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Roger Henderson

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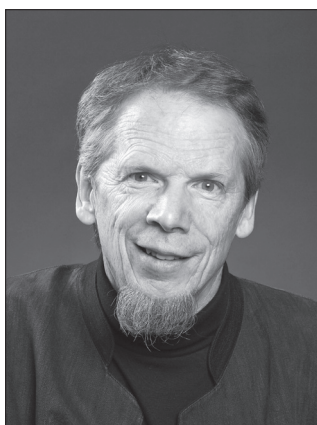
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Should a School be a Business? (or) What is Education?



by Roger Henderson

I once heard a business professor make reference to the “product mix” of his school. Many readers will have heard such things at their American colleges or universities. These and similar remarks inadvertently remind us that the distinctive character of an educational organization is in need of recognition and defense—in our financially driven (read “obsessed”) times. Few would deny that a barrel could be used as a skirt; is it therefore equivalent to a skirt? Few would doubt that a new-born child could be called the product of a household; is it therefore a product? Although such analogies can be drawn,

Dr. Roger Henderson is a former Dordt professor of philosophy. He now lives in Aptos, California, where he teaches Logic and Ancient History in a classical Christian school.

does this endow them with propriety or make them legitimate? Why did Jesus not like being called “Rabbi”? Wasn’t he a Rabbi of sorts? Sometimes the differences out-weigh the similarities in an analogy. The queen may be a princess but a very different sort of one; if you speak of her as a princess you miss most of what makes her a queen. It is easy to miss and fail to honor what makes a person or thing uniquely itself.

Why is a school or a college not a business, and why are students not customers or consumers? The reason people organize together into schools is to help students learn, to gain insight, to become educated and changed—hopefully in the light of God’s Word. Their goal is not to make money or even to pay their own bills—most exist thanks to gifts, grants, and subsidies; they are not there to make a profit, “grow the business,” or “increase market share.” They are not organized for the purpose of perpetuating themselves as financial units, or at least not traditionally. No such goals are theirs, not what makes them tick. A school is not a business and should not be operated as a business; its *raison d’être*, its nature and end as an organization (of teachers and learners), is to pass on, to give away what the Lord has given to the already educated—hand it on to the next generation of young people. When a school or college starts talking and thinking of its work as intrinsically anything other than educational, it will have lost sight of its peculiar and distinctive calling.¹

Schools, like all other organizations, exist in a world where economics is a reality, but that’s not

part of their defining purpose. If business principles are allowed to guide decisions and dictate priorities in schools, mistaken characteristics and motives will appear that tend to compromise or corrupt their founding educational purpose. Money must change hands and bills must be paid but just as families and churches are not characterized financially, so educational institutions operate with a different goal and organizing principle. We see the difference in a word like “tuition,” which does not mean pay or money; it comes from the Latin verb “to look at” or “look after.” Tuition is supposed to be used to look after the needs of the teacher; it is not strictly speaking offered as “pay.” If it were simply pay, it would most often be unfair pay in view of the required qualifications and value of teaching.

Have I been too quick in rejecting the analogies between business and school, product and education, tuition and pay? Let’s try again. Perhaps the product of a school or college is a certain kind of “insight,” intellectual-spiritual maturation, along with various “skills.” You pay us money and we “give” you knowledge, maturation and skill. It is obvious, at least to most teachers, that this is not how it works; it isn’t possible to simply “give” these things in the way things are handed to you in a store. Neither is it the same as receiving the “filling” the dentist “puts” in your tooth, or the pill the pharmacist puts into your hands. And it is not like the experience that entertainers or movie makers offer while we are watching or thinking about their show. What about the “product” of the exercise club? Such clubs typically have one or two trainers and many members. After receiving pointers from the trainer, most members work out alone, whereas teachers must keep coming back to give more and more instruction, trying to take the student deeper and deeper, layer by layer, to discover more and more about the world—for themselves. What the student does and or has done when a class is all over is invisible. It cannot be seen. It can only be approximately assessed and tentatively recognized.

It also evident that our “product” is not information. Encyclopedias, documentaries and the Internet offer that in a greater abundance than any school or teacher ever could. Nor is it the mere “handling” of knowledge that schools teach, for unless there is *understanding* of information, the sig-

nificance and connections of knowledge will remain in the dark.

