

Everything We Think About Schooling Is Wrong!

An interview with John Taylor Gatto



Introduction – Consider that hidden forces were inserted into the public education system that prevents it from developing imagination and real critical and creative thinking in most students? What if the game is rigged, like a crooked roulette wheel, so the majority lose rather than gain from the experience.

Concerned people have been trying to reform public education from its inception. One voice has taken this challenge to its final conclusion – put an end to government controlled compulsory schooling as it was designed and is imposed today. Why? Because, as John's latest book, *Weapons of Mass Instruction*, points out, everything we know about schooling is wrong. In quantifiable terms – the more standardized and costly schooling becomes – the less literate and truly educated the population grows. What if this is not a mistake!

“At the start of WWII, millions of men showed up at registration offices to take low-level academic tests before being inducted... Eighteen million were tested and 17,280,000 were judged to have the minimum competence in reading to be a soldier – a 96 percent literacy rate.

WWII was over in 1945. Six years later, another war began in Korea and several million more men were tested for military service. This time 600,000 were rejected. Literacy in the draft pool had mysteriously dropped to 81 percent... This group had more years in school, with more professionally trained teachers, and more scientifically selected textbooks than the WWII men. Yet, it could not read, write, count, speak or think as well as the earlier, less-schooled contingent.

A new American war began in Vietnam in the middle 1960's. By its end in 1973, the number of men found non-inducible by reason of inability to read safety instructions, interpret road signs, decipher orders – the number found illiterate in other words – had reached 27 percent. Vietnam-era young men had been far more intensely schooled than either of the two earlier groups, but now the 4 percent illiteracy of 1941, transmuted into the 19 percent illiteracy rate of 1952, was (in 1973) 27 percent.

By 1940, literacy as a national number stood at 96 percent for whites and 80 percent for blacks. Four of five blacks were literate in spite of all disadvantages.

Yet, six decades later, the Adult Literacy Survey and National Assessment of Educational Progress reported a 40 percent illiteracy rate for blacks – doubling the earlier deficiency – and a 17 percent rate for whites, more than quadrupling it. Yet, the money spent on schooling in real terms had grown 350 percent.

From Weapons of Mass Instruction

This is not a mistake. Rather, as John has extensively documented, this was and is by design.

M: It took you 30 years living inside the system we call school to arrive at the radical conclusion that this massive institution was not designed to develop true potential – but rather to limit, constrain, as you say Dumb Down that potential. Basically you are a whistle blower.

J: It wasn't my intention but that is what happened.

M: The bell rings in a Pavlovian way and we take our children that we dearly love and we put them on this conveyor belt for twelve or more years and don't ask any of the basic questions you raise. Why is it so hard for most of us who have been so deeply conditioned by this system to see that the king has no clothes?

J: They may have an intuition, but parents are involved in making a living and mowing the lawn and walking the dog, burping the baby. There's so many distractions that I think we end up taking what seems to be a perfectly rational gamble because everyone else is taking it.

It's fascinating that you and many other people say that I took a radical stance. I was one of the Founders of the New York State Conservative Party. I was an Officer of the Party for about 20 years until it dawned on me that no one in the Party was conservative. The radical label is mis-applied. I'm not suggesting anything that hasn't been established and documented by long experience in human history. To me that's conservative.

M: Part of your thesis is that the true purpose of compulsory government schooling is conditioning, conformity, rows of chairs, routine, bells. Jerry Mander, author of the Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television, uses the phrase 'form is content.' The form of public schooling is its content.

J: Jerry is one of my heroes.

M: His insights, in my view, have never been equaled. Marshall McLuhan said the same thing about television. The true content of the television experience is the relationship we have to the box, not what is flickering on the screen. This notion that the form of the system, the structure, is that system's primary content, is your underlying thesis.

You are not talking about the math, reading or history. You're talking about the structure being the real content – not learned – but deeply conditioned.

Form is content. We're learning how to conform and part of this conditioning is to not question the structure.

