

# THE VIRGINIA TEACHER

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## ON FREEDOM FOR TEACHERS

I AM A BUSINESS man, not a professional educator. As a business man, however, I feel free to make a certain criticism of our school system; for what is wrong with the schools, it seems to me, is very largely the work, not of educators, but of business men.

To say that our modern schools have failed is an unsupportable, one-sided statement. It seems to me, at least, that they have been conspicuously successful in many ways. In the natural sciences, they have not only discovered great and useful truths which had been hidden from the human mind throughout the ages, but they have raised up a generation of fact-finders capable of searching out new truths and applying them to the solution of many practical problems.

In many ways, the American masses have become marvellously educated. Millions of modern youth, for instance, think nothing of driving high-power engines at a speed which would have caused the youth of any other time to quake with fear; and children who, had they lived a century before, would have been laboriously learning the routine of farm chores, are now discussing radio-activity and making their own short-wave sets. The schools, to be sure, may not be directly responsible for this; but neither were the schools of a century ago directly responsible for all the education which their students received. In each case, the schools have supplemented the education which the child received from his environment.

There was, however, this difference. The old red schoolhouse, as a rule turned out graduates who were equipped to make a living in the way that livings were then

made, equipped also with a workable understanding of the human relations of the period and a workable knowledge of its economic set-up. Even the modern high school, even the modern university, scarcely does that.

Modern schools, to be sure, do attempt to teach economics and sociology, whereas the old red schoolhouse did not undertake to go much beyond the three R's. Before he entered school, however, or during the period in which he attended the elementary school, the average child of a century ago studied agriculture, industry, and trade in a way which measurably equipped him to solve most of their basic problems.

Agriculture, industry, and trade, to be sure, were rather simple problems then. The problem of agriculture consisted basically of how to grow on the farm about all the food which the family expected to consume; and the industrial problem was mainly a problem of how the family could make the things which the family expected to use. The problem of trade consisted mostly, then, of trying to exchange something which the family could go without for the few things which the family could not produce and still could not or would not go without.

Basically, however, these problems are about the same as they ever were. The main difference is that the modern family produces few if any of the things which it consumes and is therefore almost wholly dependent upon trade; and very few people, either traders or economists, even pretend to know how trade can be carried on.

In 1929, for instance, trade slowed down to a point where millions of Americans suffered acutely and almost everybody was alarmed, but nobody seemed to know what to do about it, and most of us were of the

opinion that nothing either could or should be done.

If we would only wait a while, we were told, trade would revive.

A century ago, it would have been quite impossible to fool the average 10-year-old in any such way as that. For he *knew* about trade. He knew that if his folks had more hogs than they needed, they could make a trade with some family which had more hay than it needed, or more of something else which his family might want.

If his father couldn't make a trade with the first neighbor he consulted, it never occurred to him to blame the condition of trade. The way to revive trade, he knew, was by trading something for something else—which was equally true in 1929, but nobody thought of it. Even if a neighbor didn't have any money or any goods in those days, it was still possible to do business with him; for he almost always had labor-power and that was known to be valuable. It was still valuable in 1929, but something had happened to us so we couldn't see just how it was valuable; but in those uneducated days, the man without money or products was invited over to help create some wealth on a neighboring farm, and he would be given some money or products in return.

How was it that people were so wise in those days and so foolish in ours, in spite of the better schooling of this latter time? The answer is plainly that the home in those days educated its children in the ways of life. It did this because it could. The modern home does not do it because it can't. The modern home can tell its children where father works, if he is working, but it cannot, as a rule, acquaint him exactly with what father does and why. He may work in a bank, but the home cannot explain banking, and surely cannot ask the children to help on such a job. He may work on the railroad, but even those who own the railroads may not be able to explain them. They may be laboring under the impression

that railroads exist primarily for bondholders, not for the transportation of goods and people. Or he may work in an office or factory tied up in some mysterious way with the work of some other office or factory, giving some service or manufacturing some gadget which the second organization is in the habit of purchasing during those periods when business happens to be good, but which has to shut down and throw father into unemployment if business happens to be bad. As to why business is bad, father hasn't the slightest idea. Neither, in all probability, have his employers, and it is their understanding that it is hardly worth finding out as they couldn't do anything about it anyway. Employers, they think, are quite helpless in this matter of unemployment.

Contrast the schoolboy living in that sort of environment with the average youngster in the old red schoolhouse a century ago. The boy in agrarian days not only learned how to make the soil do what he wanted it to do but obtained a first hand acquaintance with all the essential industries—construction, transportation, textiles, milling, slaughtering, packing, preserving, and, of course, heat, light, and power. He knew by actual observation, contact, and co-operation, what all these things meant to life in his community and how they could be controlled to serve the purpose of that community. He knew that heat came from the woodlot, light from a sheep's "innards" and power from the raising and training of certain colts and calves. The child in this machine age learns from *his* environment that the people who get what they want are those who have the money, but behind that one stark fact, there seems to be a great blank wall.

Yes, the modern schools teach economics and sociology to certain students who have a flair for formulas; but how much of the mystery of their own economic status is thus cleared up for them? How much stirring truth do they drink in as to the work-

ings of modern heat, light, and power? If they can't use the railroads as they would like to us them, do their classes in economics tell them what to do about it? If father is out of a job, does the boy learn what the trouble is and just how that may be corrected? If the family income doesn't enable him to live like the other boys, does his class in economics suggest a way by which the injustice may be corrected?

