Editorial Views

The Cultural Component

ALFRED North Whitehead opened his Aims of Education, one of the most fascinating and nonsystematic books on education written in this century, as follows:

Culture is activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling. Scraps of information have nothing to do with it. A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God’s earth. What we should aim at producing is men who possess both culture and expert knowledge in some special direction.1

If Whitehead is correct then it follows that effective liberal education begins early at home and continues throughout life. It is not and cannot be the peculiar prerogative or province of secondary schools and colleges of arts and sciences, as important as these may be at certain crucial stages in the process. In fact even those of us who are strict partisans of “liberal education” would have to admit that poorly conceived and mechanically taught courses in the humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences can be serious deterrents to culture in the sense in which Whitehead is talking about it rather than aids to cultural growth. “To this day,” Whitehead wrote, “I cannot read King Lear, having had the advantage of studying it accurately at school.” 2 I have never quite recovered from a similar course in Milton. This is not to say, however, that the goal of collegiate liberal education, however short of it any student, teacher, or institution may fall, is not fairly well described as producing human beings with both culture and expert knowledge in some special direction where culture is understood as “activity of thought, and receptiveness to beauty and humane feeling.”

Whitehead’s statement also acts as a corrective to a series of further popular misconceptions about the educational process. The first of these is that specialization and liberal education are antithetical concepts. Quite to the contrary, specialization is an integral part of continuing liberal education itself—is that which gives focus and direction to general interest and involvement in areas outside one’s specialization. And, in reverse, it is the continued interest in general areas—the areas of the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences—which may give point to and place in meaningful perspective one’s field of specialization. Specialization tends to narrowness only when it becomes exclusive. If this is the case, then it may well be an obligation of professional schools and specialty boards to encourage developing specialists to continue to see their specialties in their human and cultural perspectives, to encourage a breadth of interest and involvement commensurate with enrichment both of the person and of the field of specialization itself.

A second misconception Whitehead’s statement tends to counteract is that the cultural component in education anywhere along the line is something that can be quantified. Inert ideas are useless baggage. Cultural growth cannot be measured by the number of courses taken in college or through adult education programs, the number of museums visited, the number of miles travelled, the number of books read outside one’s own field, the num-
ber of concerts or plays slept through, or the number of cocktail parties attended. Quite to the contrary, development of the cultural component is a function of involvement, encouragement, interest, and perceptivity. Perhaps the key lies in the difference between reacting as a complete person in contrast to reacting by fragmented parts. Granted the latter, any of the former may enhance the cultural component, but no one is essential to it.

The third misconception Whitehead’s statement highlights is closely related to the second. This is the assumption that the cultural component in human development is something that can be taught to or given to an individual—or can be attained by an individual through adequate discipline and training. At this point it would be easy to be misunderstood. We have already suggested that developing the cultural component is one of the goals of collegiate liberal education—now we appear to be saying that the cultural component cannot be taught. Yet the seeming contradiction disappears once the difference between content, even content conducive to, and attitude or activity is recognized.

A home, a school system, a college, a group of associates, a community can be more or less conducive to, can encourage or discourage the development of the cultural component in human growth. Any or all of these can provide to a greater or lesser degree the content normally ingredient in the cultural component. But none of these can make a person think, appreciate, or feel humanely. Ironically an individual can by training and self-discipline amass a considerable amount of factual content that normally would be ingredient in the cultural component, and yet lack the essential attitudinal characteristics. Whitehead’s well-informed bore is a case in point. The person who works so hard at trying to understand what he should appreciate that he never quite gets around to appreciating is equally so. Somehow the integrative spark that might best be described as imagination and enjoyment is missing. The ingredients are present, but the catalyst is missing.

It might be more accurate to suggest that the cultural component can be caught, even communicated, but not taught. Fortunately it is contagious. Once it is present the content, from anesthesiology to art history, becomes alive. The infecting agent may be a parent, a teacher, a research associate, or a friend. Once caught the difference between training and education needs no further elaboration. It is for this reason that teaching machines, visual aids, even libraries and laboratories, as important as all of these are in the educational process, can never replace the effective and dedicated teacher, parent or associate in the continuing liberal education of any individual or group. “This atmosphere of excitement,” Whitehead adds, “arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact: it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energizing as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes.”

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References
3. Aims of Education, p. 139.