

EXCLUSIVE REPORT ON “THE WORM IN THE BRAIN”

Sensational (re)discovery of pathogen solves riddle regarding change in thinking and communication habits of bureaucrats, educationalists, etc.

Prospects for a quieter Spring term for *Forum* staff were shattered with the interception of yet another “Galactic Intelligence Report” from the Pleiadean agents Netti and Avkon (see September and October 2000 issues of the *Forum*). The deciphering of this report, made possible with state-of-the-art quantum-fractal cryptography, sent psychodynamic shockwaves through *Forum* offices. The Pleiadeans were informing their superiors about the existence of an organism that attacks specific human brain cells, causing victims to alter their speaking, writing and thinking habits – another factor contributing to the decline of human civilization. It would answer a question that had plagued the extraterrestrials during their detailed study of *Homo sapiens*: What drives “eduspeak,” “academese” and “bureaucratese,” with their reliance on jargon, obfuscation and the passive voice? Later portions of the Pleiadean

report acknowledged that the pathogen was first identified by Professor Richard Mitchell of Glassboro (NJ) State College’s Department of English. In *Less Than Words Can Say* (1979), Mitchell referred to the pathogen as the “worm in the brain.” In another provocative book, *Graves of Academe* (1981), Mitchell extended his analysis to show how the “worm” had infected the twentieth-century educationalist establishment, leading to a dramatic departure from logic, reason and common sense, including the invention of terms such as “facilitators,” “learner-centered education,” “performance indicators,” “mission statements” and, more recently, “visioning” and “innovation.”

At this time, unfortunately, there is no vaccine for the eradication of the malady. However, it is rumoured that reading particular works aloud (e.g., Plato’s *Symposium*) for prolonged periods of time seems to put

the “worm” into a kind of dormancy, making it possible for the infected person to experience short periods of clear thinking.

In an effort to raise awareness of this debilitating disease, the *Forum* is pleased to be able to reprint the foreword and first chapter of *Less Than Words Can Say*, where the “worm” is identified. Readers are invited to submit accounts of their own contacts with colleagues who have been infected with the disease. The *Forum* will “sanitize” all reports, respecting the confidentiality of both the authors and the unfortunate subjects.

GRADING WARS

An interview with Harvard professor Harvey C. Mansfield on grade inflation at universities. Reprinted from the *National Review*.

UW PROF WINS OCUFA AWARD

Ron Scoins, of the Faculty of Mathematics, is one of this year’s winners of an OCUFA Teaching Award. Article by Catherine Schryer.

Inside this issue:

Letters to the Editor	2
Less Than Words Can Say	3
Book Review	9
Grading Wars	12
Things You May Not Know	14
OCUFA Teaching Award	15
President’s Message	16

EDITOR'S NOTE

The articles reprinted in this issue share common threads of thought. (My thanks to the colleagues who drew my attention to them.) Richard Mitchell humorously identifies the *doublespeak* or *gobbledygook* and, more important, the associated thinking (or lack thereof) that has firmly rooted itself in government, business and academic institutions. Diane Ravitch's book, *Left Back*, traces the deleterious effects of "progressive" reform movements in American education. The anti-intellectualism associated with these movements paved the way for the nonsense described by Mitchell in *Less Than Words Can Say* and *Graves of Academe*. Finally, Harvard University professor Harvey Mansfield publicly declares that grade inflation at universities – including his own – has been the inevitable consequence of declining standards in primary and secondary education.

As usual, your comments and criticisms are most welcome. The next issue of the *Forum* will appear in September. Happy summer reading! ERV

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I'm afraid that Peter Hoffman misunderstood my meaning in my letter in the March *Forum* about elitism and the Dean of Math's approach to grading. Let's distinguish between the words "elite" and "elitism." I think it's wonderful that the Math Faculty has attracted a talented group of (elite) students. I think it's dreadful that the students' talent is used as an excuse for grade-fixing. Leaving aside the actual group of students in Stanley Lipshitz' class; surely all of us have taught bright "A" students who didn't work very hard in a particular class or who misunderstood some of the course material. Apparently I am expected to grade such students objectively according to the results they actually produce in class, but professors of talented Math students are not. That's elitism. Nor am I impressed by Hoffman's assertions regarding UW Math students' admission into prestigious American graduate schools. One wonders how those universities' graduate officers will feel about transcripts from the University of Waterloo if such grading practices continue.

Jeanne Kay Guelke
Geography

Ken Westhues is not helping the cause at all with his otherwise interesting observations in his letter to the April *Forum* on the so-called "grade-changing" arbitration issue.

Nobody in his or her right mind could ever imagine that the doctrine of "institutional academic freedom" is not alive and well in current American jurisprudence, but it as not appeared before now in Canada.

It does the cause of real academic freedom in this country absolutely no good – indeed it may do it irreparable harm – to insist, as Westhues does, that this noxious, offensive and uniquely American doctrine should apply in Canada as well as in the United States. We are not governed by the decisions of American courts but we surely will be if we do not resist this intrusion with all the force we can muster.

That is what this dispute is really about. Its particular current context – arbitrary administrative grade-changing – is effectively of no consequence at all. Dwelling on it simply obscures the real issue. How long is it going to be before all our so-called friends understand this and accept what has to be done to eliminate the problem?

John Wilson
Political Science

LESS THAN WORDS CAN SAY

by Richard Mitchell

FOREWORD

A colleague sent me a questionnaire. It was about my goals in teaching, and it asked me to assign values to a number of beautiful and inspiring goals. I was told that the goals were pretty widely shared by professors all around the country.

Many years earlier I had returned a similar questionnaire, because the man who sent it had promised, in writing, to “analyze” my “input.” That seemed appropriate, so I put it in. But he didn’t do as he had promised, and I had lost all interest in questionnaires.

This one intrigued me, however, because it was lofty. It spoke of a basic appreciation of the liberal arts, a critical evaluation of society, emotional development, creative capacities, students’ self-understanding, moral character, interpersonal relations and group participation, and general insight into the knowledge of a discipline. Unexceptionable goals, every one. Yet it seemed to me, on reflection, that they were none of my damned business. It seemed possible, even likely, that some of those things might flow from the study of language and literature, which is my damned business, but they also might not. Some very well-read people lack moral character and show no creative capacities at all, to say nothing of self-understanding or a basic appreciation of the liberal arts. So, instead of answering the questionnaire, I paid attention to its language; and I began by asking myself how “interpersonal relations” were different from “relations”. Surely, I thought, our relations with domestic animals and edible plants were not at issue here; why specify them as “interpersonal”? And how else can we “participate” but in groups? I couldn’t answer.