It is my understanding that economics is not taught in our schools in any such exciting way as that. It is my understanding that the teachers themselves, and even the people who write the textbooks, do not pretend to know the answers to such questions; and that if they did pretend to know, or if they organized their classes to undertake any very searching inquiry along these lines, there would be some danger of their losing their jobs. Why? Because certain business interests wouldn't like it.

I am a business man and I can understand why they wouldn't like it. I can understand their fear of irrational, radical, and subversive theories creeping into our schools. I even share the fear myself. Nevertheless I can't help noting that we have made tremendous progress in chemistry, physics, and many other subjects in which business interests have not interfered with the educational process, and we have made almost no progress (unless it has been during the past two years) in acquainting the mind of youth with the real nature of the modern economic and social set-up.

We business men had uses for chemistry and physics, which could not be learned in any other way than by organized fact-finding. We had no opinions whatever as to any chemical formula, and we never asked for anyone's opinion on any chemical problem. We wanted the exact facts, no matter how dangerous or subversive the facts might be. We did have opinions, however, as to the social and economic set-up. We had opinions as to how labor should behave,

employed or unemployed. We had opinions as to the profits we should be permitted to take, whether they were earned or not. And we had opinions as to our inalienable rights; and if the schools were to teach the social sciences, we wanted to have the subjects taught in harmony with all these fixed opinions. In fact, we insisted on it.

We encouraged professors of chemistry to air all the subversive theories which might be suggested by their investigations; and we encouraged their students to prove that their professors were wrong if they could possibly dig up the proof. In physics, we didn't care how much heresy there was, for we had faith in the truth if it could only be discovered; and we knew that the best chance of discovering the truth lay in one's freedom to challenge every ancient formula, no matter how basic it might seem to be.

The results were good.

In the social sciences, however, we did not trust the scientific method. There was no objection, to be sure, to the gathering of facts and figures, providing the conclusions reached could be guaranteed to harmonize with our previously formed conclusions. But there must be nothing subversive. There must be no "heresy."

And the results were not so good. When, in fact, we found it no longer possible to carry on business, none of us could understand what the trouble was. The schools hadn't given us an inkling of what had been happening in economic and social evolution. We hadn't let them.

Well—better late than never. We must discover a way by which children and adults can become as well acquainted, at least, with the present economic and social set-up, as were the folks of the agrarian age with theirs. To say that modern life is too complicated for individuals to grasp is merely begging the question. If it is too complicated for individuals to play a conscious part in it, it is too complicated to be lived; and unless we have a population

generally educated and trained to play such a conscious part, we will not be able to continue in this modern life.

We have individual responsibilities—all of us—whether business men, wage-earners, farmers, or members of the various professions; and we cannot make this modern civilization work unless those individual responsibilities are adequately accepted and discharged. To accept them, however, we must know what they are. Today we do not know. We do not even understand what the social set-up is. Even in these days of the New Deal, in which a great light is beginning to break, the great majority of us are still waiting to see “what the Government will do,” or “what capital will do,” or “what labor will do,” and are unable as yet to see the situation in terms of our own individual responsibilities. This situation must be changed and only education can change it. As to what kind of education, I can see no hope excepting in the kind which has worked so well in the natural sciences—the method of scientific fact-finding.

In our school boards today, can we not at least lay down certain principles for the organization of this necessary education? Granted that no one knows enough to teach the subjects which must be taught, can we not at least agree to take off all restrictions so that teachers and students will be free to learn everything which can be discovered?

I know that my proposal is dangerous. A little knowledge is always dangerous, but that does not constitute a sufficient reason for not acquiring a little knowledge. Chemistry is also dangerous. So is life. The only really safe place seems to be the cemetery; but our civilization, I am convinced, does not want to take that course.

EDWARD A. FILENE

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If there is anything in the universe that can't stand discussion, let it crack.—WENDELL PHILLIPS.

## THE RADIO INTERVIEW-DIALOG

OF all means of getting ideas across by means of words spoken into a microphone for broadcasting, the dialog-interview is perhaps the most effective if it is well done, and the most disappointing if it is not.

Radio “interviews” in the form of dialog between the person interviewed and the announcer are seldom if ever spontaneous, and are usually prepared in advance by a “continuity-writer” who is neither the announcer nor the person interviewed. The announcer has worries of his own without having to think up questions to ask the scores of prominent citizens or learned authorities and others whom he meets for the first time a few minutes before the program “goes on the air” and perhaps never sees again.

The person interviewed might be equally bewildered if suddenly called upon to provide answers to a volley of questions for which he had prepared no answers. There is, in addition, a risk of mistakes, misunderstandings, inaccurate statements, copyrighted quotations and even of inadvertently libellous remarks which might provoke legal difficulties.

The radio dialog-interview differs radically from the printed interview which appears in the newspapers and magazines. In the printed interview, the interviewer submerges his own personality as rapidly as possible. He may, for the sake of “atmosphere,” describe the celebrity’s home surroundings, appearance, manner, etc., but as soon as the lion begins to roar he must roar alone. The only trace of the interviewer appears in the quotation marks, put there as often as not so that the lion may disavow some of his roarings if necessary.

The radio dialog-interview is on a different footing. Though the speaker is invisible, the voice is unmistakably the voice of Esau in person. The industrious continuity-writ-