Evolution, Dodge Ball, Retention, and Kumbaya

Evolution, which could certainly be defended as a form of progress, depends on natural selection, a sort of culling, if you will, of the weaker characteristics of any species. Mother Nature miraculously identifies and then eradicates the members of the species who possess weaker characteristics, making the rest of the species stronger. Evolution is nature's version of Survival Helper. Most species other than humans have a strong survival instinct that doesn't need Mother Nature's Survival Helper because they live under the demands of the wilderness. Humans have this wilderness instinct too, but because we think on a higher level—complex memories, humor, art, fast food, and big screen digital home theatres—we have to be encouraged to remember that it wasn't always this easy. My mother told me a thousand times that during the war she "could make a pound of hamburger last a week." Today, my sixteen year-old eats a pound of hamburger a day, and he's mostly a vegetarian.

If you're over thirty you remember dodge ball and dodge ball was evolution in miniature. Mr. Kardatzky would throw about ten volleyballs into the middle of the gym floor, divide us in two, and blow his whistle. If you got hit, you were done till the next game. This is not exactly like evolution because in the game of life, as of right now, we have no hard evidence that you get to come back for the next game once you're dead. Anyway, on good days we could get three or four games in before we had to take off our matching gym shorts and jump into the shower, trying to win the post dodge ball game of towel snapping. If you're not over thirty, you didn't get to play this game because dodge ball was too violent (according to the mother of the kid who always got put out first) and has been replaced with Mime. Matching gym shorts restricted our freedom of expression, so gym uniforms have been replaced with $200 Ray Lewis football jerseys, an $80 pair of Alan Iverson basketball shorts, and a $180 pair of Air Jordan Stealth Fighter Nikes, handmade by an Asian four-year old. Towel snapping I miss the least. As my father used to say, "Somebody's gonna lose an eye!"

In Inventing the Future, Denis Gabor refers to evolution and says that the modern world faces a trilemma: the threats of over population, nuclear war, and "leisure." Gabor suggests that we could more easily survive the first two. Nothing in history has prepared us for leisure or for a world without dodge ball. All other ages were driven by a memory of the past that taught us how to survive the present and WORK for a better tomorrow. Gabor believes that without an understanding of the past (when threats were palpable—as in dodge ball) and man struggled to survive, there will be a neurological evolution or re-wiring of the human brain that would ultimately short-circuit our survival instinct.

The more I read of Gabor's theories, the more frightened I become. What scares me is that the majority of current college students have no concept of the past, when we as a species struggled to survive by making a pound of hamburger last a week. These students have not experienced the fear of possible extinction that one feels when ducking or catching a volleyball going sixty miles per hour aimed at your head (for those of you who have forgotten, when you catch the ball, the person who threw it is out). What we in academe have created, much to Denis Gabor and others' chagrin, is a world devoid of dodge ball. For all practical purposes (and this is especially true of higher education) we have reinvented the academic environment.
to resemble a day care center where we all take naps, play games, hold hands, and sing Kumbaya. Students live in pseudo-harmony, knowing that the threat of competition, extinction, or failure is next to impossible. And—if failure occurs—it will certainly be someone else’s fault. Face the facts. Students take the SAT to strengthen that short-term memory muscle. They seem to do better and better on the SAT and then they arrive at college with only a small fraction of the skills and education that any common eighth-grader possessed in 1950. Here’s an experiment that will prove my point, unless you happen to be teaching a graduate level history course. Take away their laptops, make them get out a pencil and paper, and ask them the following ten questions: When was WWI? When was WWII? When was Pearl Harbor bombed? Who wrote *Leaves of Grass*? When was Lincoln shot? When was the Revolutionary War? Who is the Vice-President? When was the Civil War? Whose government is based on the Magna Carta? When was the U.S. Constitution first ratified? Collect these papers, look at all the blank spaces where questions weren’t answered, and look at your students’ teary eyes because you didn’t mention a pop-quiz on the syllabus.

The hard truth is that many of those 1950 eighth graders (now retired 68 year-olds) never got into a college. If you managed to get into a college and then flunked out in 1958, it was always your fault. You didn’t study hard enough or you weren’t disciplined enough or you weren’t smart enough. College wasn’t for everybody. I never heard “The teacher is hard to understand” or “She doesn’t follow the syllabus” or “Does he think this is the only class I have?” or “She goes too fast” until the last few years. Now, apparently, to address these issues of obvious teaching incompetence, the best teaching role models are the ones who on the first day of class give their students a color-coded syllabus (a severe fine can be levied if this is changed without the student’s consent), a map to the teacher’s house, a map to the teacher’s office, the teacher’s pager number, office number, cell number, and home number, an autographed copy of the catalog, and, finally, a role model who teaches like Jay Leno (don’t miss his lecture coming in October).

