becomes necessary for the universities themselves to define their rights and to defend them, rallying to their cause all those citizens who respect the integrity of the human mind and spirit. It was in this cause that Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson gave their leadership in the formative years of the United States; it was with this vision that Rutherford travelled from New Zealand and Canada to Cambridge and Einstein made his pilgrimage from Berlin to Princeton; it is this flame that continues to burn in all the great universities, distinguishing them from their unfortunate sisters who have become isolated by religious or economic or political control.

The university tradition links us with the past but there are other unifying movements which have developed in very recent years. There was the Committee for Intellectual Co-operation which was established under the League of Nations. This was in a sense an ancestor of UNESCO whose programme has been directed very clearly towards breaking down isolation between academic disciplines, between the levels and types of education, between nations, races and ideologies. These efforts have been reasonably successful, although, of necessity, they have been widely dispersed, sometimes superficial, loosely co-ordinated and occasionally even misdirected. At least it is perfectly clear that if UNESCO had not been prepared to undertake many of these tasks it would have been necessary to establish such a body to take its place.

And other bodies are now contributing as well. In 1959 the representatives of all the territories in the British Commonwealth met at Oxford for the first Commonwealth Education Conference. As a result of these discussions a scholarship plan was set in operation and assistance was offered to the underdeveloped territories through exchange of various types of teaching personnel. The response has been very encouraging and a second conference is now being planned in New Delhi in January 1962. Meanwhile various foreign aid and travel programmes have been offered by other countries, particularly by the United States. All these are evidence of the appetite for education, in every corner of the world, and of the willingness of the older nations to share their resources. They are proof also of the growing realisation that unity of knowledge and equality of opportunity are recognised almost universally as principles by which our efforts must be guided.

These efforts are timely for we live in a changing world and it is a question whether the pace or the universality of change is the more remarkable. It is estimated that the doubling time of knowledge is now between eight and ten years, which means, of course, that men and women in every part of the world are more occupied and more affected by things that are new than by things that are old. This is true not only in the world of gadgets and technology but also in the world of ideas and values. It has been estimated that twenty-five per cent of our children will spend most of their working life in jobs that have not yet been invented and we know that many of our own contemporaries have been victims of changing industrial, commercial and social needs. So long as it is used wisely and constructively, education holds the key to our adjustment in this sort of world but this brings

us face to face with an inevitable choice. We may choose to enjoy our comforts and protect our privileges in what Sir Charles Snow has called our "existentialist societies" without much thought or foresight about the consequences. This, he says, is the prevailing trend in most Western countries where the memories of past conquests and the myth of present security have produced a sort of political paralysis and social frustration. However there is another choice. Many of our neighbours have chosen deliberately to direct their planning towards the future and they are prepared to make painful sacrifices today and tomorrow so as to ensure success at the end of a decade or a century. To help them in this course education is being used systematically and prudently to unify and integrate the fields of knowledge, to control and shape the character of society and to spread a sinister gospel across the boundaries of racial groups and nations. Thus it becomes a question of great importance whether we use education as a brake to control, a wall to separate, an opiate to seduce or use it as a dynamic force to meet the challenge of these exciting times.

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