J: The architects of institutional schooling were completely conscious of this. I've encountered some intriguing passages that state openly that habit training and attitude training is imposed by the structure. This is what mass schooling is really all about. These observations were not coming from outsiders or radical sources. They were coming from the very center, Alexander Inglis, around the First World War, wrote a book, it's very, very hard to get, called "*Principles of Secondary Education*". In one section, he lists the purposes of what we call schooling. There's six - everyone is illuminating - and hair raising.

The first is to make people predictable so that the economy can be rationalized. You can do that if people are predictable. Yet, history has demonstrated over and over and over again that we're not. So the very first purpose or goal of institutional schoolings is to make people predictable.

Darwin was a big influence, but it's not the Darwin that is sold in school text books. It's not the fellow curious about nature. It's a fellow absolutely certain that animal trainers and plant breeders had discovered the operational truth of human life.

And that they have supplied, I'm citing from Darwin's "*Descent of Man*" which is about 12 years after *Origins of Species*, and made a much bigger impact, that the overwhelming majority of human biology is fatally corrupted. It cannot be improved by cross-breeding because it's so far gone. And if we cross-breed the mass with the evolutionarily advanced this will drag everyone back into the swamp.

That book probably has caused more damage than any piece of writing in human history. It was immediately adopted by the managerial classes of the planet. You had to find ways to lock up the evolutionarily retarded, to waste their time and set them against one another. And whatever you did, keep them away from the good stuff! There was no evil intended - quite the reverse. They were taking human improvement into their own hands.

In the United States there was a seminar course taught by the President of Indiana University, David Starr Jordan, a legendary name on the West Coast. Jordan called the course *Bionomics*. The idea was to take charge of evolution by reducing the breeding propensities of the inferior.

As Darwin said in *Origin of Species*, only mankind is stupid enough to allow its inferior stock to breed. What Jordan did was to organize a class that would politically and intellectually take charge of this. Who was the President of the University of Indiana?

He turned out to be the first President of Stanford University, the Harvard of the West, a position he held for 30 years.

What we're really talking about is a deliberate and massive retardation of normal human growth processes and the monopolistic assumption of responsibility and decision making so the challenge of reducing inferior breeding can be conferred on a managerial group.

M: I get the impression of creating a pen, herding together the masses, feeding them mediocrity, structuring and conditioning them in ways that insure that they don't cause any trouble, so they can be predicted and controlled.

J: Well said. Let's start five centuries ago when John Calvin, who seemed to me the most influential theologian of the last fifteen hundred years. Calvin says clearly that the damned are many times larger in number than the saved. The ratio is about twenty to one. There are too many damned to overwhelm with force. So you have to cloud their minds and set them into meaningless competitions with one another in ways that will eat up that energy.

Jump from Calvin to a thoroughly secular philosopher in Amsterdam, Benedict Spinoza who published a book in 1670 that had a huge influence on the leadership classes of Europe, the United States and Asia. It's called "*Tractate Religico Politicu.*"

In it he said it was nonsense to think people were damned or evil because there was no supernatural world. He also said there's an enormous disproportion between permanently irrational people who are absolutely dangerous and the people who have good sense. The ratio is about twenty to one.

Spinoza actually says that an institutional school system should be set up as a 'civil religion.' It's a term you find common in early colonial writing because everyone read Spinoza, all over the planet.

He said we need a 'civil religion' for two reasons. One, to eliminate official religion, which he says is completely irrational and dangerous. And two, to bind up the energies of these irrational twenty to one and to destroy their imagination. In all but words said the same thing as Calvin, but Spinoza said it flatly. We have to destroy the imagination because it's only through the imagination that the maximum damage is unleashed. Otherwise people can struggle against the chains, maybe even cause local damage, but they can't do much harm to the fundamental structure because they can't think outside of the box.

Jump from Spinoza in 1670 to Johann Fichte in Northern Germany in 1807, 1808, 1809, where the very first successful institutional schooling in the history of the planet, was established.

Fichte says in his famous Addresses to the German Nation, that the reason Prussia suffered a catastrophic defeat against Napoleon at Jena was because order was turned on its head by ordinary soldiers taking decisions into their hands.

