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Society flunks out

Could most adults meet the high standards we expect of our kids?

By Joseph Ganem

October 3, 2010

Calls for education reform are again dominating the news, which is no surprise during an election year. The usual suspects are being rounded up to blame for the failures in our school systems — poor teachers, lax standards, lack of parental involvement. But is it realistic to expect our schools to be islands of academic rigor within a society that does not model the educational standards it espouses?

Let us briefly survey how well many adults might fare in standard academic subjects.

English: Debates in Congress frequently include politicians taking the floor to denounce proposals as being "politically motivated" and to accuse colleagues of "playing politics" or of acting to "gain a political advantage." Actually, a politician is a person who practices politics. These kinds of accusations are as trite as saying that I, a physicist, practice physics. In fact, most of the rhetoric in Congress is either trite or platitudinous. Everyone supports eliminating government waste, reducing the deficit, improving education, punishing criminals and so on. Saying that you are for these things does not contribute in any meaningful way to public debate. This content-free use of language would receive an F in English class.

Reading: A disturbing cultural attitude has developed about reading. When in agreement with a writer, people typically say, "that's the truth," and when in disagreement, people say, "that's biased." Actually, all writing is biased. In school it is taught that a written piece should have a point of view, an intended audience, a central argument and factual evidence supporting the argument. It is the reader's job to render judgment on the validity of the argument and the relevance and weight of the evidence. But if we stop reading after encountering a central argument that we don't like, and never consider the evidence for it, we stop learning. It is imperative to read viewpoints different from our own and to give them careful consideration even if we still decide to disagree. It is intellectually dishonest to dismiss everyone we disagree with as biased and laud all those we agree with as sources of truth.

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Science: Published news reports have detailed extensive efforts by BP to employ scientists conducting research on the Gulf of Mexico oil spill. Once under contract, the scientists will be prohibited from sharing data, publishing findings or even talking about their work unless BP approves. In this regard, BP is following the example of pharmaceutical companies who for years have paid for drug studies in which they own the results and can then decide what to publish and what to keep proprietary. Yes, it has always been true that scientists don't publish all the data that they accumulate and frequently disagree among themselves about what the data mean. However, the process of science has historically been self-correcting because of its reliance on independent researchers openly sharing information. When the researchers are no longer independent and the published data is cherry-picked to maximize corporate profits, it distorts the scientific method in a way that renders all conclusions suspect. This exceptionally dangerous situation brings to mind the physicist Richard Feynman's warning in the aftermath of the space shuttle Challenger disaster. He wrote: "reality must take precedence over public relations because nature cannot be fooled."

Math: The Republicans have announced a "Pledge to America" in which they state that their plan is to cut taxes while reducing the deficit. Do they understand the difference between addition and subtraction? President Barack Obama has announced plans to cut the deficit in half by the end of his term. Does he understand that any nonzero deficit represents an additional accumulation of debt and that half of a very large number is still a large number? Neither side has produced numbers for deficit reduction that make any sense, and this is a math problem involving simple arithmetic, not advanced calculus. Yes, both parties promise that their policies will fix the disparities between the positive and negative numbers by promoting "jobs and economic growth." But math (and recent history) also teaches that extremely rapid growth is unsustainable.

Our government and corporate leaders clamor for higher educational standards, increased accountability for teachers and more students trained in math and science. But these same leaders advocate policies in ways that would not meet the minimum standards for a passing grade in any academic subject, and they are quick to dodge accountability for themselves. How can we expect our schools to uphold academic standards for our children that adults are not willing to model?

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