I asked further how a “basic” appreciation was to be distinguished from some other kind of appreciation. I recalled that some of my colleagues were in the business of *teaching* appreciation. It seemed all too possible that they would have specialized their labors, some of them teaching elementary appreciation and others intermediate appreciation, leaving to the most exalted members of the department the senior seminars in advanced appreciation, but even that didn’t help with basic appreciation. It made about as much sense as blue appreciation.

As I mulled this over, my eye fell on the same word in

the covering letter, which said, “We would appreciate having you respond to these items.” Would they, could they, “basically appreciate” having me respond to these items? Yes, I think they could. And what is the appropriate response to an item? Would it be a basic response?

Suddenly I couldn’t understand anything. I noticed, as though for the first time, that the covering letter promised “to complete the goals and objectives aspect of the report.” What is a goals aspect? An objectives aspect? How do you complete an aspect? How seriously could I take a mere aspect, when my mind was beguiled by the possibility of a basic aspect? Even of a basic goals and basic objectives basic aspect?

There must be some minimum allowable dose of inanity beyond which the mind cannot remain reasonable. Irrationality, like buried chemical waste, sooner or later must seep into all the tissues of thought.

After years of fussing about the pathetic, baffled language of students, I realized that it was not in their labored writings that bad language dwelt. *This*, this inane gabble, this was bad language. Evil language. Here was a man taking the public money for the work of his mind and darkening counsel by words without understanding.

Words never fail. We hear them, we read them; they enter into the mind and become part of us for as long as we shall live. Who speaks reason to his fellow men bestows it upon them. Who mouths inanity disorders thought for all who listen. There must be some minimum allowable dose of inanity beyond which the mind cannot remain reasonable. Irrationality, like buried chemical waste, sooner or later must seep into all the tissues of thought.

This man had offered me inanity. I had almost seized it. If I told you that this little book would provide you with general insight into the knowledge of a discipline, would you read on? If so, then you had *better* read on, for you are in danger. People all around you are offering inanity, and you are ready to seize it, like any well-behaved American consumer dutifully swallowing the best

advertised pill. You are, in a certain sense, unconscious.

Language is the medium in which we are conscious. The speechless beasts are aware, but they are not conscious. To be conscious is to "know with" something, and a language of some sort is the device with which we know. More precisely, it is the device with which we *can* know. We don't have to. We can, if we please, speak of general insight into the knowledge of a discipline and forgo knowing.

Consciousness has degrees. We can be wide awake or sound asleep. We can be anesthetized. He is not fully conscious who can speak lightly of such things as basic appreciations and general insights into the knowledge of

a discipline. He wanders in the twilight sleep of knowing where insubstantial words, hazy and disembodied, have fled utterly from things and ideas. His is an attractive world, dreamy and undemanding, a Lotus-land of dozing addicts. They blow a little smoke our way. It smells good. Suddenly and happily we realize that our creative capacities and self-understanding yearn after basic appreciations and general insights. We nod, we drowse, we fall asleep.

I am trying to stay awake.

1. THE WORM IN THE BRAIN

There's an outrageous but entertaining assertion about language and the human brain in Carl Sagan's *Dragons of Eden*. It is possible, Sagan says, to damage the brain in precisely such a way that the victim will lose the ability to understand the passive or to devise prepositional phrases or something like that. No cases are cited, unfortunately – it would be fun to chat with some victim – but the whole idea is attractive, because if it were true it would explain many things. In fact, I can think of no better way to account for something that happened to a friend of mine – and probably to one of yours too.

He was an engaging chap, albeit serious. We did some work together – well, not exactly work, committee stuff – and he used to send me a note whenever there was to be a meeting. Something like this: "Let's meet next Monday at two o'clock, OK?" I was always delighted to read such perfect prose.

Unbeknownst to us all, however, something was happening in that man's brain. Who can say what? Perhaps a sleeping genetic defect was stirring, perhaps some tiny creature had entered in the porches of his ear and was gnawing out a home in his cranium. We'll never know. Whatever it was, it had, little by little, two effects. At one and the same time, he discovered in himself the yearning to be an assistant dean pro tem, and he began to lose the power of his prose. Ordinary opinion, up to now, has always held that one of these things, either one, was the cause of the other. Now we can at last guess the full horror of the truth. *Both* are symptoms of serious trouble in the brain.

Like one of these Poe characters whose friends are all doomed, I watched, helpless, the inexorable progress of the disease. Gradually but inevitably my friend was being

eaten from within. In the same week that saw his application for the newly created post of assistant dean pro tem, he sent me the following message: "This is to inform you that there'll be a meeting next Monday at 2:00." Even worse, much worse, was to come.

A week or so later it was noised about that he would indeed take up next semester a new career as a high-ranking assistant dean pro tem. I was actually writing him a note of congratulation when the campus mail brought me what was to be his last announcement of a meeting of our committee. Hereafter he would be flying fatter fish, but he wanted to finish the business at hand. His note read: "Please be informed that the Committee on Memorial Plaques will meet on Monday at 2:00."

I walked slowly to the window, his note in my hand, and stared for a while at the quad. The oak trees there had been decimated not long before by a leak in an underground gas line. The seeping poison had killed their very roots, but they had at least ended up as free firewood for the faculty. Pangloss might have been right, after all, and, calamity that it was, this latest message spared me the trouble of writing the congratulatory note and even afforded me a glimpse of a remarkably attractive young lady straying dryad-fashion through the surviving oaks. Things balance out.

You would think, wouldn't you, that the worm or whatever had at last done its work, that the poor fellow's Hydification was complete and his destruction assured. No. It is a happy mercy that most of us cannot begin to imagine the full horror of these ravaging disorders. To this day that man still sends out little announcements and memos about this and that. They begin like this: "You are hereby informed . . ." Of what, I cannot say, since a

combination of delicacy and my respect for his memory forbid that I read further.