He called for a national system of training that would make it impossible for underlings to imagine any other way to do things. A decade later Prussia had the first institutional form of mass schooling on the planet.

In 1820 we have Darwin saying that people are biologically fixed in classes and there's nothing you can do about it. Every one of these people, in a sense, is saying that what 'we call education' isn't even possible. What we call education is romantic nonsense.

Jump back to Germany, the University of Lipsing in the 1870's, 1880's, 1890's, and we find the most important Psychologist who ever lived. We find a man emerge who is the Father of Behavioral Psychology, Scientific Psychology, Bill Helmvoight, and people from all over the planet, including from the United States, come as disciples to study under Voight.

There's a secondary reason for that, or maybe it's the primary reason. Prussia, Saxony and Hanover, these three little states up at the top of Germany, are the only place in the world where something called a Pd.D. Degree exists. Americans by the thousands came to Germany to get a Pd.D. Degree.

Literally, every college presidency of any significance in the United States, with the single exception of Cornell, is awarded a Prussian Ph.D. Every department head had a Prussian Ph.D. If not you were marginalized. So this tiny military state in Northern Germany finds a way to seed the planet with its mandate that we must have a national system of training that makes it impossible for underlings to imagine any other of doing things, other than the way they're told.

Japan in 1868 translated the Prussian Constitution into Japanese and that's why we get the famous Japanese schooling system. It has nothing to do with Japan's organic history.

Darwin said we were insane to try to invest people with inferior IQ's with positions of responsibility. We're not talking about a fringe intellectual position. This was the dominate map for how to run a society in the early 19th century. Once you know this – you view the form and content of public education differently.

You can still dislike the Dick Cheney's and Rumsfield's of the world however; you quickly see that eliminating these people doesn't work. They will simply be replaced by others who think the same way. This is the leadership point of view. It's come from the great intellectuals of human history, an unbroken stream of them. All the romantic stuff is for the middle class, lower middle class. It's stuff for boobs.

M: You claim to be an instructor of the English Literature. But that isn't what you teach. You don't teach English. You teach school and win awards in doing it. What do you mean when you say you don't teach the subject?

J: The subject is schooling and all the unexamined assumptions schooling imply, such as - to be removed from your family, your neighborhood, your traditions, your church, whatever other source you have and be placed in the hands of total strangers who, after a while, if you keep your eyes open, you come to see are, all from bottom to the top, flunkies. They're all interchangeable. None has any original ideas. This qualifies them as guards, to see that the training is imposed as it was designed. But by whom? Who designed the training?

It's not easy to find out who designed the training. If you're obsessive and I was obsessive because I was pissed off. I was so furious that I'd spent my life hurting children. That anger, quite hot, lasted for ten years. I'm still not un-angry. During that time, by working seven days a week, sixteen hours a day, and with nothing other than this on my mind, I managed to stumble across sources.

For example. In 1915 there was a Congressional Commission called the Walsh Committee that tried to answer the same question. In 1959 there was a second Congressional Committee called the Reese Commission. They discovered that the management of forced institutional schooling was coming from the project offices of a dozen or so private corporate foundations. Now, at least, you have a clue.

The expression common during the Watergate era was 'follow the money.' This is still the best way to begin. Who is actually putting out the money to underwrite this? There were key families who were proud enough of their heritage to have left behind a family record. By looking, not only at the immediate architect of a school plan, but looking at the grandparents, the great grandparents, as far back as you can trace, you can follow the continuation of ideas - like the one we went through a few minutes ago - that jumps from Calvin to Spinoza to Fichte to Darwin to Arthur Jensen.

The idea at bottom is that a utopian society is a worthy goal to spend your time on, especially if you have a lot of free time and a lot of money, and that the bedrock of a utopian society is an absolutely stable social order.

What's being done is a trade of security and stability for liberty. You have to cash in your liberty, your individuality, your freedom to get that. Since people won't willingly do that stability, all the insights about crowd management that have accumulated throughout human history are now put into play in the form of social structures.

M: Schooling.