Is our “product” our words? To start with, precious few of our words or even sentences are really our own, so this would make us all bootleggers and plagiarists if words were considered “our *product*.” Moreover, such an “answer” loses sight of what is essential to education, i.e., thought, thinking and understanding. Students are not just being tested on their word-parroting skill but on their judgment-making abilities, using acquired concepts. The idea that we are selling words (or vocabulary) also fails since learning is not something that can be “given.”

Must we finally admit that teachers, schools, colleges and universities have no product? Well, perhaps we sell a “service” to our students. Isn’t our product the labor of talking, writing, composing exams, listening to and reading what students write—grading exams? If that idea is correct, there would still be no “product” (since “goods and services” are usually distinguished). As such, educators would be merely day (or night) labors paid for their service hourly.

Education is something less tangible than labor. People can “labor at it” with little or no effect—it takes a very distinctive type of attention and concentration that can then yield a distinctive affection in the learner. The recognition of the ideas and distinctions behind the assembled words is what we aim at, our purpose and goal—which means that education involves cognitive movement or change. Would it be correct to say we sell change, changed minds, changed people? In the normal sense I think not. A person is not heavier or lighter, weaker or stronger by it; rather the student is altered in indecipherable ways, reordered inside through the effort he or she makes. The student becomes capable of judging things about which he or she was formerly ignorant, of discerning what is and is not (true). Awareness of this change can foster either humility and thankfulness or arrogance and hubris. The broadened basis (or horizon) can further illuminate or blunt a person’s perception of the truth. This capacity is most strikingly evident in its absence, that is, when we and the student have failed, when the student leaves as he came, when she remains unaltered, unmoved, unaffected.

To educate is to connect and to disconnect be-

liefs, to answer questions and support answers with understanding, to help a student gain in vision and comprehension and to help a person stand on his or her own two feet intellectually or spiritually. Education is supposed to expand imagination, expose ignorance and show the students how they are attached to and dependent upon the workings of history, of the world around and in them. By understanding the nature of our dependence and attachments, we become a little less simple victims of them. To learn is to explicate the nature of our

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various kinds of subjection to law and to divine ordinances. This learning can offer the possibility of various degrees of *liberation*, making us able to plan for, cooperate with, and “harness” the regularities of human and non-human nature. Education can mitigate slavishness and disclose possible ways of flourishing but it can also lead to hubris, arrogance and the misuse of power over things, animals, other people and self. When organized on business principles, education tends to be narrowed down to learning for instrumental purposes, that is, as a way to acquire power, influence, and wealth instead of learning for the sake of good stewardship by means of understanding and admiring the work and wisdom of God (or even “serviceable insight”).

Conclusion

Educational institutions can be said to have a “prod-

uct” in only a very indirect sense. The way a school is organized and run should reflect its character, purpose and distinctive reason for existing. Its first and primary goal is learning, which is an intrinsic good, requiring no further justification beyond gratitude to God. This goal should be and has usually been honored. Educational institutions receive support from a wide variety of sources, all of whom should be obliged to keep their distance, none of whom should try to direct teaching or research activities. This is a matter of respect for the nature of the learning process and trust in the people engaged in it. Such respect will serve everyone best.

We often find in the vicinity of colleges and universities a concentration of innovative and prosperous businesses. This is not coincidental, not because schools are businesses in disguise, but because the knowledge and insight generated in them is useful—enabling graduates with initiative to start companies and run very successful businesses. The teaching and primary research done at schools and universities prepares the way for ideas, products, and people to contribute to innovative forms of production. Recognition of their indebtedness to educational institutions (and God) should cause the people and companies assisted by them to make gifts and subsidies available with no strings attached. A school’s dependence requires trust and faith—a trust intrinsic to any Christian (educational) institution and the faith needed to guard against trying to turn a school into a business or self-centered power base.

Endnote

1. I am told that James K. A. Smith has written a similar article—which I have not yet read—called “Are Students ‘Consumers?’” in *The Devil Reads Derrida* (Eerdmans, 2009).