

Article VII

STEM and Cross-cultural Insensitivity. Alternatives

Educators possess prodigious pedagogical tools to teach pure and applied sciences. However, despite our ostensibly best efforts, schools are graduating a mixed bag of good and bad apples. We graduate successful doctors, teachers, engineers, entrepreneurs, farmers, and fishermen along with a few great inventors, scientists, and researchers. But the best STEM education in the world also graduates distressing numbers of successful Machiavellian entrepreneurs, terrorists, and barbarian autocrats. It has provided foot soldiers of the likes of hate-filled organizations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda using their computer and chemistry skills to design and manufacture IED's and modern-day virtual Web IED's. In short, despite STEM's immense power to do good, it has immense power to misfire.

To stop the vicious cycle of poverty, frustration, alienation, hate, crime, violence, and war, all sectors of society, including the science and applied sciences professions must be better attuned and sensitized to the genie in the bottle that is at their command. The science genie bestows upon us what we wish. But as universal folk tales attest, our wishes may boomerang. Atomic power and the Internet were ground-breaking inventions that have immeasurably improved our lives, yes. But how do we put the bomb back in the bottle? How do we rein in the new Internet IED -- gifted to upstart terrorist organizations and rogue states? The deaths, hate, and oppression inadvertently spewed by most great inventions were not typically because of bad intentions of the inventors. Some even warned of uncontrollable consequences.

But of the more malicious and less forgivable, we might include the Sakers' along with their

scientists who developed the lethally addictive opioid drug and doctors and clinics that prescribed and sold the drug. Volkswagen engineers cunningly configured emissions to bypass inspections killing thousands in the US and Europe. Boeing engineers created profitable fuel-efficient planes that could not be piloted without danger of crashes that ultimately killed hundreds. Chemists develop foods that are addictive to our taste buds, but lethal to our bodies. Hitler's STEM geniuses created genocidal killing machines that exterminated millions of souls on the basis of hate. This tip of a tainted iceberg demonstrates that STEM education historically and currently continues to graduate loose cannon. We are not teaching the ethics, moral character building, interpersonal sensitivity, or positive-sum mindset that values fellow human beings.

Human and social sciences can be powerful tools to exponentially improve the outcomes of STEM to improve society.

We push people sciences aside to our own detriment. Without the "soft sciences," STEM does not teach us to understand our own behavior, emotions, mental well-being or that of others. STEM alone does not teach a holistic picture of life. Alone, it fails to help us to understand our culture or society or those of others. It enhances left brain functions of cold logic, facts, details, and emotionally detached practicality. But STEM education largely ignores right-brain functions of big picture, feeling, empathy, love, imagination, and creativity. (These are latest findings of STEM neuro-scientists!) These two sides obviously need to work together.

Educators, we need to inject *people* studies as core curricula in our schools. Ethics study and

higher-order social-emotional skill development need to continue beyond preschool from where it declines precipitously all the way through college or trade school. Without these fundamental life skills including a well-developed moral compass and higher-order social-emotional maturity, we shall continue to see flailing societal solutions including hate, scapegoating, circle-the-wagon groupism, and violence. We will continue to see hard-to-manage classrooms and children turned off by “baaaw-ring” school unrelated to life’s more immediate problems.

Equal curricular weight, holistically balancing STEM studies should include cultural anthropology, sociology, social-psychology, psychology, abnormal psychology, pedagogical and childhood development studies, and their many offshoots.

Let’s utilize the left brain’s language proficiency to make the bridge with literature and thought-provoking writing exercises to tap the right brain’s capacity for deep emotional understanding and empathy.

Without understanding ourselves and others, without a big picture -- in effect, with a stunted emotional development -- we cannot expect to halt racism, ethnocentrism, violence, and the frustration of one’s inability to become fully self-fulfilled. Without balanced education, we become dangerously oblivious to and vulnerable to societal forces, groupism, and our own emotions that we cannot fully understand.

Teachers’ brethren, preachers, may use similar strategies to undercut humanity’s self-destructive hate, racism, ethnocentricity, and violence. Love, empathy, compassion are religion’s purported expertise. Yet we need to back that up with that same expertise in reaching out to others than those in our own theological camp. In opening minds to outsiders rather than narrowing minds and

demanding blind abidance to ancient infrequently-questioned sacred laws, we are producing good fodder for similarly rigid, narrow-thinking students of STEM. It is not paradoxical that full development of big picture, positive-sum perspective, disables monomania, and enables cross-cultural emotional depth, compassion, empathy, and love.

Rigidity has always been religion’s Achilles heel leading to hatred, narrow-mindedness, violence and war. The powerful pulpit is yours to guide your flock to self-fulfillment or to dangerous divisive narrow thinking. The danger to religion itself and the huge potential good it can do, and often does do, is its fear to encourage its flock to think for themselves -- to be independent. Without such vibrancy and ability for self-reflection and to see deeply and compassionately beyond the confines of the religion, it will weaken and wither over time, as would any such group. Religion now has an opportunity to lead in their right side brain, if you will, and balance with a reasonable preaching of when to follow and when to lead. We need to teach how to love, not as a commandment, but from the “heart.” That comes from deep understanding of ourselves and others, not by following the rules or the flock, but from one’s own highly developed moral-ethical-emotional maturity. A flock imbued with compassion beyond its perimeters can then help to humanize pure science and guide its outcomes with a new broader social conscience.