It's always a mistake to forget William of Occam and his razor. Look first for the simplest explanation that will handle the facts. I had always thought that perfectly normal human beings turned into bureaucrats and administrators and came to learn the language of that tribe through some exceedingly complicated combination of nature and nurture, through imitative osmosis and some flaw of character caused by inappropriate weaning. Piffle. These psychologists have captured our minds and led us into needless deviousness. The razor cuts to the heart of things and reveals the worm in the brain.

Admittedly, that may be a slight oversimplification. It may be that the decay of language and the desire to administrate are not merely concomitant symptoms of

The next step is not taken until you learn to see a world in which worms are eaten and decisions made and *all* responsible agency has disappeared. Now you are ready to be an administrator.

one and the same disease, but that *one* is a symptom and the other a symptom of the symptom. Let's imagine what deans, who like to imitate government functionaries, who, in their turn, like to imitate businessmen, who themselves seem to like to imitate show-business types, would call a "scenario."

There you sit, minding your own business and hurting no man. All at once, quite insensibly, the *thing* creeps into your brain. It might end up in the storage shelves of the subjunctive or the switchboard of the nonrestrictive clauses, of course, but in your case it heads for the cozy nook where the active and passive voices are balanced and adjusted. There it settles in and nibbles a bit here and a bit there. In our present state of knowledge, still dim, we have to guess that the active voice is tastier than the passive, since the destruction of the latter is very rare but of the former all too common.

So there you are with your active verbs being gnawed away. Little by little and only occasionally at first, you start saying things like: "I am told that . . ." and "This letter is being written because . . ." This habit has subtle effects. For one thing, since passives always require more words than actives, anything you may happen to write is longer than it would have been before the attack of the worm. You begin to suspect that you have a lot to say after all and that it's probably rather important. The suspicion is all the stronger because what you write has

begun to sound – well, sort of "official." "Hmm," you say to yourself, "Fate may have cast my lot a bit below my proper station," or, more likely, "Hmm. My lot may have been cast by Fate a bit below my proper station."

Furthermore, the very way you consider the world, or the very way in which the world is considered by you, is subtly altered. You used to see a world in which birds ate worms and men made decisions. Now it looks more like a world in which worms are eaten by birds and decisions are made by men. It's almost a world in which victims are put forward as "doers" responsible for whatever may befall them and actions are almost unrelated to those who perform them. But only almost. The next step is not taken until you learn to see a world in which worms are eaten and decisions made and *all* responsible agency has disappeared. Now you are ready to be an administrator.

This is a condition necessary to successful administration of any sort and in any calling. Letters are written, reports are prepared, decisions made, actions taken, and consequences suffered. These things happen in the world where agents and doers, the responsible parties around whose throats we like our hands to be gotten, first retreat to the remoter portions of prepositional phrases and ultimately disappear entirely. A too-frequent use of the passive is not just a stylistic quirk; it is the outward and visible sign of a certain weltanschauung.

And now that it is your weltanschauung (remember the worm has been gnawing all this time), you discover that you are suited to the life of the administrator. You'll fit right in.

Therefore, we may say that it is not the worm in the skull that causes deans and managers and vice presidents, at least not directly. The worm merely causes the atrophy of the active and the compensatory dominance of the passive. (Through a similar compensatory mechanism, three-legged dogs manage to walk, and the language of the typical administrator is not very different from the gait of the three-legged dog, come to think of it.) The dominance of the passive causes in the victim an alteration of philosophy, which alteration is itself the thing that both beckons him to and suits him for the work of administration. And there you have it. Thanks to Carl Sagan and a little help from William of Occam, we understand how administrators come to be.

You may want to object that a whole view of the world and its meanings can hardly be importantly altered by a silly grammatical form. If so, you're just not thinking. Grammatical forms are *exactly* the things that make us understand the world the way we understand it. To understand the world, we make propositions about it, and those propositions are both formed and limited by the grammar of the language in which we propose.

To see how this works, let's imagine an extreme case. Suppose there *is* after all a place in the brain that controls the making and understanding of prepositional phrases. Suppose that Doctor Fu Manchu has let loose in the world the virus that eats that very place, so that in widening circles from Wimbledon mankind loses the power to make and understand prepositional phrases. Now the virus has gotten you, and to you prepositional phrases no longer make sense. You can't read them, you can't write them, you can't utter them, and when you hear them you can only ask "What?" Try it. Go read something, or look out the window and describe what you see. Tell the story of your day. Wait. . . you can't exactly do that . . . tell, instead, your day-story. Recite how you went working . . . how morning you went . . . no . . . morning not you . . . morning went . . . how you morning went . . . The rest will be silence.

Only through unspeakable exertion and even ad hoc invention of new grammatical arrangements can we get along at all without the prepositional phrase, as trivial as that little thing seems to be. It's more than that. Should we lose prepositional phrases, the loss of a certain arrangement of words would be only the visible sign of a stupendous unseen disorder. We would in fact have lost *prepositionalism*, so to speak, the whole concept of the kind of relationship that is signaled by the prepositional phrase. We'd probably be totally incapacitated.

Try now to imagine the history of mankind without the prepositional phrase, or, if you're tired of that, the relative clause or the distinction between subject and object. It would be absurd to think that lacking those and other such things the appearance and growth of human culture would have been merely hindered. It would have been impossible. *Everything* that we have done would have been simply impossible. The world out there is made of its own stuff, but the world that we can understand and manipulate and predict is made of discourse, and discourse is ruled by grammar. Without even so elementary a device as the prepositional phrase we'd be wandering around in herds right now, but we wouldn't know how to name what we were doing.

We're inclined to think of things like prepositional phrases as though they were optional extras in a language, something like whitewall tires. This is because we don't spend a lot of time-dwelling on them except when we study a language not our own. We study German, and here comes a lesson on the prepositional phrase. Great, now we can *add* something to our German. That's the metaphor in our heads; we think – there *is* German, it exists, and when you get good at it you can add on the fancy stuff like prepositional phrases. All we have to do is memorize the prepositions and remember

which ones take the dative and which ones take the accusative and which ones sometimes take the one and sometimes the other and when and why and which ones are the exceptions. Suddenly it becomes depressing. How about we forget the whole thing and settle for your stripped-down basic model German without any of the fancy stuff? If you do that, of course, you'll never find the *Bahnhof*. You'll be stymied in Stuttgart.