J: Schooling comes very, very late, with social evolution. We don't have successful forced schooling until the early part of the 19th Century, and then only in this military state in Northern Germany. It takes another 50 years for the idea to spread globally. Suddenly it's everywhere.

But all the other powerful forms were using the same strategies; the army, religions and so on, they're all in existence from the beginning of history.

School is such a devaluation of human experience and human hopes that it took a long time to pull the trick off. Today the stability of the school institution seems permanent, but not because it serves people. It's the largest single part of the economy. It employs more people, gives more career ladders. It's one of the bedrocks of middle class America and preserves all the other institutions.

The development of the critical mind is strictly forbidden in school. You're not allowed to learn how to think critically, period.

M: It must be painful for you personally to see how you unwittingly hurt people, damaged people, contributed to this whole thing.

J: I started to teach without any compulsion to abuse young people. I was in between jobs as an Advertising Copywriter where I expected one day to be the Copy Chief and eventually write, like Scott Fitzgerald, and run around with glamorous ladies. But fortunately for me I had had a militantly intellectual German grandfather who was a printer and I would sit with him while he was hand feeding the press. I was a little boy, and he would hold court on Hegel for instance. I became a dialectical thinker by the time I was eight.

When I began teaching I suddenly realized that I had a hundred and twenty young lives in front of me. The way not to take this responsibility seriously is to fill the board with notes, have the notes copied down, give a test every Friday, prepare for the test every Thursday and to correct the test in class every Monday. The way not to take this responsibility seriously is to intimidate kids with the thought that if they make a mis-step on standardized tests that this has a detrimental effect on their future. If they make too many mis-steps – it's a permanent effect. All that is not taking seriously your responsibility for the lives of these one hundred and twenty young people. Not taking that responsibility seriously transforms you into as relay in the great school mechanism.

But if you say instead, I'm going to hold myself responsible to be useful to these young people, and one way to do that is to allow them, at any moment, to demand from me an explanation for why I'm occupying their time this way. If my explanation isn't compelling it is my responsibility to provide alternatives. Since all those alternatives are, by in large, against the law (not just against school procedure), I realized after doing this just a couple of years that the correct label for what I was doing is – saboteur. I was making the mechanism work less efficiently.

M: You made the observation that the only reason you could have possibly become the Teacher of the Year was by breaking all of the rules that were imposed by the system.

J: I don't think that will ever happen again in New York State. In fact, I've heard that from a State Department of Education person. I won the Teacher of the Year Awards a number of times because I correctly intuited what they would look for. They were looking for visible production - and visible production caught the attention of journalists, television, radio, newspapers.

When I submitted my credentials, I had boxes full of such productions. I wrestled with myself. If they asked me how I got these kids to achieve this way, would I be honest? And I said to myself - yes. I will. They never asked. That won't happen again.

For example, if a kid sets up a business at 13 and makes more than both his parents put together, and gets a page in a daily New York newspaper, and then someone asks, how did you assist this kid, and if I were to reply, I freed him from all attendance requirements for most of the year; I don't think he was here more than 10 to 20 days the whole year, and then I faked his grades on the report card. And that's just one kid. There were dozens and dozens of these examples every year.

M: The system imposes certain boundaries, certain restrictions by simply demanding attendance 12 or more years. Imagine all the 'real life' experiences young people might have during that time. And the money - imagine if all the money that went into salaries, buildings, and books were given to families to invest in these experiences. When you really see what is taking place - you become a saboteur.

J: We're taking our real wealth - our children and their potential - and we're throwing it away. We are burning it. We are smashing it. What the young brain offers in any moment in history is a new way to see things, unquenchable energy that can be beaten down and it will rise back up again. And we're just pitching it out in exchange for this stable orderly society.

"Craig Ventner, the beach bum surfer who shared the laurels for producing the map of the human genome... cut class often to hit the boogie board and only escaped junior high because a teacher changed of his 'F' grades to a 'D' - so the school would be rid of him.

George W. Bush had a 'C' average in high school and a 'C' average in college, but that was a higher 'C' average in high school and college that was earned by Massachusetts senator John Kerry... Al Gore flunked out of his first college and squeaked through his second with a 'C' average. Dick Cheney flunked out too. Legendary progressive Senator Paul Wellstone scored 800 on his combined SATs.

