

[Introduction to *Minding American Education: Reclaiming the Tradition of Active Learning* by Martin Bickman, Teachers College Press of Columbia University, to be published April, 2003]

Children in the Concrete

Teaching demands thoughtfulness. There simply is no way to become an outstanding teacher through adherence to routine, formula, habit, convention, or standardized ways of speaking and acting. Thoughtfulness requires . . . a willingness to look at the conditions of our lives, to consider alternatives and different possibilities, to challenge received wisdom and the taken for granted, and to link our conduct with our consciousness.

—William Ayers

The minister had just given a delightful sermon, a Wordsworthian paean on the wonder and innocence of childhood, and was now bidding farewell to his parishioners on the church steps. Suddenly he caught out of the corner of his eye some children playing in the freshly poured cement on a few squares of new sidewalk ineffectively fenced off with yellow tape. He rushed over, red in the face, and began scolding them, as close to the verge of profanity as someone in his profession could come. One woman who was particularly shocked at the outburst said, “Why, Reverend, you just told us how much you love children!” The minister answered, “I love children well enough in the abstract but not in the concrete.”

This book hopes to reverse this attitude and bring into closer conjunction the history and philosophy of American education with what we actually do in the classroom. While courses in these subjects are usually required for teaching in public schools, the textbooks and syllabi that form their core often leave the experience of students and instructors in the dust of an abstract language and an antiquarian approach. Such courses are usually sealed off from more practical ones such as teaching methods with only the vague hope that these future teachers might someday make their own connections. But more often than not we professors as well as our students are isolated behind the walls of our own academic specializations and can think only in units of course credits instead of reaching out for relation and synthesis. This situation is a microcosm of American education as a whole, another symptom of its failure to integrate the conceptual and symbolic with the perpetual flow of our lives.

In this book I will reconstruct a counter tradition that is the antidote to this problem, a current in American thought the very goal of which is to relate the abstract to the concrete, contemplation to action. I call this confluence the tradition of the active mind—without capitalization, because I do not want to reify or memorialize it. While the tradition encompasses a diverse group of writers and educators over the span of 180 years, I argue for its ultimate coherence both as a theoretical framework and a set of practices. In a modest way this book itself hopes to close the gap between thinking and doing by being at once an intellectual adventure and a call for action.

This will not be a thorough and detailed exposition of the history of American education as much as a reconceptualizing of it. The history of our schools can be reconstructed as a tension between those who want to put the act of thinking at the center

and those who let other priorities override this such as socialization and the need to compete economically. But it has been said that there are two kinds of people in the world—those who say there are two kinds of people in the world and those who don't. Not to put myself too firmly in the former camp, I also want to stress that I see an understanding of this tradition as a way of reconciling opposing tendencies in current school reform movements, in mediating between conservative and progressive approaches. The tradition of the active mind envisions a necessary dialogue between individual experience and cultural symbols, between self-expression and teaching the basics. Too often warring factions in educational reform have seized upon only a part of the cycle that generates real learning and urged it upon us as the entire solution. We can learn from and transcend their errors.

This book can be explained further by contrasting it with another that has recently had some play in the press, Diane Ravitch's *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (2000). Ravitch shows convincingly how what went under the name of progressive reform movements was anti-intellectual and uneducative. She rightly deflates movements such as "scientific" curriculum-making and life-adjustment studies. But she tells only half the story, for the traditionalism and conservatism she does not critique have been at least as anti-intellectual and uneducative. I attended what some consider the apogee of classical education in a public system, Boston Latin School, and found it at least as hostile to the life of the mind as any offshoot of progressivism. The Latin language was treated more as a collection of datives and ablative absolutes through which to "build character" than a medium of cultural and literary power. Although in my senior year we translated the first four books of the *Aeneid*, it was not until college that I

learned it was indeed a poem. But worse than Ravitch's partiality is her negativity; she offers no positive program, partly because she does not appreciate how harmful the very division between progressives and traditionalists that she is perpetuating is itself part of the problem. We are oppressed by our educational past, but we can also see beneath its most obvious contours a hidden, vital current that offers us the seeds of hope from groups often marginalized or co-opted.

This narrative begins with one such group, the New England Transcendentalists in the 1830s and 40s. For these transformative intellectuals ideas were valuable only to the extent they were realized, put to work in our lives. They did not all adhere to a single party line—Margaret Fuller said of them that they were a group of the like-minded in that no two of them thought alike—but shared an interest in creating a new education which would not only transmit the previous ideas of a culture but create new ones. They saw in education a way to respect both the continuities and metamorphoses of a rapidly changing society and to give its democratic ideals the kind of institutional support they have often lacked. They envisioned a schooling where the power of thought would triumph over privilege, prejudice, and habit.

Although their actual educational experiments were few and small—Bronson Alcott's Temple School, Margaret Fuller's Conversations with the women of Boston, the academy run by the John and Henry David Thoreau—I give them what may seem a disproportionate amount of attention. But the full story of Transcendentalist education has never been fully told; these figures have been relegated to the past, where they are often viewed as otherworldly and naïve dreamers. At best they are read as exemplars of certain developments in the history of ideas or literary taste; at worst, they become fodder

for exam questions, factoids of cultural literacy. That they could actually speak to our current dilemmas is rarely considered.

But if one aim of this book is to rescue the Transcendentalists from the restricted realm of belles lettres, another is to reverse the process and see what insights literary studies can bring to our educational thinking. Prose writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Herman Melville and poets like Robert Frost have solved within their works issues of the relation of openness to form that are relevant to how we can restructure education. Sometimes they make this relevance explicit, in which case we can ferret out and organize these statements; where it remains implicit we can draw out the implications ourselves through close analysis. Further, the field of literary criticism itself has its own pedagogical relevance, and while rarely have literary critics written about education with enough specificity and clarity to be helpful, they need only refocus the same scrutiny they use on texts to their own classrooms to make their efforts fruitful. This book represents my own attempt to make my experiences as a literary critic, a teacher, and an educational activist converge in ways that might be of use to others.

This book does not promise any quick fixes or provide ready-made blueprints for reform. Quite the opposite, it insists that fresh thinking be constantly applied every moment of our teaching lives, that “No method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert” (Thoreau, 1854/1971, p. 111). If it reaches into the past, as the last sentence does, for words to move us in this direction, it does so to begin to create a community of thinking that links us with people and events in our educational history as well as with others in the present who are willing to share this vision.

While I took great care in arranging this material, I also want to be true to the spirit of active learning and encourage readers to approach this text in a proactive way. Some readers more interested in educational activism—precisely those readers I most want to reach—may prefer to skip over the second chapter and the first half of the third, both of which go into more depth on matters of philosophy and intellectual history than some would like. Some readers may also want to begin with the last chapter for a sense of the immediate applications of the ideas advocated here before going into their history and rationale. To further this interactive spirit, I am hoping that readers will contact me at bickman@colorado.edu with their reactions and questions.