Like prepositional phrases, certain structural arrangements in English are much more important than the small bones of grammar in its most technical sense. It really wouldn't matter much if we started dropping the *s* from our plurals. Lots of words get along without it anyway, and in most cases context would be enough to indicate number. Even the distinction between singular and plural verb forms is just as much a polite convention as an essential element of meaning. But the structures, things like passives and prepositional phrases, constitute, among other things, an implicit system of moral philosophy, a view of the world and its presumed meanings, and their misuse therefore often betrays an attitude or value that the user might like to disavow.

Here's an example from the works of a lady who may also have a worm in her brain. She is "the chair" of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. It's very short and seems, to those willing to overlook a "small" grammatical flaw, almost too trivial to be worthy of comment. She writes: "Instead of accepting charges indiscriminately and giving them docket numbers, charging parties are counseled immediately."

"Charging parties" are probably faster than landing parties and larger than raiding parties, but no matter. She means, probably, people who are bringing charges of some sort, but there are many kinds of prose in which people become parties. It's not really meant to sound convivial, though: it's meant to sound "legal." What's important is that the structure of her sentence leads us to expect that the people (or parties) named first after that comma will also be the people (or parties) responsible for doing the "accepting." We expect something like: "Instead of doing *that*, we now do this." That's not because of some *rule*; it's just the way English works. It both reflects and generates the way the mind does its business in English. We, the readers, are disappointed and confused because somebody who ought to have shown up in this sentence has in fact not appeared. What has become of the *accepting* parties? Are they hanging around the water cooler? Do they refuse to accept? Are they at least hoping, that no one will remember that they are *supposed* to accept? We can guess, of course, that they are the same people who make up the counseling parties, who have also disappeared into a little passive. It's as though we went charging down to the EEOC and

found them all out to lunch.

Well, that could have been a slip of the mind, the mind of the chair, of course, but later we read: “Instead of dealing with charging parties and respondents through formalistic legal paper, the parties are called together within a few weeks. . .”

It’s the same arrangement. Who does that dealing, or, since that’s what they did before the “instead,” who did that dealing through “formalistic” paper? Wouldn’t they be the same parties who ought to do the calling together? Where have they all gone?

A schoolteacher would call those things examples of dangling modifiers and provide some rules about them, but that’s not important. What’s important is that those forms are evocations of that imagined world in which responsible agency is hardly ever visible, much to the comfort of responsible agency. Since that is the nature of the world already suggested by the passive voice, you would expect that this writer, or chair, would be addicted to the passive. You’d be right. Here are the bare skeletons

In a small child these would be mistakes; in a chair they are accidental revelations of a condition in the mind.

of a few consecutive sentences:

. . . staff is assigned . . .
. . . cases are moved . . .
. . . parties are contacted . . .
. . . files are grouped . . . and prioritized . . .
. . . steps are delineated . . . and time frames established . . .
. . . discussions are encouraged . . .

You have to wonder how much of a discussion you could possibly have with these people. They’re never around.

Admittedly, it does these bureaucrats some credit that in their hearts they are ashamed to say that they actually do those things that they do. After all, who would want to tell the world that he, himself, in his very flesh, goes around grouping and prioritizing?

The dangling modifiers go well with the passives, and, in suggesting the nature of the world as seen by bureaucrats, they even add something new. The passives are sort of neutral, verbal shoulder-shrugs – these things happen – what can I tell you? The dangles go the next obvious and ominous step and suggest subtly that those charging parties have caused a heap of trouble and really ought to

be handed the job of sorting things out for themselves, which, grammatically, is exactly what happens. In the first example the people who do the accepting and the counseling ought to appear right after the comma, but they don’t. In the second, the people who do the dealing and the calling ought to appear right after the comma, but they don’t. In both cases the people who do appear are the clients on whose behalf someone is supposed to accept, counsel, deal, and call. Does that mean something about the way in which those clients are regarded by this agency? They seem to have been put in some kind of grammatical double jeopardy, which is probably unconstitutional.

The poor lady, or chair, has inadvertently said what she probably meant. Working for the government would be so pleasant if it weren’t for those pesky citizens. A waspish psychiatrist might observe that she has taken those charging parties and has “put them in their place” with a twist of grammar, thus unconsciously expressing her wish that they ought to be responsible for all the tedious labor their charges will cost her and her friends. She herself, along with the whole blooming EEOC, has withdrawn behind a curtain of cloudy English from the clash of charging parties on the darkling plain. “Ach so, sehr interessant, nicht wahr, zat ze patzient ist immer py ze Wort ‘inshtead’ gonvused. Es gibt, vielleicht, a broplem of, how you zay, Inshteadness.” And indeed, the result of the dangling modifiers is to put the charging parties forth *instead* of someone else, as though the word had been chosen to stand out in front of the sentence as a symbol of the latent meaning.

Surely this lady, or chair, is an educated person, or chair, perfectly able to see and fix dangling modifiers of the sort they used to deal with in the early grades. After all, she has been hired as a chair, and for such a position we can assume some pretty high standards and stringent requirements. All right, so she doesn’t know the difference between “formal” and “formalistic” – big deal. When such a high-ranking official of our government apparatus makes a mistake in structure, and habitually at that, it’s not much to the point to underline it and put an exclamation mark in the margin. In a small child these would be mistakes; in a chair they are accidental revelations of a condition in the mind. To put the name of the thing modified as close as possible to the modifier is not a “rule” of English; it is a sign of something the mind does in English. When the English doesn’t do that thing, it’s because the mind hasn’t done it.

It would be fatuous for us to say that we don’t understand those sentences because of the disappearance of the people who are supposed to do all those things. It is a schoolteacher’s cheap trick to say that if you don’t get your grammar right people won’t understand you. It’s almost impossible to mangle grammar to that point where

you won't be understood. We understand those sentences. In fact, we understand them better than the writer; we understand both what she thought she was saying and something else that she didn't think she was saying.

Many readers, of course, would "understand" those sentences without even thinking of the problem they present, and they might think these comments pedantic and contentious. Oh, come on, what's all the fuss? A couple of little mistakes. What does it matter? We all know what she means, don't we?