Bill Gates and Paul Allen of Microsoft - no college degrees. Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak of Apple - no college degrees.

Michael Dell is another un-degreed immortal of the computer game, as is Larry Ellison of Oracle.

Ted Turner, founder of CNN, dropped out of college. William Faulkner's high school grades were too horrible to get him into the University of Mississippi. Warren Avis, the man who pioneered auto rentals at airports, decided that college was a waste of time and didn't even apply. Edward Hamilton, the nation's largest independent mail order book dealer, wrote me that the advantage he had was that he hadn't wasted his capital or time on college. Paul Orfalea, the highly intelligent founder of Kinko's was not regarded as very bright by his high school. Lew Wasserman created modern Hollywood with his colossal MCA; he had no college and virtually no seat time in high school.

Warren Buffet started business at the age of 6, selling iced Coca-Cola. By 18 Buffet had the equivalent of \$100,000 in the bank. Then applied to Warton Business School and was turned down.

George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln – someone taught them, to be sure, but they were not products of a school system. Through most of American history kids generally did not go to high school – and yet the unschooled rose to be admirals like Farragut, inventors like Edison, captains of industry like Carnegie and Rockefeller, writers like Melville and Twain and Conrad and even scholars like Margaret Mead.

Consider what society would look like if 65 million trapped school children learning to be consumers were suddenly set to actively imagining themselves to be producers instead of bored consumers?... Isn't that exactly what America needs at this sorry, sterile juncture in our history – not more well-schooled zombies on whose backs the few can ride.

From Weapons of Mass Instruction

M: Imagination is the key. You said that the system prevents individuals from developing the capacity for critical or creative thinking.

J: I can give you a solid rational reason, divorced from the usual demonology, why imagination has to be destroyed. Capitalism is a way of organizing economic activities. It suffers from certain diseases that have been well understood for several hundred years. The most dangerous is something that used to be called over-production, now in the financial markets its called over-capacity. But let's use the term, over-production.

In capitalism if more is produced than consumers purchase, the price can't be maintained. Worse, it becomes difficult to assemble pools of capital because investors get spooked. The easiest way to curtail production is to make most people unproductive.

You do this by removing the imagination that can improve productive process. Do that and you remove the will to have an independent livelihood, by constantly talking, from kindergarten on, about 'good jobs.'

M: How is the structure we call mass- schooling designed to retard imagination?

J: It was understood, as far back as the Roman Collegian, that if you submerge people in a rule-driven existence their imagination, the creative part of them, will naturally atrophy or vanish. There's no room for it to be practiced. And those training procedures designed to retard imagination have been used by armies and churches throughout history.

When we arrive at the 19th Century, German military states - like Prussia - had this worked out to a science. Look at the liberal philosopher Spinoza. He said the way to get rid of imagination was to imbed people in nonsense rules, competitions, fill their minds with inaccurate information and eventually they'll make so many mistakes or be so frustrated they'll simply cede decision making to somebody else. And that, of course, takes place through schooling.

A great breakthrough took place when I stumbled, quite by accident, across a book by a major international historian, Carol Quigley, head of the International Relations Department at Georgetown University. I have a tendency to actually read political speeches published in newspapers. I read them word for word and see if I can get some penetration into the speaker person beyond the rhetoric. And then, in the last or next to last line of Bill Clinton's acceptance speech for the Democratic nomination for President, Dr. Quigley came out of nowhere. Clinton said he wanted to thank Dr. Carol Quigley who had been his mentor at Georgetown, and 'saw the future clearer than anyone else.'

I read obsessively and have since I was 5 years old and never heard the name Carol Quigley. So I went to the New York Public Library which has eleven million volumes and sure enough Quigley was listed. I ordered the book and I was told that the book had been stolen from the collection and it was out of print. I fly around the country constantly so I was in San Francisco, and I went to their library, and the book had been stolen from the collection. I was in Dallas a few days later, the book had been stolen from the collection! I was beginning to smell a rat.

