

From the Editor

Integrity and Conscience among the Saber-tooth Tigers

The impact of the economic recession on our field and our lives in general continues. There is increasing evidence that much of this crisis was caused by personal or corporate greed. Dishonesty and self-serving behavior has seemingly permeated our entire society, from the government to religious institutions. As a child I was taught that once we violate a person's trust, it takes ten acts of trustworthiness to make up for it. If we violate trust again, then 100 acts are required, and so forth. There is a lot of truth to this maxim. Unfortunately, the conditions may never arise for the offender to show trustworthiness in the future, thus destroying the integrity of the person or organization forever.

In my own dealings over the past four or so years, I have gone through five automotive repair companies with whom I will never do business again. I have dealt with an improperly prescribed medication, the results of which could have been very grave. I helped an elderly neighbor (that is, more elderly than I) obtain a refund of several hundred dollars for work for which he was duped into thinking that he was responsible. I have received mail from marketing companies that design their letters as though they were part of the federal government. Now that I will soon be eligible for Medicare health insurance, I have received a lot of these mailings. Companies put less product in the same size package and then charge the same or even more for it. Earlier this week I saw a product that I regularly use with a label stating that it contained a "bonus of 25% more" product. I checked into it and found that the "bonus" cost 30% more than the original, smaller quantity, version of the product.

One of the things that I have really valued about my education and experience in technology education is its unique, practical value. This is probably true of everyone in this field. I feel that I have gained a lot of technical knowledge and know-how that I have been able to apply to my everyday life. Perhaps more than any other aspect of my teaching career, I enjoy facilitating the development of this knowledge and ability in my students. I feel empowered by what I know and am able to do and I feel very pleased when I can empower my students as well. One of the outcomes is the ability to know when you are about to be duped in the marketplace.

As time goes on, the technological systems with which we interact become more and more complex. Fewer and fewer people understand them and it opens more doors for deception and the erosion of integrity. Part of our responsibility as technology educators is to teach our students to be able to recognize deceptive practices among those who provide our services and products and to confront those companies and individuals who engage in them. That, it seems to me, is one of the unique contributions to society that should be expected of us and one that we can offer better than any other program in the school. As teachers, we can also serve a broader and more assertive role in the communities in which we live as consumer experts and adult educators. Moreover, consumer education is clearly a part of the *Standards for Technological Literacy* and is reinforced as a goal for technology education in the study reported by Ritz in this issue. It would be interesting, though, to try to find out what the students we serve actually know about consumerism, looking at their “experienced curriculum” as described in the article by Ryan Brown in this issue.

Summer for many educators is a time to catch up on things. For me, this usually involves two activities: doing some pleasure reading and organizing the stack of papers and literature that accumulated over the previous school year. I started with the cleanup part, uncovering one of my favorite books. It was a timely find, for it had direct significance to the major revision I am planning for one of the courses I teach. The book is an oldie, published in 1939, and titled *The Saber-Tooth Curriculum*. The author, J. Abner Peddiwell, is a pseudonym for Harold Benjamin who devoted his career to education, serving in a variety of roles. In fact he may have had some direct effect on our field since he served as Assistant Dean at the University of Minnesota and as Dean at the University of Maryland. The book seemed so pertinent to my present day experiences that I decided to reread it once again. As I read, I was compelled to check the publication date several times to make sure that I was not reading an update of the original volume that was newly published.

Peddiwell describes a curriculum developed in a fictitious paleontological era. It consisted of three courses: fish-grabbing-with-the-bare-hands, woolly-horse-clubbing, and saber-tooth-tiger-scaring-with-fire. As the ancient civilization advanced, there became a time when none of this knowledge and skill was needed, but the curriculum continued unchanged anyway. These subjects, even with their total lack of pertinence, were thought to have taken on “magical power” over the years and thus continued to be the core of the curriculum:

The only subjects which lacked cultural respectability were those which were studied for the practical effect on the behavior of learners. These subjects remained in a suspected and inferior category, therefore, because they did not pretend to have magic power. Thus the only disgrace in the university curriculum was seen to be the disgrace of being practical. (Peddiwell, 1939, p. 85)

After rereading the Saber-tooth, I searched for book online, trying to find a novel that I thought I would enjoy. The vendor with whom I usually do business

presents a list of recommendations for me each time I enter their Website. Among the list of recommendations on this particular occasion was a book titled *Shop class as soulcraft* by Matthew B. Crawford (2009). Trying not to be an impulsive buyer, I read some reviews and quickly decided it was a “must have” since it was written, at least in part, about our field *and* the author was outside of our field – an exciting prospect! So I cast my aspirations in fiction to the wind.

