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Straube, Win. (2007). *QGE = A: Quality Generic Education is the Answer*. NY: University Press of America

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The observation has been made, more than once, that everyone feels entitled to an opinion about education because everyone has been to school. Consequently said opinions vary in their quality, sophistication, political complexion and relatedness to the real world.

That there is profound disagreement about the purposes of education further contributes to the cacophonous public debates about the subject. Underpinning much of what is said about education are unarticulated models of the point and purpose of schooling and further education. Egan proposes that three mutually exclusive purposes underlie the arguments that are put, that is, that education should be about (1) the development of the unique individual learner; (2) socialization into existing society, including or especially the demands of its workplaces, or (3) the development of critical faculties that allow the challenging and improvement of existing society. Labaree, in contrast, highlights the division between education conceived of a personal resource and as a public good: Is schooling to increase the life chances of individual students or to contribute to the good of the greater society?

The influence of these various conflicting models of education contributes to the widespread perception that something is 'wrong' with education and that something ought to be done about it. There is no shortage of people willing to step up to the plate with their own 'solutions' to the 'problem', or in the case of Straub's book, his 'answer' to the 'question'.

Straube regards education as a 'good thing' of which there can not be too much, provided the content is carefully controlled, and human beings as 'programmed to learn', unless a variety of difficulties and disasters intervene, a sample of which he catalogues with some relish. The purpose of education, according to Straube, would seem to be the satisfaction of individual desires, aspirations and mobility. However, the meeting of these also contributes to the greater good via

the creation of an educated populace, who would not, for instance, make the mistake of torturing people during a war because they would be familiar with the Geneva Convention (p. 11).

The belief that information will solve all the world's problems is a common one, if somewhat misguided. For Straube, the main problems with education, or access to learning/information, are that it 'costs too much' and that many who wish to obtain an education are prevented from doing so. The solution lies in 'quality generic education' delivered via electronic means.

According to Straube, lack of money, or more correctly money unwisely spent, is not the only reason why there is a crisis of some sort threatening education, however. The new age of education has not dawned because teaching union officials work to protect the 'old ways'. Best to allow students only encounter the very best teachers (how chosen, Straube does not say) via electronic media.

Parents, too, are to blame, for not raising their children properly. In Chapter Three Straube introduces the contention that education is a parlous state chiefly because hedonistic parents are unintentionally producing unwanted children and then neglecting them. Worse than that, they also expect to 'get something for nothing', education included, which seems rather at variance with the original claim that the problem with education is that it is too costly. In general the 'bad guys' the author proposes are the usual set of targets of the stereotypical 'grumpy old conservative': lousy parents, hopeless teachers, sinister unions, profligate public officials, arrogant academics. It is not wise to expect evidence in support of Straub's claims, however.

Straube has little time for traditionally structured educational facilities, that is, schools and classrooms. Everything went wrong once education was consigned to such premises, chiefly, Straube maintains, because putting large numbers of people in the same place at the same time leads to the development of 'herd mentality' and 'regimentation of thought, with all its deadly consequences' (p. 28). The solution, then, is to isolate the students and have them access learning materials by electronic means: DVDs, televisions, computers.

If anything can cut to the conservative distrust and loathing of human beings, especially when people attempt communal solutions to the challenges of existence, then it is this odd and naive prescription for 'fixing' education. Any number of questions spring immediately to mind: if schools close what becomes of the children? Do they wander the streets until the urge to log on to a lecture drives them home, presumably to the uncertain supervision of their 'deadbeat' parents? Who provides the individual assistance needed, especially at the beginnings of mastery of any new skill or body of knowledge, particularly via the accomplished teacher's familiarity with the student and his or her current achievements and learning needs?

Straube is also very keen that his 'quality generic education' avoid at all costs 'ideology', defined, one assumes, as it is by Clifford Geertz: 'I have a social philosophy; you have political opinions; he has an ideology'. To this end the contents of generic education must be only those subjects, or parts of subjects, that are composed entirely of uncontested facts, Chemistry, algebra and languages are 'in', history, however, is 'out' except where 'the facts' are universally agreed-upon. Also forbidden are the parts of psychology where different schools of thought have conflicting opinions or interpretations, which regrettably, although Straube does not know it, is the entire discipline.

Despite Straube's claim that he wants education to teach people how to reason about the world he wants them to have no practice whatsoever at this by denying them any knowledge of the existence of different values or beliefs about or interpretation of any topic whatsoever. Such a narrow vision would be 'ideology' if one of Straube's opponents proposed it but when he proposes it, it is, naturally, an obvious necessity based on a sober evaluation of the state of affairs. He

apparently sees no contradiction between his claims to value democracy and his assertion of the necessity of the stifling of all voices except those with whom he agrees.

The entire book proceeds along the lines described above, with broad and often contradictory claims produced with, despite the several bulky appendices, no regard for the necessity of supporting these with evidence other than appeals to the words of people such as Abraham Lincoln, or homilies based on the author's own childhood or the early experiences of luminaries like Albert Einstein or Thomas Edison. Paradoxically, experience of engaging with differing opinions hones one's ability to construct strong and convincing arguments: avoiding intellectual conflict for the sake of 'staying out of trouble', in Straube's words, leads to an impoverished understanding of the world and difficulty making one's point in a clear and defensible way.

Straube is something of an autodidactic and a very poor, or maybe that is instructive, advertisement for the sort of education he proposes. The book has little to say about the real benefits of distance education but covers a wide range of problems and issues in a superficial way and proposes a simple solution to these complex problems: do away with schooling as we know it and replace the rich and contested diversity of human knowledge taught in regular educational institutions with a bizarrely sanitized and bowdlerized collection of 'no frills' facts stripped of their human meaning and delivered electronically to students isolated from each other, lest they give into 'herd mentality'. I suppose dealing with the complexities of human relationships by doing away with them entirely may appeal to someone ill-at ease with the messy richness of human experience but hopefully the simplistic and unrealistic 'solution' proposed in this book will not appeal to many.

References

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About the Reviewer

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