Such objections come from the erroneous idea that the point of language is merely to communicate, "to get your ideas across," whatever that means. Furthermore, such objectors may think that they are defending a hardworking and well-meaning chair, but she is little likely to be grateful for their partisanship if she figures out what it means. They say, in effect, that her little mistakes are just that, little mistakes rather than inadvertent and revealing slips of the mind. In the latter case, however, we can conclude that she is merely a typical bureaucrat with an appropriately managerial twist in the brain; in the former we would simply have to conclude that she is not well enough educated to be allowed to write public documents. Which of these conclusions do you suppose she would prefer? It seems that we must choose one or the other. Those are either mistakes made in ignorance or mistakes made in something other than ignorance.

The mind, thinking in English, does indubitably push modifiers and things modified as close together as possible. Can there really be a place in the brain where that happens, a function that might be damaged or dulled? It doesn't matter, of course, because there is surely a "place" in the mind analogous to the imagined place in the brain.

Whether by worms or world-views, it does seem sometimes to be invaded and eaten away. The malfunctions we can see in this chair and in my erstwhile friend, now an assistant dean pro tem, are small inklings of a whole galaxy of disorders that has coalesced out of the complicated history of language, of our language in

particular, and out of the political history of language in general.

* * * * *

Richard Mitchell is Professor of English at Rowan University (formerly Glassboro State College) in Glassboro, New Jersey, USA. He was the editor and publisher of the controversial monthly publication *The Underground Grammarian* and is the author of a number of provocative books, including *Less Than Words Can Say*, *The Graves of Academe*, *The Leaning Tower of Babel* and *Gift of Fire*.

We thank Prof. Mitchell for permission to reprint the above sections from *Less Than Words Can Say*. Prof. Mitchell's books and articles are now available *gratis* from an authorized WWW site dedicated to his works:

<http://sourcetext.com/grammarian/>.

He has also given permission to copy – and even plagiarize – his articles.

For further reading:

1. William Lutz, *Doublespeak*, HarperPerennial, 1989.
2. William Lutz, *The New Doublespeak*, HarperPerennial, 1996.

FAUW Office

Room 4002, Mathematics & Computer Building

Phone: 888-4567, ext. 3787

Fax: 888-4307

E-mail: facassoc@uwaterloo.ca

FAUW Website

<http://www.ufacass.uwaterloo.ca>

BOOK REVIEW

by Philip J. Davis

Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms. By Diane Ravitch, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000, 555 pages, \$30.00.

"The only trouble with progress is that it goes forward and not backward." Oscar Wilde

Reading, writing, and arithmetic were once the three mainstays of elementary education. But who needs reading in a culture that is increasingly iconographic and aural? Who needs writing (or even printing) when everyone has a laptop? Who needs spelling when spelling comes free with all word processors? Who needs arithmetic when calculators are built into everything in today's chipified world? There is hardly an intellectual discipline, a topic for discussion, or an art or a craft, old or new, that, when proposed for a curriculum, has not been trashed.

Diane Ravitch has written a new book that presents a substantial and well-documented history of American education in the past century, with its associated enthusiasms and trashing. She has been a professor of education at Teachers College (Columbia University) and New York University, and is currently associated with the Brookings Institution. To some, Ravitch is the voice of common sense and rationality; to others, she is a conservative elitist only slightly to the left of Genghis Khan.

During the period under consideration (from 1890 to roughly the present day), I would characterize American education in six words: constant complaint, constant change, and constant controversy. Ravitch describes the changes in terms of a variety of enthusiasms or idealistic movements; and her conclusion, which she could also have placed up front as an epigraph, is that

if there is a lesson to be learned from the river of ink that was spilled in the education disputes of the twentieth century, it is that anything in education that is labeled a 'movement' should be avoided like the plague.

The primary purpose of her narrative is to show how we got to where we are now so that we can find a way to provide a proper education to the current generation of children, who

swim in a sea of images shaped by the popular

culture, electronic media and commercial advertising . . . [in which] everything becomes trivia packaged to fit the terms of celebrity and sensationalism.

The secondary purpose, largely historical, is to show how "progressive education" has fallen from grace over the years and is now a terrible mistake. The centerpiece – or perhaps more appropriately, the production number – of Ravitch's book is the chapter entitled "The Great Meltdown." Here we are presented with the history – in micro-Gibbon fashion – of the Decline and Fall of the Progressive Educational Movement. A partial characterization of progressive education might state that it

sought to make the schools more practical and realistic. It sought to introduce humane methods of teaching, recognition that students learn in different ways, and attention to the health of children. It sought to commit the schools more to social welfare than to academic studies.

Ravitch asserts that "by the end of WW II, progressivism was the reigning ideology of American education"; by the 1950s,

the public schools had become agencies for socializing students, teaching them proper attitudes and behaviors and encouraging conformity to the norms of social life and the workplace. [My italics.]

What are the things that Ravitch abhors? Her three major bugaboos are:

- The "progressive belief that the schools had the power and the responsibility to reconstruct society."
- "The century-long effort to diminish the intellectual purposes of the school."
- The child-centered movements of the 1920s and later that "tried to eliminate an orderly curriculum and external standards and to make schools as much like 'living' as possible, free of lessons, tests, marks, competition, textbooks and lectures."

Other Ravitch aversions: large schools, as advocated and promoted by James B. Conant (one-time president of Harvard); history converted into social studies.

Progressivism, far from being a monolithic doctrine, harbored many submovements. Among them were the vocational education movement and the mental hygiene movement, the “self-esteem movement,” the “liberation movement.” Perhaps the most prominent among them was the life adjustment movement. “Basic living” courses, “common learning” courses became the order of the day. Courses that taught students “how to find a job, how to become popular and get along with the opposite sex,” garnered both praise and derision. Satirizations and parodies flew back and forth across the doctrinal aisle.

From its birth, progressivism met with constant criticism, and opposition both from conservative educators and from parents and politicians. In 1955 Rudolf Flesch’s *Why Johnny Can’t Read* made the best-seller lists, and concerned parents shuddered. In that same year, the Progressive Education Association folded, having “expired from intellectual exhaustion.”

Who among the dozens of educators mentioned are Ravitch’s heroes? John Dewey? A.N. Whitehead? Think again! Her heroes are three individuals unknown to most of us in the math business: William T. Harris, William C. Bagley, and Isaac L. Kandel, “men whose ideas were balanced and sound, if not often heeded.” (Years ago I met Kandel – a professor at Teachers College – and I would add: conservative.)