Here was possibly the next President of the United States saying this is a guy knows the future and his book wasn't available. I managed to obtain a copy from the rare book room at a New York University. I read it and the hair stood up on my head.

Quigley, in a 1300 or 1400 page book, brilliantly written, and written only for a scholarly readership, says that not a single major event of the 20th Century hadn't been staged and arranged. The First World War, the Second World War, etc., etc. Staged and arranged by exactly whom? And for what purpose?

It turns out that in the last part of the 19th Century, arising out of Oxford University in England, a small group of very, very influential people decided that the progress of the human race had stopped, and that war and starvation and all these bad things would continue to happen forever unless there was a world global government.

They drew into their orbit Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, the Rothschild's in Europe, and in these high level commissions (think of them as the Aspen or the Bilderberg of their day), decided that no one would willingly surrender their national sovereignty. It would have to be taken from them by trickery.

One of the strategies was to underwrite and subsidize war - everywhere on the planet - because war tends to break down and weaken national sovereignties. And the schemers knew that to eliminate national allegiance you had to eliminate the allegiance of the population to their own government. War was one of the best strategies to do that.

There are a variety of others but one that John D. Rockefeller proposed (and took charge of) was to infiltrate every subversive organization that they could locate anywhere on the planet. Not to destabilize these organizations, but just the reverse. To feed enough resources into the organization that it could survive and it's thought, strategies and plans could be studied without the organization being aware.

M: Globalization describes what you're saying.

J: Absolutely. Look at the price we pay. The chief axe we grind against the Islamic population is that it demands exactly the reverse of a separation of church and state. Any commitment to a source of wisdom other than the political state cannot be accepted in our society - except on Fourth of July. And that includes a commitment to your mother and father, to family, to your children. The state or new world order must constantly weaken these ties.

M: All of this lays behind our deeply conditioned response to compulsory schooling. The bells, confinement, crazy time sequences, age segregation, lack of privacy, and constant surveillance were deliberately designed to prevent critical thinking and promote addiction and dependence.

J: You must have people dependent upon material purchases and consumption to keep a mass production economy running.

Look at the powerful traditions that exist in the human history, the most powerful of which to me, is the historic tradition that comes most predominately out of Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius - that teaches: 'nothing you can buy or no orders you can give are going to make your life better, or bring you happiness.' Do you really want to spread that idea around if you're in business? The dumbing down part is to prevent over-production.

Dumbing down starts with grades and pats on the head. The system is designed to create an unquenchable consumption sequence. Boredom is essential because you don't want people who buy things that actually produce any satisfaction over a long period. Cars, suits, everything has to be disposed with as quickly as possible. Ideally you want to create a throw away economy and that takes a population that is easily bored and childish.

For example, you buy the newest computer. Read Tracy Kidder's "The Soul of a Great Machine". It won't be a year before you begin to hear, not in so many words, that you've made a big mistake because coming down the production pipeline is a better model. It never ends.

You don't reach nirvana in purchases because if you did, the whole economy would collapse. You have to become dissatisfied, bored with everything. Now if you learn to be bored with material things, you'll also be bored soon enough with friends, with mates, with loyalties of any sort. You'll dispense of them. You'll walk away from them. And that's almost the definition of a Proletariat, a term used to identify members of a lower social class, the working class. The proletariat has no firm ground to stand on.

M: How does the conditioning that happens in schools bring about this state of addiction, and boredom, and dependency?

J: You want to get really practical? How is this? You're not allowed to finish anything you start. How often do you have to break the natural sequence of completing a job before starting a new job? These are internal mechanisms of schooling. They weren't thought up by teachers, principals, the superintendents. These strategies have been refined throughout human history as devices that produce certain behavioral results. The overkill part we can't afford much longer is doing it for 12 years. You don't have to do it for 12 years. But they wanted to make sure that there was no chance that this conditioning, boredom and addiction wouldn't stick.

M: Let's look at personnel.