In conclusion, it seems that more and more of the responsibilities for student “success and retention” are placed on the faculty, staff, and advisors. It’s sad when a student fails, and, even though we have their money, our contemporary grieving process now requires instructors to do a self-study and take a 36-hour seminar in advising to figure out why the student failed to thrive. Once we have identified the problem with our teaching in the dodge ball-less world, we invite the students back and promise them we’ll do better. Poppycock! Education, like art, is not supposed to be easy and fun. Education should be hard. Whatever happened to staying up until four in the morning in the library Sunday through Thursday nights reading the assignment until you understood it? Education, like evolution and dodge ball, needs to select students, not recruit them. We need to make college hard to get into and hard to complete. Forty years ago most eighth graders knew the answers to those ten questions, fought for their academic survival like animals to get into an institution of higher learning, and frequently failed. They fought because getting into a college was an honor, not a birthright. Staying in college was the result of hard work and intelligence. Graduating was a family victory! More importantly, flunking out was never someone else’s fault. Now colleges advertise like on-line Canadian Drug Companies. We’ve become a pop-up. Perhaps we should “raise the bar.”

**Stephen Ayers, Dept. of Communication, Theater, and Dance**

*The opinions printed here belong solely to the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the editorial staff or of the Faculty Center. If you would like to respond, e-mail Nienhuis by the 8th of the month.*
I am still not sure if you wanted me to read the article to proof it for you, but it has a nice conversational tone, good flow, and it is grammatically sound—but I would change the misuse of the colloquialism, "much to whatever-his-name and other's chagrin," to "much to the chagrin of whatever-his-name and others."

The problem is Pops, you can apply the line of thought, "if we asked them to do what we had to do," to juxtapose any two generations separated by 50 years and it would result in an ostensibly "failure" of the education system. And don't look now, but your assertion just makes you sound old. If we asked 1950's students to type the bare minimum 40 words per minute (and, by the by, you STILL don't know how to type correctly or use a spreadsheet... how is that for living up to your educational accountability?), to utilize an electronic library bigger than 10 libraries in the 1950's combined (do you even know what an HTML is?), to name the structural shape of DNA (which all of your students would get), to explain the electoral college (hell, the average high school senior even takes AP Calculus), students of the 1950's could not have done these things in the same fashion. The Human Genome is posted online at the average student's disposal and you think it is a crime we do not know the DATES of a war that was fought a hundred years ago? I am applying to medical school and they expect me to have had computer science. You think the doctors 50 years ago had to do that? That isn't even the point. The point is there just is no longer an emphasis on factual regurgitation. Read anything about contemporary educational theory, etc, and it will tell you the emphasis has drastically shifted towards theoretical understanding from factual vomit on a page.

Now I am not saying students should not value the proverbial hardship accompanying the pound of hamburger meat; I am just saying we do not have to remember dates with the advent of computers that show us what we need to know in fractions of a second; we learn on a theoretical level. With the sheer amount of information available at our fingertips, of COURSE we do not remember names and dates—we have 1000x more to access and, in turn, to remember and learn about than you ever did. And with such an emphasis placed on not just general erudite careers but well-rounded existences, we aren't just playing ball and goin' to class like you did—we have to be involved in 15 clubs to get into college. Did you even have 15 clubs at your high school? Simply put, students are learning a larger volume of drastically different material, learning it in a different way, and are being expected to perform well in more areas and in a completely different world than you grew up in. With the "education boom" of the 1970's, college has become the "norm" for middle class individuals—just as high school was in 1950's. Thus, the responsibilities that were placed on a high school faculty, the "success and retention" of the "mean" students as you so pejoratively put it, has now been re-assigned to the college professors. If you want to find some good old nostalgic education, I will give you some places to look: a defunct educational theory textbook, an old persons' home, or the republican platform (a la EOC testing—the bane of every adept teacher's existence and the greater state of Texas). Or even better yet... you could find it on the web. Dad, stop being so old. Love, Michael

Michael Ayers, Sophomore Student at Duke University
Responses to “Evolution, Dodge Ball, Retention, and Kumbaya” by Stephen Ayers, 4/1/05

Like Stephen Ayers, I worry about the effects of “leisure” on our students. As he points out, although SAT scores are rising, many of our students arrive with an attitude that works against their educational and professional successes. Their behavior says, “We’re entitled to be entertained and protected from discomfort, and we refuse to engage in activities that require sustained focus and effort.” Unfortunately, our culture has provided them with ready entertainment and protection from discomfort for most of the lives. When I visit classes to talk about research, I often start out by asking how many students have televisions in their rooms. Virtually every hand goes up. (It’s the rare student who has cut the cord, so to speak.) Then we talk about procrastination, about how easy it is not to think. I ask how many of them visit the fitness center. Again, many hands go up. “Your brain functions like the rest of your body,” I explain. “The more you challenge it, the more effective it becomes. The less you challenge it, the less effective it becomes.” Students who have been sitting with their heads down suddenly look up. Now I can talk about how to write a good research paper, fitness training for their brains.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers reports that many employers find college graduates lacking in qualities/skills that require higher brain function: communication skills (speaking and writing), honesty/integrity, interpersonal skills, motivation/initiative, and a strong work ethic. High SAT scores and GPAs are notable, but they are only strands in the larger tapestry of higher education and how it prepares students for the global economy in which they will compete.