With regard to mathematics, once an honored part of a classical curriculum, Ravitch says that the progressive movement turned it into a minor option.

In my own days as a (naïve) student, I was totally unaware of the existence of the turbulent and muddy waters of educational theorizing. In my 1-12 years (no K for me), the only discussion involving teaching I ever heard concerned whether aspiring teachers in my native city had to buy their jobs from the politicians on the School Committee. In later years, still fairly ignorant, I began to hear of “progressive” education. My initial assessment of this movement was that it was the cat’s whiskers (= cool). I therefore find Ravitch’s description and discussion of the various movements that have “plagued” education tremendously informative. I was not aware, for example, that by 1942 the movement had become (in I.L. Kandel’s view) strongly anti-intellectual.

Let me now turn more directly to mathematics education. Although Ravitch was assistant secretary of education under President Bush père, her book hardly mentions our present concerns, such as charter schools, vouchers, or student and teacher testing. Nor does it get into the problems and controversies of the computer age, with its mathematical software that is said to make drill of the traditional sort obsolete and drill of a computer sort a necessity of life. Nor does it get into multimedia

instruction or distance learning.

In the three pages devoted to the rise and fall of the 1989 standards of the NCTM (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics), Ravitch writes:

The NCTM lost the public relations battle when it de-emphasized basic skills; once that was communicated to the public, its other strategies, no matter how worthy, sounded like pedagogic jargon. Moreover the standards were . . . a way of teaching, rather than what most people would recognize as standards.

Critics on the other side objected to universal standards, preferring to have available a variety of curricula, corresponding to a variety of talents and interests.

The NCTM has now put out a new version (*Principles and Standards for School Mathematics*, Reston, Virginia, 2000). Examination of the extent to which this edition has overcome criticism of the earlier version would require a separate article.

Over the years, I have witnessed a number of mathematical movements, major and minor, elementary and advanced, driven by enthusiasts who reacted with religious fervor to new developments, new insights and possibilities. There was the New Math (late ‘50s). Then, in 1973, NYU mathematician and historian Morris

Advocates of the educational enthusiasms at the cutting edge of modern mathematics seem to be researchers dreaming of an education they think they should have had when they were students. These movements have displayed energy, intelligence, knowledge, but not always wisdom.

Kline’s *Why Johnny Can’t Add*, together with much teacher and parental opposition and dropping test scores, dealt the coup de grâce to the movement. Today, there is the New New Math, sometimes called Fuzzy Math by its opponents, which has given rise to the current “Math Wars.”

There was the bourbakiste movement. There was the R.L. Moore style of teaching – a method that today, and in a context much wider than topology, is called “constructivism.” There was the nonstandard analysis movement for teaching elementary calculus. Its stock rose a bit before the movement collapsed from inner complexity and scant necessity. There have been math

curricula designed toward certain special goals, as though these goals were the be-all and the end-all of mathematical theory and wisdom: e.g., the spectral theory of operators, catastrophe theory, and fractals. Advocates of the educational enthusiasms at the cutting edge of modern mathematics seem to be researchers dreaming of an education they think they should have had when they were students. These movements have displayed energy, intelligence, knowledge, but not always wisdom. They have absorbed vast amounts of public money and have occasionally created considerable public

I, too, have had my personal enthusiasms. In the days of the IBM 650, run with punched cards, I was one of the first to teach both a “computer calculus” (to considerable faculty resistance) and a “computer art” course.

So what does Ravitch want? That’s not entirely clear. A liberal arts education for all, certainly, stressing intellectual skills and accountability. She wants students to be taught

science, history, and the principles of self-government, great works of literature and art, [in a] conscious effort to build shared values and ideals.

Unless I have it all wrong, Ravitch dreams of the education she received as a girl in Houston, Texas. But what specific topics and manner of instruction will lead to these goals? She doesn’t really declare her hand. As a historian, she doesn’t have to. She comes closest in her treatment of the whole-language and reading controversy. In her comments on teaching reading, she implies that anyone with a bit of sense will use a variety of methods. I agree with her there, and I would go beyond reading.

So what do I want? I am moderately conservative. I find some good in each of the movements and enthusiasms. Each is akin to one dish in a large salad bar of education. Paralleling the information on the back of a cereal box, we might look at a given curriculum as composed of a

hundred basic ingredients. The problem is to decide what the recommended daily amounts are and for which students they apply. I do not advocate teaching only what is relevant today or what is conjectured to be relevant tomorrow. I had woodworking in grammar school and thirty years later found in cabinetry a relaxing and satisfying hobby.

I am an elitist in that I consider deeper math appropriate only for those who display innate skills (dirty terminology?), and would recommend less math for J.Q. Student than is suggested by the NCTM’s Principles and Standards. I wish there were informed teachers who could put together their own mathematical menus, relying much less on what the publishers of texts dish out on the basis of these standards.

Though I am all for computers in education, I am worried by the hell-bent-for-leather enthusiasm of those who would bring in the computer and multimedia with hurricane force. Like Ravitch and Talleyrand, I am suspicious of “too much zeal.” What I also want – and this is not core material – is for students to acquire an appreciation of the role that mathematics plays in today’s highly mathematized civilization – what it does for us and what it does to us.

Philip J. Davis, professor emeritus of applied mathematics at Brown University, is an independent writer, scholar, and lecturer. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and can be reached at philip_davis@brown.edu. The Forum thanks both the author and SIAM News for permission to reprint the article.

FORUM EDITORIAL BOARD

*Edward Vrscaj, Applied Mathematics, Editor
Andrew Hunt, History*

*Paul Malone, Germanic & Slavic Languages & Literature
Jeffrey Shallit, Computer Science*

*David Williams, Optometry
Catherine Schryer, English, ex officio*

Pat Moore, Faculty Association Office, Production

GRADING WARS

An interview with Harvard professor Harvey C. Mansfield

by Roman Martinez

Professor Harvey C. Mansfield is the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Government at Harvard University. An eminent political philosopher, he has long been an outspoken critic of political correctness and declining standards, both at Harvard and in American education more generally. On campus, he is notorious for being a tough grader – students have nicknamed him “Harvey C-minus Mansfield.” Recently, however, he has attracted attention for his new grading system, currently being implemented for the first time in his course “The History of Modern Political Philosophy.” Mansfield’s latest book is a new translation of Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America.

