Artificial Stupidity

Thomas Sowell

A woman with a petition went among the crowds attending a state fair, asking people to sign her petition demanding the banning of dihydroxymonoxide. She said it was in our lakes and streams, and now it was in our sweat and urine and tears.

She collected hundreds of signatures to ban dihydroxymonoxide—a fancy chemical name for water. A couple of comedians were behind this ploy. But there is nothing funny about its implications. It is one of the grim and dangerous signs of our times.

This little episode revealed how conditioned we have become, responding like Pavlov’s dog when we hear a certain sound—in this case, the sound of some politically correct crusade.

People are all born ignorant but they are not born stupid. Much of the stupidity we see today is induced by our educational system, from the elementary schools to the universities. In a high-tech age that has seen the creation of artificial intelligence by computers, we are also seeing the creation of artificial stupidity by people who call themselves educators.

Educational institutions created to pass on to the next generation the knowledge, experience and culture of the generations that went before them have instead been turned into indoctrination centers to promote whatever notions, fashions or ideologies happen to be in vogue among today’s intelligentsia.

Many conservatives have protested against the specifics of the things with which students are being indoctrinated. But that is not where the most lasting harm is done. Many, if not most, of the leading conservatives of our times were on the left in their youth. These have included Milton Friedman, Ronald Reagan and the whole neoconservative movement.

The experiences of life can help people outgrow whatever they were indoctrinated with. What may persist, however, is the lazy habit of hearing one side of an issue and being galvanized into action without hearing the other side—and, more fundamentally, not having developed any mental skills that would enable you to systematically test one set of beliefs against another.

It was once the proud declaration of many educators that “We are here to teach you how to think, not what to think.” But far too many of our teachers and professors today are teaching their students what to think, about everything from global warming to the new trinity of “race, class and gender.”

Even if all the conclusions with which they indoctrinate their students were 100 percent correct, that would still not be equipping students with the mental skills to weigh opposing views for themselves, in order to be prepared for new and unforeseeable issues that will arise over their lifetimes, after they leave the schools and colleges.

Many of today’s “educators” not only supply students with conclusions, they promote the idea that students should spring into action because of these prepackaged conclusions—in other words, vent their feelings and go galloping off on crusades, without either a knowledge of what is said by those on the other side or the intellectual discipline to know how to analyze opposing arguments.

When we see children in elementary schools out carrying signs in demonstrations, we are seeing the kind of mindless groupthink that causes adults to sign petitions they don’t understand or—worse yet—follow leaders they don’t understand, whether to the White House, the Kremlin or Jonestown.

A philosopher once said that the most important knowledge is knowledge of one’s own ignorance. That is the knowledge that too many of our schools and colleges are failing to teach our young people.

It takes a certain amount of knowledge just to understand the extent of one’s own ignorance. But our “educators” have given assignments to children who are not yet a decade old to write letters to members of Congress, or to Presidents, spouting off on issues ranging from nuclear weapons to medical care.

Will Rogers once said that it was not ignorance that was so bad but “all the things we know that ain’t so.” But our classroom indoctrinators are getting students to think that they know after hearing only one side of an issue. It is artificial stupidity.