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School's Out

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The current climate of opinion demands that the American public school system be reformed. To that end we read of Goals 2000, school choice, various curricular reform movements, and other suggestions for revamping the schools. In his book *School's Out* (Avon Books, 368 pages, \$12), Lewis Perelman suggests that reform plans are wrongheaded because technological advances will soon render both public and private schools irrelevant to America's economic future. Claiming that he really is not concerned with education itself, and armed with state of the art technology and contemporary science; Perelman argues that economic realities dictate the abolition of schools, both public and private.

Essentially, Perelman suggests that hyperlearning, a new wave of technologies that both possess and enhance intelligence will streamline and democratize learning in America, making our overcrowded, bureaucratic schools obsolete. The countries that most quickly phase out their costly, inefficient school systems will be the economic leaders of the future as hyperlearning renders school educators as irrelevant to the dissemination of knowledge as the Gutenberg Bible made the Catholic priesthood irrelevant to the dissemination of holy scripture. This educational reformation will soon shake the foundations of American schools just as the Protestant Reformation shook the foundations of post-Medieval Christianity.

Perelman predicts that credentialing will become a thing of the past as technology trains people for the jobs they want without irrelevant academic mediation. Experts will become obsolete in business and industry as information retrieval and application replace human encyclopedias. The technological revolution is progressively blurring the boundaries separating entertainment, instruction, work, and general learning. We are soon to live in a comprehensive learning environment in which technology links "hordes of data bits into patterns or structures the human mind can grasp. . . . The job of hypermedia alone is to inform; its job as part of the fabric of hyperlearning is to empower."

There are two reasons why everyone concerned with education and schooling will find this book fascinating and challenging. It is challenging because Perelman's devastating critique of American schooling is largely accurate. The cumbersome school bureaucracy is not cost effective, it does not foster higher order reasoning skills, and it does perpetuate a largely artificial credentialing scheme producing large numbers of the over-schooled and unemployed.

The book is fascinating because of Perelman's jaw-dropping descriptions of contemporary learning technology and its potential application. With such tools at hand, the author believes that the real outrage is not that our students are failing to learn, but that our students are learning to fail. The proper application of technology, he believes, will change all that.

In the face of technological challenge, Perelman predicts that schools will fight for survival by repeating "myths" that social and natural science have demonstrated false. But in a pivotal chapter called "Science Lessons: Beyond the 'Effective School' Myths," Perelman is on shaky ground as he attempts to explode the following "myths."

Myth #1—"People Learn Best in School." Perelman is, of course, right in branding this a myth. But here he makes the grave error of making learning and education synonymous. Learning is a large umbrella concept, underneath which lie "education," "training," etc. All of these words are not synonymous. Learning does take place everywhere, and it probably takes place easier outside of schools. But if education is a special kind of learning consisting of intellectual, moral, and possibly even spiritual activity, then Perelman's perspective is narrow to the point of irrelevancy.

Myth #2—"School is a Preparation for Working in the Real World." Again, Perelman is both right and wrong. School is not a good preparation for working in the real world. His error, however, is in assuming that schools ought to be primarily concerned with preparing people for narrow vocations. As Robert Hutchins wisely reminds us:

We hear a great deal today about the dangers that will come upon us through the frustration of educated people who have got educated in the expectation that education will get them a better job, and who then fail to get it. But surely this depends on the representations that are made to the young about what education is. If we allow them to believe that education will get them better jobs and encourage them to get educated with this end in view, they are entitled to a sense of frustration if, when they have got the education, they do not get the job. But, if we say that they should be educated in order to be men, and that everybody, whether he is a ditch-digger or a bank president should have this education because he is a man, then the ditch-digger may still feel frustrated, but not because of his education.

Myth #3—"The Teacher is the Fountain; the Learner is the Bowl." While Perelman is correct that quality education cannot consist of active teachers pouring knowledge into the heads of passive students, he is merely criticizing traditional educational methodologies at their worst: Classrooms need not be guided by dullards who destroy active learning with memorization, repetition, and nothing more. Of course, much of that does go on in schools, as does much equally non-productive, though creative, "student centered" miseducation.

Myth #4—"More or Less Academic Achievement Means More or Less Learning." Anyone should know that degrees, certificates, and years of schooling are not necessarily indicative of real educational attainment, especially today. The solution, however, does not lie in abolishing schools, but in raising standards to the point that more or less academic achievement does mean more or less learning.

Myth #5—"You Have to Learn to Walk Before You Can Learn to Run." Again, Perelman criticizes certain assumptions underlying conservative teaching methodology at its worst, nothing more. He again attacks a straw man.

Myth #6—"Education is Different from Training." Interestingly, to dispel the myth, Perelman never shows that education and training are the same thing. Since he has already incorrectly pronounced learning and education synonymous, he simply identifies training as a form of learning and logically, but incorrectly, concludes that it too is education. He goes on to praise the apprenticeship model as though the only meaningful learning is that undertaken for job skills.

Myth #7—"Some People Are Smarter Than Others." No, says Perelman. No one is any smarter than anyone else. Defying the self-evident fact that some people actually are smarter than others, Perelman enlists Howard Gardner's research to criticize schools for measuring only the types of intelligence useful for "academic work." Perelman challenges the conclusions of standardized tests showing large portions of the American population to be illiterate, ignorant, and incompetent. Ironically, while relying on science to dispel all of the "effective school" myths, Perelman suddenly dismisses the standardized test, which is certainly as scientific a measure as those Perelman cites throughout the book in defense of his own case.

Myth #8—"Facts are more important than skills." Showing himself for the philosophical Pragmatist, that he is, Perelman, with no convincing scientific evidence, downplays the importance of a knowledge base. He crucifies E. D. Hirsch, author of *Cultural Literacy*, for suggesting that there is a canon of facts that every American should know. Only process is important, says Perelman. Unfortunately, the author seems unaware of Hirsch's contention that cultural literacy enhances process, that

cultural literacy enhances general literacy. Perelman is right and technology soon makes literacy obsolete, who cares!

Myth #9—"Learning is Solitaire." Here again, Perelman again simply criticizes the effects of certain traditional teaching methodologies. Schools, however, need not rely heavily on those methodologies (though they often do).

Myth #10—"Schooling is Good for Socialization." Perelman is right to a point. It is a myth to say that schooling socializes everyone in a positive manner. Socialization is hit and miss. But socialization is hit and miss everywhere. Who is to say that clusters of young people, freed from schools, will experience only positive socialization while playing on their computers or congregating on the street corners of America?

The problem with *School's Out* is that the author's cheery de-schooling prediction may not result in the digital paradise he envisions. Indeed, his cure may easily prove deadlier than the disease. Of course we must reform the schools, but what might we lose if Perelman's predictions come to pass? Certainly we

lose a sense of a common culture, and possibly a sense of anything worthy of the name culture at all. If human life at its best consists of nothing more than animal survival and problem solving, if education is a synonym for employability, and if information retrieval is a synonym for wisdom, then maybe we should welcome Perelman's brave new world. But if we envision a society peopled by more than highly skilled barbarians, then we should reconsider such classics as Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* and fight to preserve distinctions between the superior and inferior, the fine and the vulgar, the worthwhile and the merely popular. Perelman also fails to preserve distinctions as he confounds Aristotle's definitions of labor, play, and leisure. Without such distinctions, all the technology in the world will fail to improve us in ways that really matter.

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