

The Dumbing Down of America: Anti-Intellectualism and Common Core



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The revolution is in our living rooms and it is digitized! We are surfers and facebookers that sit for hours becoming dumb on smart gadgets. We live in a culture of low expectations. We laugh at ourselves when we fail to grasp the most basic of concepts and what is worse is that we shrug it off and simply refuse to revisit the problem and correct our mistakes. Who is using education for a voyage of self-discovery or to seize the technological moment?

When Congressman Darrell Issa mixed up Guinea with Guyana in referring to the Ebola outbreak many questioned his knowledge of geography. His Washington office was contacted and when told that Guyana is not Guinea they simply said that he meant Papua New Guinea and it was business as usual. The office could not say where Papua New Guinea is and it did not matter. As many of us know neither Guyana nor Papua New Guinea is connected to Ebola.

The dumbing down of America has its roots in years of neglect and misplaced priorities. Many of our young people have become addicts to social media and spend hours in front of a screen without direction. The money and intelligence that go with the technological explosion are not in our hands. We are slaves to the technology.

Richard Hofstadter, a History Professor at Columbia University, was among those that provided the theoretical basis for anti-intellectualism. He argued in 1963 that there was a cult of ignorance in America. According to Hofstadter, 'the strain of anti-intellectualism has been a constant thread winding its way through our political and cultural life, nurtured by the false notion that democracy means that my ignorance is as good as your knowledge.' This was said before the invention of the internet! Isaac Asimov says that for the most

part intellectuals have been relegated to a corner where they have become an object of derision.

Education has been sacrificed at the altar of job training and the result has not been promising.

In 1982 the number of adults that read books for pleasure was 82 per cent. But twenty years later this figure had dropped to 67 per cent and the proportion of 17 year olds that read nothing, unless required by school, doubled between 1984 and 2004.

The Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs commissioned a civic education poll among public school students in 2009 and found that 77 per cent of them did not know that George Washington was the first President of the United States, nor could they name the author of the Declaration of Independence. When the citizenship test was admin-

istered to these students they did not fare any better as only 2.8 per cent was able to pass it.

There were other disturbing revelations in 2009. The National Assessment of Educational Progress found that 68 per cent of public school students in the US did not read with proficiency by the time they had reached the third grade. The US News and World Report states that less than 50 per cent of students mastered college level reading upon graduation from High school. Dumbness has also found itself in the echelons of government. A recent survey found that 74 per cent of Republicans in the US Senate and 53 per cent in the House of Representatives do not accept that climate change

exists or that it has the capacity to affect the planet. These views have come at a time when the US National Academy of Sciences and other international agencies state that the opposite is the case.

In 1983, anti-intellectualism came to the fore in America when a publication sent shockwaves in the community. The document was called 'A Nation at Risk.' It was published during the Reagan administration and it highlighted what some already knew to be the case in education. The document pointed out that in an age when science and technology were going to be in great demand the

attainment. However, would the present generation be able to achieve these levels or even surpass their parents? One analyst concludes that, 'for the first time in the history of our country, the educational skills of one generation will not surpass, will not equal, will not even approach those of their parents.'

The anecdotes in the media are often amusing. When asked to name a country that begins with the letter 'U' some seventh graders replied 'Europe, Utah, or Utopia.' A group of eighth graders were next asked to name the currency used in England. Here the response was 'pesos, the dollar, I don't know, or Queen Elizabeth money!' Another question was: What is the name of America's neighbor, south of the border? The response to this was 'Disney World, Texas, or Montana.'

As we have seen the national sense of frustration was summed up in the publication 'A Nation at Risk.' In order to explain this loss of vision there are at least three considerations that need to be visited. The first concerns our approach to the philosophy of education. American education for several years has been influenced by the ideas of John Dewey and his supporters. The idea here is that education is in the service of social reform and progress. The classroom becomes an agent of social change with teachers and principals as the lead players. Education should grow and develop through its own questions and research.

The second consideration is policy. The classroom as a regimented arena has infiltrated and shaped policy, notably the Common Core Curriculum. This curriculum was seen as the panacea that would fight anti-intellectualism and get students back on track. Progressivism would lead the schools to be centers of

leadership and obedience with students being given the tools for the workforce.

But Common Core has been criticized as being too regimented, as teaching for assessments and for failing to produce well-rounded students. Diane Ravitch, a historian on education says that at first she was neutral on Common Core. But this changed when she saw that Common Core did not fundamentally improve scores. Ravitch concludes, 'I have come to the conclusion that the Common Core standards effort is fundamentally flawed by the process with which they have been foisted upon the nation.'

The third consideration is policy approaches to tertiary education. The mountain of student debts is estimated at \$1trillion. This sum exceeds the GDP of several countries. The spiraling costs to pay for elite colleges has led many to question whether higher education is worth the effort. This is a discussion that will go on but before one thinks of college the basics must be mastered in schools. There is good reason to put good schools with quality programs in run-down neighborhoods in America. It is here that the transformation will begin and where students will master academic instruction and learn to be a total person. We can start by minimizing distractions, stamping out school violence and placing education at the top of the agenda.

The task is for parents, teachers and the school administration to work together to reinforce discipline, effective supervision and instruction and to produce the next generation of literate students.



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What has led to the state of dumbness in America? The former Senator from New York, Daniel Moynihan, explained that dumbness in America is not an overnight phenomenon. It was going on for years and the social media embraced it with the tentacles of a matrix. Moynihan argued that video knocking print off the shelves and formal learning replaced by web surfing became the recipe for a sub-standard education.

In 1982, to the dismay of many Americans, it was stated in official circles that learning in America had failed to meet international standards. What is striking is that the statistics became a wake-up call for the nation. The National Endowment for the Arts reported that in

children in America were ill equipped to meet them.

According to the report, 'a total of 13 per cent of all 17 year-olds in the US were functionally illiterate. Functional illiteracy among minority youths may run as high as 40 per cent.' What was damning about these revelations is that many 17-year olds did not possess higher-order thinking skills and 40 per cent 'could not draw inferences from written material; only one-fifth can write a persuasive essay, and only one third could solve a mathematical problem requiring several steps.'

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The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of the THE WEST INDIAN.