Crawford has an undergraduate degree in physics and a doctorate in political philosophy. For a period in his life he was a manager for a “think tank.” Ironically, he became disenchanted with his work and eventually bought a motorcycle shop. He wrote:

Socially, being the proprietor of a bike shop in a small city gives me a feeling I never had before. I feel that I have a place in society. Whereas ‘think tank’ is an answer that, at best, buys you a few seconds when someone asks what you do and you try to figure out what it is that you in fact do, with ‘motorcycle mechanic’ I get immediate recognition. (p. 27) [editor’s note: “Hmm...”]

He has a deep concern about how the emphasis in education today is increasingly on the preparation of knowledge workers and this emphasis has consequently reduced the opportunities that students have to work with real tools and materials. He stated:

Anyone looking for a good used machine tool should talk to Noel Dempsey, a dealer in Richmond, Virginia. Noel’s bustling warehouse is full of metal lathes, milling machines, and table saws, and it turns out that much of it once resided in schools. Ebay is awash in such equipment, also from schools. Most of this stuff has been kicking around the secondhand market for about fifteen years; it was in the 1990s that shop class started to become a thing of the past, as educators prepared students to become ‘knowledge workers.’

The disappearance of tools from our common education is the first step toward a wider ignorance of the world of artifacts we inhabit. And in fact an engineering culture has developed in recent years in which the object is to ‘hide the works,’ rendering many of the devices that we depend on every day unintelligible to direct inspection. (p. 1)

He stated further that the high level jobs to which we hope our young people will aspire and prepare themselves will inevitably become routinized:

Much of the ‘jobs of the future’ rhetoric surrounding the eagerness to end shop class and get every warm body into college, thence into a cubicle, implicitly assumes that we are heading to a postindustrial economy in which everyone will deal only in abstractions. Yet trafficking in abstractions is not the same as thinking. White-collar professions, too, are subject to routinization and degradation, proceeding by the same logic that hit manual fabrication a hundred years ago: the cognitive elements of the job are appropriated from professionals, instantiated in a system or process, and then handed back to a new class of workers – clerks – who replace the professionals. (p. 44)

Crawford is also concerned about treating students without regard for their individuality and unique interests through:

...the use of drugs to medicate boys, especially, against their natural tendency toward action, the better to 'keep things on track,' as the school nurse says. I taught briefly in a public high school and would have loved to have set up a Ritalin fogger in my classroom, for the sake of order. It is a rare person who is naturally inclined to sit still for sixteen years in school, and then indefinitely at work, yet with the dismantling of high school shop programs this has become the one-size-fits-all norm, even as we go on about 'diversity.' (p. 73)

In Catholic school I learned about the "examination of conscience" whereby you reflected on your transgressions and omissions of responsibility. You also reflected on the good things that you did. After reading these two books, I found myself torn in a dichotomy parallel to that of good and evil, without knowing which is which. It also made me realize once again how grave the responsibilities are for teachers, how different the schools are today than they were when I started teaching, and how much our profession has changed. I also think about how many educational initiatives we have embraced over the years and how much energy and money we put into them. Only a handful had any affect whatsoever in the long term education of the youth we serve. Having been a science teacher for a time as well, I know the same thing is true in other realms of education. Along with some of my colleagues who have expressed the same sentiment over the years, I thought about the integrity of these initiatives. I wondered if they were really only self-serving to advance the careers of the developers, to meet university pressures for acquiring funding and producing publications, to seize an opportunity simply for opportunity's sake, or perhaps even to feed an ego; or did the developers really believe that their work would significantly change our profession for the better? I also wondered about how many very capable individuals in our field have turned their backs on opportunities to contribute through leadership, service, research, and development. I also thought about brilliant projects, like brilliant products, that were never implemented due to the lack of a "marketing plan." Then my thoughts turned to the "curriculum wars" that mark our history, and where the line is between healthy competition and the deterioration of our profession.

