

Low Self of Steam

People feel good about themselves only after they have earned it.

By John Robson

The February 2 issue of Maclean's (which incongruously arrived in late January) poured scorn on the concept of forcing students to write the same thing over and over again as a punishment. So, while its editors write, "We will not put fictitious future dates on our publication" 100 times, allow me to explain why they are wrong.

Maclean's "ScoreCard" was full of praise because "Donald Lucas: Gutsy Stirling, Ont. Grade 8er rebels at teacher's order to write lines for not doing homework. Says tedious task 'puts the mind into neutral.' Instead, negotiates right to pen essay on the folly of writing lines. Smart kid, sure. Smart teacher, too."

And my newspaper called his punishment "a mindless activity of repetition, not something a learning institution should be encouraging. A school, and a teacher, for that matter, should strive for knowledge."

They should, but knowledge comes in many forms and in many ways. Let me tell you a tale. There was once this kid who spent years in a kind, nurturing school where they never made him do anything he didn't want to do lest, say, correcting his spelling were to give him a low "self of steam".

If he disobeyed instructions, he was rewarded with a really interesting assignment involving yet more impudence and praised by the press. One day he graduated and got a job as an intern at a newspaper.

Then, he was assigned a story he didn't feel like doing. It would involve tedious phone calls and slogging around in bad weather talking to dull people with no post-graduate degrees at all. So he blew it off and, when reproached, sassed his editor.

Now, how do you think my fable ends? Is our hero praised and told to write a big long feature on the virtues of non-conformity, taking as long as he wants, as much space as he wants and being assured the piece won't be edited once he's done?

I don't want to spoil the surprise, but if you want to ask him directly, you can probably find him flipping burgers somewhere.

The philosophy of the modern educationist seems to be that rather than risking a series of little dents and

I don't imagine most students will go back and thank their high school when told that, despite an impressive average year after year, they're too illiterate to go to a good university and gosh, yes, they squandered those youthful years when learning language is easiest but hey, their teachers didn't want to say anything in case it upset them.

If there were nothing more to say about education, it would, I admit, be a bit grim. But there is.

That SFU panel recommended

that students whose first language is not English and who have been here less than two years be exempted from the testing. You see, the university is confident that such students will not as a rule quit when they find that their English isn't yet good enough.

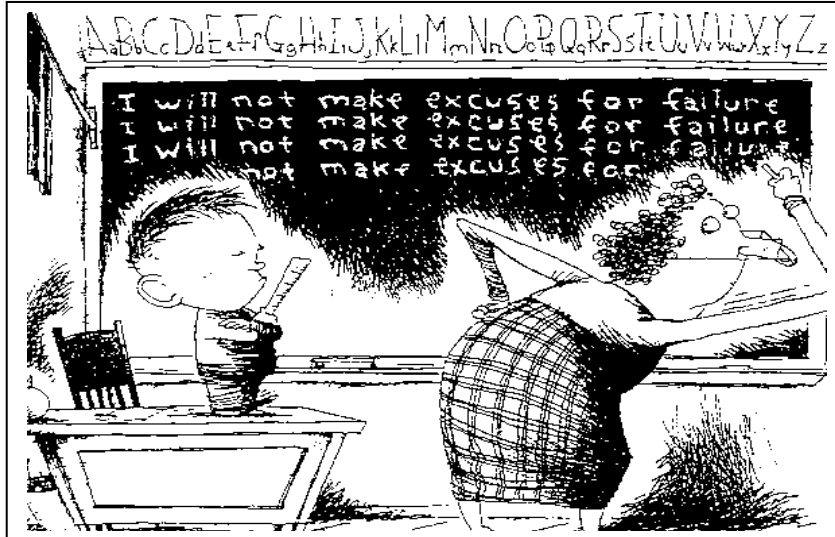
If knocked down by a strong verb, they'll pick themselves up, dust themselves off and try again. And one day, they'll not only

have a degree and be fluent in English, but they'll be really prepared for adult life because they'll know they did something worthwhile even though it was difficult.

And it will make them feel good about themselves.

Self-esteem isn't given, it's earned. That one small sentence is the key to a life not of frustration and boredom but of joy and fulfillment. If need be, it's even worth making someone write it on the blackboard 100 times.

(Reprinted with permission from The Ottawa Citizen, Jan. 30, 2004. Mr. Robson is the brother of OQE Honorary Director Bill Robson.)



cracks in a student's overweening sense of self-worth, they should be encouraged to develop enormous, elaborate, but fragile egos that can be shattered dramatically in a single blow.

For instance, Simon Fraser University is considering literacy tests even for students with good marks because, explains the head of their undergraduate curriculum committee, "a significant number of students arrive here unprepared to undertake university study. It's problematic, and it's not just something that is happening at our university. It's happening everywhere."