J: God knows school teachers have the hardest jobs that exist on the planet. I'd much rather do menial labor than teaching. But the truth is, it's hard to find a single science teacher in the United States. How's this for throwing it on the gauntlet. Being a science teacher means that the moment they have free time they commit it and their resources to penetrate secrets of nature. Every single one of our so called science teachers are clerks.

If you go around the subject areas the only reasonable exceptions to this are music and art teachers who often turn out to be actually musicians and artists. Having a teaching job allows them to practice. Do you think kids figure this out? Of course they do. So there's this massive disrespect for lies of authority.

Consider the materials. They are neither very accurate nor do they follow the sequences through which people actually learn.

I had dinner a couple of times with John Saxon who invented the Saxon Math Program. He was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force and had flunked Calculus three times. Saxon said to me, I knew I wasn't that dumb. There was something wrong with the way it was being taught. So when Saxon retired he mortgaged his home with his wife's approval and rewrote the Calculus textbook. That was the beginning of the most successful math program that I've ever heard of.

When you hear the adulation for Hymie Escalante, the math teacher in California who took Mexican kids in Garfield High School and raised them to the main talent in California's (including private schools) Advanced Placement Calculus, and the number three calculus proficient school in the United States, you get something of the real story the movie was about.

Escalante used Saxon math. The movie should have been about John Saxon and how in two years kids who never ate off of a tablecloth were the sharpest Calculus minds in the State of California. That's what should have been written, not the guy storming around with a golf cap shouting.

Not to say enthusiasm is a contemptible quality, it's wonderful, but it was Saxon who saw how deliberately the Calculus text had been arranged in order to eliminate almost everybody from competition.

I knew from boyhood that the Bell Curve was a piece of garbage. I knew because my German grandfather pounded in it into me that you can do anything – if you can concentrate. I'm not speaking as a romantic.

What 30 years in the classroom teaching taught me was the differences in human quality are so small that they may as well not exist. You get better results presuming a kid from the Harlem ghetto can do as penetrating work on Hamlet as a Judge's son. You get better results if you don't have all these minute gradations of quality; remediation and Special Ed and so on.

So the personnel are wrong. The texts are wrong. The sequences are wrong. The constant frustration of initiative, it starts in kindergarten, frustration of initiative can't help but end up with people who lack initiative, that want to be told what to do. If you don't tell them what to do they either despair or they become enraged.

M: We talk a lot about Attention Deficit these. Add the deep conditioning you are describing to the impact of television and mass media. It becomes pretty clear what kind of minds are we creating – by design.

J: **Television and school – they do exactly the same thing in slightly different ways - even the wonderful stuff.**

I'm looking at a program on PBS called 'The Red Deer of Scotland' and I'm absolutely enthralled by it. And my wife, who is a Scot, is sitting next to me. I will for the rest of my life think of the Red Deer of Scotland the way that artist imposed on me and I'll never see the Red Deer of Scotland. I think some of the bad effect of this deep conditioning would dissipate if you develop a critical faculty of mind so that I can appreciate that this is one guy's take on Red Deer and not believe for the rest of my life that this is the definitive take on Red Deer.

M: But that requires something schools prevent.

J: Yes. They prevent.

M: Television and school – both being abstractions retard the capacity for that critical examination.

J: Yes. One of my punishments was to be assigned for almost a decade to the worst Harlem type schools, it was an attempt to get rid of me. I wouldn't have conviction in my voice when I tell you that those kids with their debased lives are quite as capable of coming to terms with high level ideas as anybody else, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes – and for many years.

If you don't want to accept what an over aged junior high school teacher is saying, listen to Adam Smith, the philosopher of capitalism. Read "Wealth of Nations". Don't read a textbook telling you what it says, read "Wealth of Nations." You'll see that in the first 15 pages he says that peasant children are quite as capable of sitting at the policy table and making high level decisions as the Duke's children.

Their minds have the ability to deal with serious content, but it is removed by habit training very early. So kids reach a stage where they can't even hold a conversation except with grunts. Because that's how they've been trained.

M: You began *Dumbing Us Down* with the statement that genius is extremely common and natural. What then is the purpose of schooling? We assume that the purpose of schooling is reading and writing. It only takes a hundred hours to transmit these skills if the person is interested and willing to learn. What do we do with the rest of the twelve plus years we spend in the machine, the system? It doesn't add up.