Barbara Hardie, Writing Center

Stephen Ayers does a nice job of capturing the concern which many of us, as faculty, express daily. The market system of schools competing for enrollment-driven funding might make our current situation inevitable, but this does not make it excusable. Our system of evaluating faculty classroom performance serves to promote a dodge-ball-free educational culture and makes it very dangerous for non-tenured faculty to do anything other than go with the flow. The really serious part of all of this is that the stakes may be higher than many realize.

David Coffee, Accounting

Dr. Ayers contends that “forty years ago . . . [students] fought for their academic survival like animals.” While I agree with his point that some courses could be more challenging, I am deeply frustrated by the argument that people were so much smarter and education so much more effective “back in the day.” Forty years ago, many eighth graders did know the answers to simple historical questions that today might challenge some students. However, those eighth graders were a much smaller group—one pared down by racism, economic necessity (particularly in rural and farming communities), and the systematic, often brutal, dismissal of perfectly capable young people whose only “limitation” was a physical or learning disability. Crying O tempora, O mores! seems too easy a fix. I for one do not wish to return to the sexist educational system of yesteryear, wherein my natural talents for Trigonometry were overlooked and my career options limited to “just teaching English or something” by my advisors. Nor do I miss being paddled with Darwinian brutality if I challenged the antediluvian notions of my teachers, who were. I’m sure, as convinced as Dr. Ayers is that these kids today are lazy little dolts who will someday ruin the world. Members of my now-
Responses to "Evolution, Dodge Ball, Retention, and Kumbaya" by Stephen Ayers, 4/1/05

omnipotent Generation X might well remember the decades we spent being known as "slackers." Bottom line? I’ll take an educational system any day that gives me diverse, if inexperienced, students over one that excludes and abuses such young people.

Leah Hampton, English

Oh, how I wish my students would stay with their homework reading assignments until they understood them!

Mary Ellen Griffin, Psychology

Toeing the Fault-Line

In the "Evolution, Dodge Ball, Retention, and Kumbaya" article of this month's Faculty Forum, Stephen Ayers raises a number of interesting issues—but the thrust of the piece is on the importance of defining high academic standards and demanding that students measure up to them. Perhaps the academic bar should be raised. Turning the metaphor back on itself, all 18-year olds should be able to jump over a 2-foot hurdle. But if we raise the bar to 30 inches—not an unreasonable height—we would likely weed out quite a few who, with just a bit of preparation and training, could otherwise clear the standard. Most of us, including Chancellor Bardo, would like to raise the bar. But when the chancellor uses this metaphor it is usually in the context of a given level of student preparation.

So, we look back to the high schools and find them not all they could or should be (Nation At Risk, No School Left Behind, Bill Gates‘ recent speech bemoaning the broken, flawed, and under funded state of America’s high schools). We see the graduate programs of education responsible for producing leaders of those high schools blasted as “inadequate to appalling” (this from a 4-year study directed by the president of Columbia University’s Teachers College). And we see evidence of a fundamental disconnect between secondary and post-secondary educational curricula (Chronicle, 3/4/2005).

Looking at our own level in the educational hierarchy we learn that measuring graduation and retention rates is not as straightforward as we thought (Chronicle, 10/22/2004), that college students study less than expected (NSSE, 2004), and that colleges and universities in all 50 states are failing to “measure up” across multiple dimensions (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004). And when it comes to “raising the bar,” we should not neglect the unintended negative consequences of the course/teacher evaluation process (i.e., student opinion survey). See for example Stanley Fish’s essay in the February 4 edition of the Chronicle entitled “Who’s in Charge Here?” Fish asserts that “the evaluation of teaching by students amounts to a whole lot of machinery with a small and dubious yield.”

Finally, there are the state budget crises. Several short decades ago states might have subsidized half or even two-thirds of a student’s public education. Today that statistic is more typically 25%, and in some states less than 15%. The greater dependency on tuition translates into greater emphasis on student retention—whether adroitly managed or misguided.
Responses to “Evolution, Dodge Ball, Retention, and Kumbaya” by Stephen Ayers, 4/1/05

The problems in our educational system are evident, and tectonic plates of entrenched bureaucracies are rumbling. Faculty could aid in the solution by reminding students that they are ultimately responsible for their own learning and that it takes persistent effort. But a significant raising of the bar unilaterally by faculty would just result in many students crashing into it, tripping over it, or merely bellying up to it. Before faculty determination can effectively raise academic standards there must come institutional resolve and, along side that, some serious political will. In North Carolina, hold your bets.

Gary H. Jones, BCIS/E