I examined my own conscience in this way relative to the endeavors in which I have been involved. I tried to think of these efforts from the perspective of both a producer and a consumer. I also thought about the long-term influence that my projects, including my doctoral dissertation, had on our profession. For the most part, it was a rather disheartening self-examination. At the same time I came to the conclusion that all this sort of work has a hidden result, akin to the notion of the "hidden curriculum." That is, all these efforts toward change bring people together in collaborative discourse, socialization, and the sharing of values and ideas. In the end, these unintended results often become the most significant; they become the planted seeds that yield true, lasting benefits. Just as with the impact that our teaching has on our students, the real legacy of the

work we put into this profession rests in the people we serve and with whom we work.

As I continued to reflect about my personal integrity, my mind was flooded with occasions of poor judgment and irresponsibility, especially regarding the students with whom I had worked over the past 43 years. I wondered what lasting damage my treatment of them might have resulted.

When I do this sort of reflection I inevitably end up thinking about a particular special needs student who was not given any attention whatsoever in another teacher's class. I decided to mentor this boy during the last period of the day, my preparation period, by letting him serve as my "lab maintenance assistant." While he was carefully holding a new cabinet door in precise position, awaiting my installation of the hinge screws, I was called to the main office for some mundane reason. On my return I decided to pick up my mail and then stop by the teachers' room for coffee. After coffee and extended conversations with my colleagues, I returned to my lab and decided to call it quits for the day. As I was leaving, I heard a muffled voice calling my name. I rushed to the storage room in which the cabinets were located and there was my student assistant who exclaimed, "I thought you were never going to come back!" As he removed his hands from the new door, there were perfectly formed silhouettes in perspiration of his hands. He had held the doors just as I had instructed for well over an hour! I can only imagine what impact this might have had him. On the other hand, I beamed in concert with him when he showed his parents the cabinet doors during an open house at the school.

A second scenario that inevitably unfolds when I reflect about integrity is set at a university where I taught very early in my higher education career. The dean made a point of meeting with the faculty in each department in the college at least once a semester. Ahead of one particular meeting, that person had been given a copy of a new brochure, describing what industrial arts (the name at the time) was, the wonderful programs that were offered, and how it provided essential experiences for students. As it turned out, the dean had just completed servicing on a task force that visited 50 schools across the state. During the meeting, the dean expressed great admiration for the brochure, but added that none of what was in the brochure was observed in any of the visited schools. There was no intent of deception on the part of the state organization involved – the brochure simply represented the ideals to which the field aspired, but not the reality. Inadvertently, a significant amount of integrity was lost across the state. Though it may have only been coincidental, the program at the university was eliminated just a few months after that meeting.

Seeing "shop class" on the cover of a modern book caused me to pause and reflect about the disdain that has developed for that word within technology education. Peddiwell would likely embrace the word since it represents viable, practical education. For Crawford, that word embodies the heart of what is missing in the experiences that need to be provided to the students we serve. For many in our field, on the other hand, it characterizes the epitome of what we have worked to move away from for several years now. We have tried to "re-

brand” our field several times over the years and are in that process right now. If only we could do as well now as was done with “shop” in an earlier era!

I am certainly not in favor of using the term “shop class” and it is amazing to me that it is used as often as it still is. After all, William E. Warner proposed that “lab” be used instead of “shop” during the 1930s. (“Lab class” does not make any sense, though, does it?) However, I can relate to Crawford in the sense that after four years of Latin and two years of Greek in high school and no applied courses, I could not wait to enroll in an educational program with an emphasis on application and practice. After reading his book, though, I did remember how flattered I was to be called the “shop teacher.”

Though I will never really know the extent of my influence on my students, good or bad, I can avow with absolute confidence that none was maimed by a Saber-Tooth Tiger. Moreover, neither high-fructose corn syrup nor Ritalin was available back then, either.

JEL

References

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