National Review Editor’s note: Mr. Martinez, a former National Review summer assistant, is a student of Mansfield’s.

Roman Martinez: What exactly is your new grading policy?

Harvey Mansfield: The new policy is to give every student two grades. One is the official, more or less meaningless, inflated grade, and the other is our – I say “our” because I have grading assistants in my course – our judgment as to what they really deserve.

Martinez: What will the first of these two grades be based on?

Mansfield: The first grade – the inflated grade – will be based on the present Harvard distribution of grades for the most recent year which shows about 25 percent A’s, about 26 percent A-minus, so 51 percent A and A-minus. The top two grades are a majority of the grades given to all Harvard undergraduates. Then, 22 percent B-plus, 16 percent B, and so on down.

Martinez: What about the argument that Harvard students are special, that by making it here they have distinguished themselves relative to their peers, and therefore deserve high grades?

Mansfield: I think the students here are all special, but that therefore they deserve to be graded by a major-league standard. They’re not in the pony league anymore, they’re in the big league, and should be graded in comparison to other Harvard students. We should stop

giving our students the same grades they used to get in high school. They’re not in high school anymore.

Martinez: When you mentioned this policy to your class, you said that the inflated grade would be the “ironic” grade. What did you mean by that?

Mansfield: Ironic means “I don’t fully mean it.” So, it’s a kind of lie. It’s a conformity to the prevailing practice, in order to stop having to punish my own students.

Martinez: Is that the main reason behind the new policy – to stop punishing your students?

Mansfield: Yes. And also because in my own mind, it seemed to me that I was violating my own conscience and giving grades higher than I wanted to give.

Martinez: What do you think is driving grade inflation in American education today?

Mansfield: What’s behind it I think is the evil notion of self-esteem in American education. You see it in higher education as well as in high-school and elementary education, where it’s attracted more attention. But in higher education it’s there, and it’s just as powerful. It says that the end of education is to make a student feel good about himself, or herself, and to make him feel confident and feel empowered. And this is at the cost of applying strict standards of judgment about how well that student has done. So it always leads – it inevitably leads – to the relaxation of academic standards.

Martinez: In the past, you’ve mentioned a number of historical reasons why this has come about – the Vietnam War, for example, when professors didn’t want to give students grades that might make them eligible for the draft. You’ve also noted the rise of affirmative action in the late 1960s.

Mansfield: Yes, the influx of black students. The Harvard faculty, perhaps understandably, didn’t want to give them a rough welcome, and for that reason stopped giving black students C’s. They therefore also stopped giving white students C’s, so as to be fair.

Martinez: The last time you made that claim some accused you of racism. No doubt that charge will be

made again. How do you respond to your critics?

Mansfield: I haven't any statistical evidence, and, according to Harvard, there isn't any. It's a strong impression I have, about on the level with my impressions that sympathy with protesters against the war, and in general the notion of self-esteem, are causes of grade inflation. In [an interview with the *Boston Globe*] what I said was that white professors, not wishing to give black students C's, also didn't give them to white students. So the fact that black students were still a small fraction of total students is not decisive.

Martinez: Do you think students at Harvard are aware that they are the beneficiaries of grade inflation? Is grade inflation Harvard's dirty little secret?

Mansfield: Well, it can't be to anyone who's been around – perhaps to students who have only been here a year or two. It seems pretty obvious to me. And yet it also seems to me a pretty obvious scandal. I can see why professors and the administration don't talk about it, and it's nothing they particularly want to defend. And when they do defend it, it's with lame excuses.

Martinez: Your critique of grade inflation has been part of a larger, conservative argument against declining standards in American education. What do you think about the current state of that debate?

Mansfield: Well, I don't think it's necessary to emphasize the partisan aspect of it, because in the last election it was clear that education was the number one concern of the voters, and there was concern about lowered education standards in both the Bush and Gore

campaigns. I think they were in agreement that this is a problem for us, and that we need to do something about it. They were not talking about higher education, but the problem's also there.

Martinez: In 1997, you wrote that the grade inflation of the past 30 years "is the clearest sign that teachers do not take their job seriously." Now you have decided to give high grades too. Are you caving in?

Mansfield: No – well, only ironically. If I'm surrendering, then it's an ironic surrender. I'm trying to provoke controversy and solve a problem both for myself and for my students.

Martinez: What do you think the long-term response will be?

Mansfield: I don't know. But we're getting a new president at Harvard soon, and maybe a new administration, which will take a different view on this. The reason why this isn't like all my other lost causes is that I don't think that the status quo is tenable. I don't think it can last for very much longer, because it is so scandalous that over half the grades we give are A's or A-minuses. Nobody who sees that can really think that it makes sense.

FAUW Forum

The FAUW Forum is a service for the UW faculty sponsored by the Association. It seeks to promote the exchange of ideas, foster open debate on issues, publish a wide and balanced spectrum of views, and inform members about current Association matters.

Opinions expressed in the Forum are those of the authors, and ought not to be perceived as representing the views of the Association, its Board of Directors, or of the Editorial Board of the Forum, unless so specified. Members are invited to submit letters, news items and brief articles.

If you do not wish to receive the Forum, please contact the Faculty Association Office and your name will be removed from the mailing list.

ISSN 0840-7320

THINGS YOU MAY NOT KNOW

1. In Shakespeare's time, mattresses were secured on bed frames by ropes. When you pulled on the ropes, the mattress tightened, making the bed firmer to sleep on. That's where the phrase, "goodnight, sleep tight" came from.
2. The sentence "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog" uses every letter in the alphabet. (developed by Western Union to test telex/twx communications.)
3. The term "the whole 9 yards" came from W.W.II fighter pilots in the Pacific. When arming their airplanes on the ground, the .50 caliber machine gun ammo belts measured exactly 27 feet, before being loaded into the fuselage. If the pilots fired all their ammo at a target, it got the whole 9 yards.
4. The phrase "rule of thumb" is derived from an old English law which stated that you couldn't beat your wife with anything wider than your thumb.
5. The name Jeep came from the abbreviation used in the army for the "General Purpose" vehicle, GP.
6. The first toilet ever seen on television was on "Leave It To Beaver."
7. It was the accepted practice in Babylon 4,000 years ago that for a month after the wedding, the bride's father would supply his son-in-law with all the mead he could drink. Mead is a honey beer, and because their calendar was lunar based, this period was called the "honey month" or what we know today as the "honeymoon."
8. In English pubs, ale is ordered by pints and quarts. So in old England, when customers got unruly, the bartender would yell at them to mind their own pints and quarts and settle down. It's where we get the phrase "mind your P's and Q's."
9. Many years ago in England, pub frequenters had a whistle baked into the rim or handle of their ceramic cups. When they needed a refill, they used the whistle to get some service. "Wet your whistle," is the phrase inspired by this practice.

