4th September, 2008

Mr. John Abbott
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Dear John

Enclosed please find my brief appreciation of your wonderful book. It has been a privilege to be asked to review it and I hope you find these few words helpful.

I hope you will not mind my making a couple of scientific corrections. On page 21, positron emission tomography is misspelt. On page 42, the attribution of the selective nature of the immune response to Edelman is incorrect. This idea was first proposed by Niels Jerne and elaborated by Macfarlane Burnet. Furthermore, much as he would love to do so, Edelman has not yet got his second Nobel Prize so the word “first” is superfluous. This section could read as follows: “Twenty years earlier Edelman had gained his Nobel Prize for his work on the immune system. He was amongst the first to embrace the view that immune responses were selective, not instructive. The human body is born with a vast number of specific antibodies…”.

By the way, your picking this area out I thought was absolutely excellent!

Warmest good wishes,

Yours sincerely

G.J.V. Nossal
Overschooled but Undereducated
Society’s failure to understand adolescence

Appreciation
By
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4 September 2008

Having spent a professional lifetime of 54 years in health, I confess to the nagging concern that education is at least of equal importance – if not even more important. From that point of view, the fact that the literature on the theory and practice of education is highly technical and largely impenetrable comes as a great disappointment to a layperson like me. What a joy, then, to find Overschooled but Undereducated, by John Abbott with Heather MacTaggart, which analyses current educational systems and trends within the context of modern evolutionary theory and neurobiological knowledge, in a beguiling and non-threatening way, illustrating key points by accessible examples. The rich pattern of John Abbott’s life and experience in education shines through but never once overwhelms or patronises the reader. So we can learn, imagine, agree or disagree, as if involved in a long and exciting conversation, all the while absorbing historical perspectives and philosophical background almost imperceptibly. The book places special emphasis on the problems of adolescence, but it is so very much more that that – reflections on adolescence meld seamlessly into a broader examination of where we have been in education, where we are going, and how we could do so much better.

The book begins with a reminder about how much learning has changed in the last 200 years with a rise in specialisation and a reduction in “learning by doing”, for example in family farms, businesses or community projects. The lengthening of formal schooling is hardest for adolescents with their inherent streak of rebelliousness. The book then reminds us what a wonder learning should be. “Humans are insatiably curious”, says Abbott, and the brain learns because that is its prime job. What, then, goes wrong in adolescence? Why are so many youngsters switched off by school, feeling disconnected from their family and community? This may be because of too much learning by rote and not enough encouragement of
independent thinking. As a result, teenagers may become “truculent, self-opinionated and openly rebellious”.

Intelligent reform of educational systems must take note of new knowledge concerning the functioning of the human brain. The book presents a wonderful brief overview of evolutionary theory, the origins of language, the varied nature of human intelligence and the inherent plasticity of the brain. Far from being a hard-wired computer, the brain is extraordinarily adaptable, making neuronal connections and undoing them again according to the dictates of sensory experiences and internal reflection. Rapid development makes the first five years of life particularly important. The next profoundly critical period is adolescence when many neural connections are literally torn asunder and new connections are created, coinciding with the time that the adolescent is experimenting and working things out for him or herself. Education must encourage, not thwart, this new assertiveness.

While evolution and genetics are important, so too are nurture and culture. The book presents a brief scholarly overview of the history of culture, concentrating on our Greek, Roman, Christian and eventually British heritage. It gives a detailed picture of the history of the English school system and makes the point that the creation of elite public schools, particularly as they developed in the Victorian era, frustrated the egalitarian expectations of the founders of Elizabethan grammar schools and constituted a powerful force for the perpetuation of a class system. Indeed, argues Abbott, the power of the group of public school headmasters was a major factor in limiting the education of the “lower classes”. Elements of this dilemma persist to the present day. Key turning points and crises in English education are clearly described and the conclusion is reached that the system has largely lost its way. Too much of education is geared to servicing a consumer society – “a curriculum for battery hens” – and this factory model of education ignores the fact that learning must be active and that children learn in different ways and at different rates.

Abbott then develops 15 principles of education which, if followed, would go a long way to remedying the situation. The final chapter sets out a vision to reverse “our overschooled but undereducated society”. The pedagogy must progressively wean the student from dependence on instruction, encourage him/her to think independently, place new and special emphasis on primary education, and enable adolescents to go “beyond their self-imposed limitations, and exceed their parents’ aspirations”.
Right throughout, Abbott makes good use of the analogy of education as a three-legged stool. The legs are the home, the school and the community. Schools must not take over the roles of home and family, or of community. “Children are children first; they are only schoolchildren second”. It is only “when, and if, these three parts come together in equal partnership that a complete education becomes possible”.

The three legs support emotional growth, intellectual growth and inspirational ideas. Part of the current crisis among adolescents comes from time pressures on parents, particularly fathers; there is a lack of inter-generational chatter. Part also derives from a lack of social order and sense of community. Even enthusiastic teachers cannot make up for this. Life seems to be more and more about acquiring things.

But Abbott is convinced that high standards of morality give groups an immense advantage, and this applies to education as much as to anything else.

This remarkable work, so individualistic and peppered with fascinating reminiscences and asides, deserves the widest possible readership. It is at the same time profoundly scholarly and eminently accessible. It is nothing less than a tour de force, and it is a privilege to recommend it unreservedly.