Media are also teachers and preachers. Media, like religion and schools, possess huge power to shape culture rather than to be leaves tossed by the fickle winds of culture. Here again, we need a balance of pure dispassionate facts and deep interpretation (not conspiracy theorization) as to how those facts relate to people’s lives. Media has failed to either make an effective case to its readership or viewers for either pure science and objectivity or for its deeper interpretation in humanitarian-sensitive terms.

Presenting the facts is not enough, even if they are actual facts. Allowing “equal time” and status for conspiracy theories, contrived or manipulated facts, or thinly disguised hate is not professional in the Hippocratic sense. Media skill and corporate permission to challenge such interpersonal insensitivity and small-picture narrow thinking needs much development. Politicians are extremely adept at avoiding uncomfortable answers, couching their racism, class biases, and narrow zero-sum thinking, and spinning the facts. Media, and therefore the public, are being hoodwinked, mugged, and bamboozled.



Other than editorial pages of some of our less inflammatory media, and some excellent investigative stories of PBS and notable others, typical news stories consumed by most of us are sometimes labeled Mc Nugget News. Both media and politicians found the Syria debacle during the Obama administration “too complex” to get involved in. News coverage of Viet Nam in 1968’s *New York Times*, at the height of that war, typically covered how many VC were killed, the Pope said this, or Senator... said that. One small lonely article appeared on a Saturday analyzing the socio-economic or political plight of Viet Nam. Again the media were co-opted by candidate and President Trump with media’s reticence to kill a cash cow. Although I see progress from, at least in part, a wizened press in analysis and challenge of interviewees since then, TV media today are still seriously deficient in holding interviewees’ feet to the fire. Journalists must insist that arguments stick to the facts, address the big picture, and demonstrate true compassion. A feeble one-shot interviewer attempt at counter

questioning fails to counter a well-crafted white wash of cross-cultural, interracial insensitivity.

When the media itself is swept up by the cultural winds reporting facts that almost unquestioningly reflect distorted, small-picture views, it is divisive. Most vulnerable are people unable to independently connect dots, see the larger picture, read between the lines, or see below the surface. Media inadvertently allow such vulnerable amongst us direction from authority figures playing on our visceral emotions.

Media, we need your help with our zero-sum, viscerally-guided, yet rigid society. While most often technically correct and immensely beneficial, STEM culture has a distressingly dispassionate, humanely-disconnected rogue element. A culture’s insensitivities do not confine themselves to the likes of Boeing-Volkswagen engineers or opioid-tobacco-food-industry chemists. Our cultural milieu is fertile for all kinds of lethal and non-lethal self-destruction including racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, etc. STEM can be a powerful good, but must be harnessed. Media can help to morph our culture into one inhospitable to such dysfunctional elements, or it can continue to be a leaf in culture’s fickle winds.

Our high-tech military and police forces likewise miss the human side, the compassion side of their jobs. High tech failed in Viet Nam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and on American streets. Rigid, dispassionate, or hate- inspiring, brute-power, overly high-tech-dependent military-police training suppresses problems or even exacerbates frustrations when root problems fail to be solved. Pre-requisite degrees in clinical and social psychology or cultural anthropology might do wonders for conflict resolution on our streets or in foreign countries where similarly there is even a militarily orchestrated disconnect between soldiers and locals. If trillions of dollars in high tech have not solved problems in multiple wars or on our streets, we obviously need a new tack.



As part of a statewide effort the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) has awarded a grant to South-East Asia Center (SEAC) to share ideas and provide actionable steps that individuals and organizations can implement for the purpose of promoting better racial understanding amongst diverse community groups.

Through a series of email messages directed to faith leaders, political leaders, educators, and social service providers SEAC will share thought provoking insights designed to discourage zero-sum thinking and instead encourage a deeper understanding of cultural relations that focuses on our commonalities.

In addition to the eight action oriented messages, SEAC will host two one hour online webinars presented by the center’s founder Peter Porr aimed at challenging assumptions, offering cross-cultural insights, and explaining how we unwittingly go wrong in our approach to intercultural interactions.

About the Author Peter Porr



Peter Porr holds degrees in education (Michigan State University), sociology of education (New York University), as well as four

years of doctoral politics of education (University of Chicago). He has trained teachers in Chicago and has taught in classrooms that range from a preschool in Harlem to a college in Viet Nam. As founding executive director of South-East Asia Center, Mr. Porr has served a multi-cultural clientele for some 40 years. Many of whom were historical arch-enemies in their native lands. He is currently an educational and administrative consultant to SEAC while working on a book that examines how education can contribute to world peace.

Mr. Porr had real-life cross-cultural conflicts in his own family that included strict Catholic maternal grandparents and strict Lutheran paternal grandparents who refused to attend his own parents’ wedding. As a German-American gentile growing up shortly after World War II in a predominantly Jewish New York suburb, Peter felt that he was the outsider and learning that being a minority, no matter the circumstances is an experience that imprints one’s soul forever – for better or worse.



HOW TO
BUILD BRIDGES OF
CROSS-CULTURAL
UNDERSTANDING
BY PETER PORR

This article is part of an 8 part series by Peter Porr that can be downloaded as an e-book.

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