To Think or To Work? That Is the Question. Crisis of America's Public Education System

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On both sides of the political aisle, workforce-training reforms are being touted as the be-all, end-all of America's public education system.

*Right-wing "school choice" proponents, such as **President Donald Trump** and **Education Secretary Betsy DeVos**, push corporate charter school programs with workforce-training curriculums.*

*Left-wing "community schooling" advocates, such as Democratic Presidential candidates **Joe Biden** and **Julián Castro**, push "lifelong-learning" programs with school-to-work curriculums. Both "conservatives" and "liberals" concur: the purpose of public education is workforce development.*

It's nice to know that, in this divisive era of Trump outrage, America's political representatives can still reach across the aisle to agree on something. Too bad this bipartisan movement will reduce the US schooling system to a corporate-government bureaucracy that deploys Big Data to train students to fill labor quotas prescribed by workforce-planning algorithms.

Career-Aptitude Pigeonholes

In this new age of rapidly advancing technologies that are automating "low-skill" jobs, many parents are understandably concerned that their children's schooling will fail to prepare them to survive in a hi-tech future where the economy is driven by computers. However, parents should be skeptical of hyped-up "career pathways" curriculums that train students in hi-tech skills prescribed for job placement in the fields of "Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics" (STEM). While this polytechnical training might offer quick shortcuts to hi-tech jobs, such vocational tech-training pigeonholes the student into a predetermined job with limited upward mobility.

Such "cradle-to-career" training is based on three of the "six basic functions" of schooling systematized by Harvard Professor of Education, Alexander Inglis, who believed that public schools are instruments of Statecraft and social engineering. In "Against School," Inglis's authoritarian "principles of education" are paraphrased by the renowned New York State Teacher of the Year (1991), John Taylor Gatto:

3. The *diagnostic and directive function*. School is meant to determine each student's proper social role. . . .
4. The *differentiating function*. Once their social role has been "diagnosed," children are to be sorted by role and trained only so far as their destination in the social machine merits—and not one step further. . . .

5. The *propaedeutic function*. The social system implied by these rules will require an elite group of caretakers. To that end, a small fraction of the kids will quietly be taught how to manage this continuing project, how to watch over and control a population deliberately dumbed down and declawed in order that government might proceed unchallenged and corporations might never want for obedient labor.

By pipelining students directly from the classroom to the jobsite, career-pathways curriculums diagnose each student's social role by consigning him or her to a job caste that is directed by Big Business partnering with publicly funded school-to-work programs. Furthermore, to efficiently determine each student's socioeconomic role, the cradle-to-career "conveyor belt" differentiates the student body into a hierarchy of managers and wage slaves who are trained with minimal job competences so that the chain of economic command is not destabilized by social ambitions.

Simply put, career-pathways do not teach students how to choose their own careers and social roles; rather, they teach students job-specific skills for limited employment openings which are predetermined by the market projections of the politically connected corporations that partner with government-funded schools.

Psychometric Learning Analytics for "Personalized" Job Training

Rather than applaud school-to-work curriculums that train students to keep up with the evolution of a hi-tech economy, perhaps schoolboards should be disconcerted about the encroachment of the Big Tech economy on schools and learning. With growing popularity, Big Data is becoming an integral component of career-pathways training through "adaptive-learning" computers that literally reduce students to numbers. By data-mining a student's responses to digital lessons, adaptive-learning software (such as Dreambox, Alta, and Brightspace Leap™) can tabulate student-learning algorithms which diagnose students as mentally "fit" or "unfit" for certain jobs. The result is a psychometrical "bell curve" system that pathologizes a student's workforce "competences" based on his or her "cognitive-behavioral" algorithms.

Such data-mining of student psychometrics might be an efficient way to distribute job placement through workforce-schooling programs. Nonetheless, acclaimed education theorist Alfie Kohn documents that the psychological conditioning methods of schooling advocated by "economists and a diehard group of orthodox behaviorists (who have restyled themselves 'behavior analysts')" usually "backfire" and "undermine the very thing we're trying to promote." Indeed, workforce-schooling psychometrics are "undermined" when "personalized" student-learning profiles "backfire" by socially engineering the student body into a workforce caste hierarchy with limited job opportunities that restrict upward mobility.

A Post-Humanism?

If parents are worried that their children may get run over by the hi-speed, hi-tech automation economy on the horizons, their attempts to reform education so that students can "compete" with the new computerized economy may actually exacerbate the problem. Rather than encourage school-to-work curriculums that train students to "interface" with a techno-automated workforce, perhaps it is more important to teach the humanities of philosophy, history, and the arts so that the next generations can make humane decisions

which ensure that technological evolution serves the inalienable rights of human dignity and conscience.

We are at a crossroads here: the "career pathways" to a technocratic economy, or the "classical way" to a moral economy based on the "categorical-imperative" values of human dignity and conscience. I am not saying that technological advancement cannot progress alongside the preservation of human values. But in a computer-automated economy driven by Big Data, algorithms must be programmed with certain values; and without the preservation of humane values in the minds of students, there will be nothing to ensure that human morality is programmed into the algorithms that plan the workforces of the future. If we amputate the arts and humanities from the "new education," which worships the supposed infallibility of data, what will it profit our children to gain the world of hi-tech jobs only to lose their humanity?

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