

# What Went Wrong?

By Laurence Stott

The twentieth century saw a critical shift in education, a shift for the worse. Only now, in the later 1990's, are significant efforts underway to correct for this mistake. What was the mistake and why did it gain such widespread currency throughout North America?

In as few words as possible, the mistake was to replace "effort" with "interest" as the foundational principle of education. Over time, this shift produced serious debilitating consequences within our school systems, some of which I list below.

- i) The teacher's essential task is to create and sustain the interest now held to be the engine of learning. If a student is not achieving, then the teacher has not done his/her job of creating interest — the teacher is lazy, unimaginative or a stiff authoritative teacher who cannot adapt to the new "progressive education." In short, the primary responsibility for educational achievement has shifted from the student to the teacher.
- ii) Achievement has become attendant upon student concentration and involvement, which themselves erase any inclination on the student's part to be a nuisance in the classroom. Thus classroom discipline too is founded upon the interest which the teacher must create and sustain.
- iii) University professors of education, responsible for teacher training, have embraced the new philosophy, teaching it to those who aspired to be teachers. They thus committed themselves to teaching the student teachers the secrets of motivation. Not only that, since they claimed to know these secrets, they themselves would have to display these secrets in their own university teaching. To give a student teacher a "D" now meant you had failed to interest him or her, you who claimed to know the secret of motivation.

Ergo, no "Ds", nor "Cs" for that matter. This quickly led to faculty of education grades becoming notoriously high. So bad is the situation that within academe "education studies" has become a term of derision.

- iv) All newly-certificated teachers enter into teaching fully indoctrinated into progressive education, and the poor and incompetent among them are also hired since they too have glowing transcripts. Grade inflation has become rampant throughout the school system as teachers too feel bound to prove themselves good teachers.
- v) According to the dogma, interested students learn more happily and more quickly than do anxious (distracted) students, and their achievements engender a better self-concept which results in ever-higher levels of achievement. But teachers who demand responsible behaviour and proven achievement may well create anxiety — even fear of reprimand or poor grades. Thus demanding teachers have been psychologically hounded out of the profession, leaving "progressives" unchallenged and in control of our schools.

Thus it was that proponents of progressive education, chief among them professors in faculties of education throughout North America, painted a wonderful, exciting and humanistic picture of education as it could and should be. But the world of rhetoric and the world of reality rarely come even close to matching. Language can bewitch and delude.

The essential error in the reasoning behind progressive education is that in fact nobody knows the secret of motivation. Why I am interested in poetry and you think it stupid, while you are interested in car engines which I couldn't care less about so long as mechanics exist, neither or us knows.

And I cannot choose to be interested in engines. If pressed about our interests, in the end we say something like: "Look, I just do find it interesting." And when my interest wanes and fades and I take to something else, I can't explain that either. Interest comes and goes in a totally mysterious fashion beyond our control.

To try to build a school system upon such a mysterious, shifting phenomenon was, and is, to invite disaster — deteriorating standards of both behaviour and achievement. Effort, however, is more reliable because largely under an individual's control. Interest should obviously be sought but effort must be the foundational principle in education. This principle is not a cure-all panacea. Rather it is hard-headed and realistic, our best shot at equipping the next generation to think, create and fend for its world better than we did. Some students will fail or do poorly but we all, including maturing students, need to acknowledge our weaknesses and take pride and pleasure in our strengths. Learning to handle failure is a very important lesson in life.

Romance, like interest, is a real but shifting, out-of-control phenomenon. In fact, not fancy, good marriages must be worked at. Those newly-in-love cannot see this. The romantics in education could not be reasoned with either, and society paid a high price. Disrespect of teachers is widespread, and without respect the teaching enterprise fails and human potential is squandered.

*Dr. Stott is Professor Emeritus (philosophy of education) at the University of Toronto.*