J: It doesn't add up for kids but it does for teachers, principals and a superintendents. It adds up for someone who writes school books, who delivers school books, who prints school books, who sells baloney to the cafeteria. It adds up for a lot of people. It only doesn't add up as a sensible way to add quality to human life.

I won't live to see this, but the first nation that deliberately sets out to un-standardize its population will end up in two or three decades owning the world. Ideas will crackle.

Every one of us has been in a town like Ithaca or Aspen in the evening and people are moving, they're talking animatedly. Everybody has a purpose, an agenda. I think it's a failure of imagination that we can't think, we can't even dream of how we would get along in a world where everybody had an agenda. And yet, people who have had the good fortune to live in one of those places for just a couple of years remember how exhilarating it was. And as Adam Smith says, as soon as you get everyone to the bargaining table, ideas crackle, they build on one another and whole avenues of wealth creation are suggested that never would be thought of otherwise.

M: Imagination - the capacity to create images not present to the sensory systems, is the classic definition. This is the mind's capacity to create and invent. Television undermines this capacity. The collapse of descriptive language undermines this. If you don't use it you lose it. Real education is not knowledge based. Real education is the unfolding of this capacity. I would love for you to help me rephrase this idea of the difference between conditioning/schooling and the unfolding of capacity which is education. The difference between those two are enormous.

J: Any number of social observers have said that death is at the center of a good life. It's only knowing that you're aging and will die relatively soon, that confers that electricity and magic on each moment. So that you want to draw from it everything that you can.

Back in the sixties an anthropologist, Carlos Castaneda, published a series of best sellers, supposedly about his apprenticeship with the Yaqui Indian shaman, Don Juan in Northern Mexico.

The shaman said the key to everything is to always see death sitting on your left shoulder, this hawk or this raven watching you. Then each moment means something.

If there was a pill tomorrow that would let us live two million years, what would anything mean at all?

One of the things I noticed as a little boy was that my grandpa didn't read the sports section. He read obituaries. I just assumed it was because he was counting his own time. But now I read the obituaries obsessively because I see in a short compass the arc of a life and what I look for is the choice points that may have gone in this direction or that direction.

I think we need to find what adds value to a community. First to add value to our self, so whatever our circumstances are, including being in a torture chamber, you have the maximum opportunity for satisfaction there. And second, because we're social animals, we have to add value to the community around us, otherwise we are parasites. You draw value but you don't reciprocate.

I don't think any amount of money or fame can make up for the fact you're not a productive person - not a consuming person - but a productive person. How can you be productive in a world in which everything has been stabilized? What you can do is be recruited by a productive idea. You have to have an imaginative understanding of what people are, what they need, and then you add your own gifts to meet those needs.

I don't think you can live without imagination because then you're reduced to the sensual life, to consuming. And we've all over-eaten, drunk too much, probably had some narcotics here and there and while it's great at the moment, all these things wear out very quickly.

I'm in my middle seventies now, I can tell you I finally reached the point where I'm reluctant to travel, not because I don't want to be amused. But because I have a piece of land, wild land in Upstate New York and I have a big porch in the back of an old barn and I put out hundreds of pounds of deer food and bird food and chipmunk food every week.

I'm surrounded by creatures of different species and they're no longer intimidated in my presence. It's just fascinating. I wake up in the morning now at 6:00 a.m., the first thing I see are hummingbirds. And almost immediately afterwards the Goldfinches. And then red-headed Finches come, and the wild turkeys come, and then the chipmunks start to dash in and grab some of the bird food, and a small herd of deer stick their heads out. It's absolutely magical. I never get tired of it. Some way to be useful is available to everyone.

Buckminster Fuller said, the wealth that graces our lives is everywhere. The conditioning that schooling, television and the corporate-consuming culture creates in our head - that we must have this or that - prevents us from seeing that there is really is enough for everybody. I think we will have to abandon forced schooling to finally realize this – to experience it deeply.

M: Thank you John.