UW PROFESSOR WINS OCUFA TEACHING AWARD

*by Catherine Schryer
Department of English*

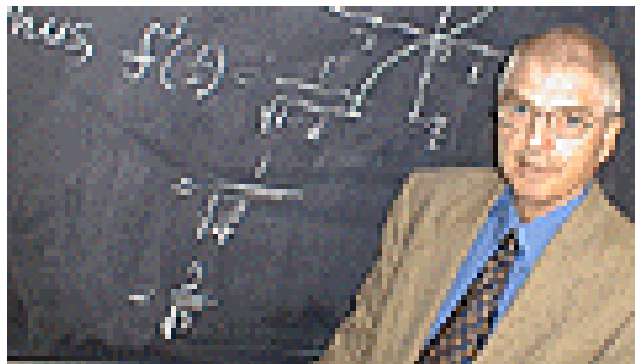
It is with great pleasure that the FAUW announces that its nominee, Professor Ron Scoins, has received an OCUFA teaching award for the year, 2001. Professor Scoins is presently an Associate Dean in the Faculty of Mathematics, a long-standing faculty member, and the recipient of numerous University awards, including the 1999 University of Waterloo Distinguished Teaching Award.

As the nominator for the OCUFA award, I had the task of preparing Ron's brief, a brief that has been maintained and developed by TRACE. After reading through his dossier, I was, of course, impressed by the quantitative numerical data supporting his case. For example, over 90% of Ron's students consistently rate as excellent his teaching in all categories. However, it was the qualitative data – the raft of personal letters stretching back over forty years from students and former students – that most impressed me.

These letters told stories about Ron, stories that emphasized the role of memory. Throughout the letters from students and former students a consistent theme emerged. Ron, they all remembered, went to great efforts to remember their names even in large classes. Not only did he remember the names of his current students, but alumni reported that, much to their astonishment, he recalled their names years after they had taken his course. As reported by all students, Ron projected enormous respect and regard for his students throughout his years of teaching. Evidently, one of the ways he created this sense of respect was through the simple and yet difficult (as we all know) technique of remembering names and faces.

Clearly, too, the students remembered Ron. They recalled his efforts to engage them in problem solving. They remembered impromptu lessons in the hallways of the University where he would turn a wall into a blackboard. They recalled his patience and the hours he spent in his office explaining mathematical concepts. Mostly, they remembered, though, his interest in mathematics – the way he encouraged even the most mathematically challenged students to appreciate Calculus.

Ron's reputation goes well beyond the University of



*Ron Scoins
Faculty of Mathematics
Photo: Barbara Elve, Gazette*

Waterloo. Because of his work in developing mathematics curriculum, his problem-oriented texts books and his workshops for teachers, Ron is recognized as an advocate for the effective teaching of mathematics. In fact, his most important accomplishment might be that he is a first-rate teacher of teachers.

Working with these memories, it was not a difficult task to piece together the brief supporting Professor Scoins' nomination for an OCUFA teaching award. In this respect, though, it is important to acknowledge the role of TRACE in developing and maintaining the records that we need to apply for honours like the OCUFA teaching award. Without TRACE and the assistance of its staff, it would not have been possible for the Board to put Ron forward as our nominee.

So the entire Board of FAUW thanks TRACE for its assistance and asks you to join with us in celebrating a memorable teaching career.

Congratulations, Ron.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

*Catherine Schryer
Department of English*

Greetings and Salutations

Over the last few months the FAUW has taken on several new initiatives and continued to try to resolve some ongoing issues.

Carol Stephenson, the President of the Librarians' Association at the University of Waterloo (LAUW) has joined us as an official "visitor" to the Board. The LAUW represents the interests of professional librarians at Waterloo. Traditionally, in Canada, professional librarians are represented by their local Faculty Associations. Unfortunately, Waterloo is the rare exception to this trend despite the FAUW's repeated attempts to include professional librarians as part of its membership. Involving Carol as a "visitor" to our Board is a first step towards resolving this historical inequity.

The Board is continuing its role of assisting in policy development through its work on the Faculty Relations Committee (FRC). We have successfully negotiated a new version of Policy 59 on reduced work loads. We have also opened up discussions on Policy 69 – Conflict of Interest. A draft of that document is now on the table and we will be returning to that issue in September after the summer break. More importantly, however, the FRC has engaged in several discussions regarding possible policies to deal with adjusting students' marks, the subject of our current grievance. These discussions were thorough and thoughtful, and I remain optimistic that we will be able to develop some remedies.

We are also still pursuing the issue of defining the meaning of academic freedom and separating academic freedom from issues related to management rights. On that issue, one senior academic administrator called the notion of "institutional

academic freedom" a "red herring." We are hoping that everyone at Waterloo will realize that we do not need the concept of "institutional academic freedom" here in Canada (it is a concept taken from American law) and that it is indeed a "red herring." In order to ensure that we have a complete discussion of the meaning of academic freedom we have asked the arbitrator in our original grievance case to continue to remain "seized" or involved with the case to give us enough time to develop remedies suitable for the University of Waterloo.

In my last message I mentioned that we are in a time of change. At Waterloo, this time of change is currently manifesting itself in terms of the departure of the acting Vice-President Academic and Provost, Dr. Alan George, and the arrival of the new Vice-President Academic and Provost, Dr. Amit Chakma. I would like to thank Dr. George for his dedicated work over the last few months. As a Board, we have not always agreed with him, but we respect his integrity and commitment to the University. We have also had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Chakma, and his message of supporting innovation and managed change was well received. We welcome him and look forward to working with him.

Finally I would like to invite all faculty members to contact us if they have issues that concern them. In particular, we are interested in faculty perceptions of the performance review process. We, of course, also encourage all faculty to contact us if they want to participate in Board committees or events.

I wish everyone a great summer.