

*It's how you play the game...*

# EDUCATION

Ted Yudelson

*The following should not be taken as a criticism of one particular institution, but as a comment on the educational system in general.*

As yet another school year encroaches upon us, we students must, once again, grapple with the deficiencies of the educational system. Plagued by unqualified teachers, ambiguous evaluation and mindless bureaucracy, we engage, almost subconsciously, in high-powered games of strategy and deception to overcome the academic establishment. It is time we came to the realization that it is not enough to evade the malfunctionings of this powerful machine for, in the end, it is we who lose.

Who can deny that, time and again, we play on the preferences of our instructors with the hope of enhancing their opinion of us? Our constant attempts to sway our educators so as to assure ourselves of a superior grade are traditional and clichéd. As we become more and more aware of the idiosyncracies of our instructors as well as those of the system, we are better equipped to engage in the fascinating series of games and rituals we know as education.

In essence, these tactics are an attempt to outwit the institution and its professors. They are a means to deal with the incredible volume of information that is thrust upon us, data which, in some cases, is irrelevant or unjustified. They constitute a device which keeps us involved with specific concerns: our advancement through the school, our maintenance of a positive self-image and the manner in which we

prepare for the future. Sociologist Ivan Illich claims that rituals in the educational process only reinforce "the myth of unending consumption."<sup>1</sup> We play games and perform rituals in order to facilitate attainment of a desirable objective, a professional degree, for example. Unfortunately, we never transcend the rituals for our involvement in them only yields new needs and objectives which, to a large extent, are functions of the games we play.<sup>2</sup> These schemes are numerous, complex and vary with the age of the student, the nature of the institution and the character of the instructors. Ultimately, we become so engulfed in our objective that we are able to "rationalize all (our) otherwise pointless activity in terms of it."<sup>3</sup> It goes without saying that we must become adept in the games and rituals of our academic microcosm if we are to achieve our goal.

*Mneumonics* is one of a series of strategies often employed at exam time which offers a means by which data can be stored in a readily retrievable form. It encompasses the utilization of catchwords, phrases or sentences to recall subject material from short-term memory. In the Biochemical and Medical faculties, the sentence *Thick-Thighed Ladies Live In Place Ville Marie* is frequently used. The first letter of each word in the phrase represents one of the eight essential amino acids: tryptophan, threonine, lysine, leucine, isoleucine, phenylalanine, valine, methionine.<sup>4</sup> Devices like mneumonics, however, are nothing more than shortcuts to preparation for examinations and do not increase comprehension. The learning of the eight essential amino acids in this manner serves no purpose beyond their regurgitation on an exam.



As writes McGill medical graduate, Martin Shapiro, "...students who understand the metabolism of the amino acids...do not need mnemonics to remind them which ones are essential."<sup>5</sup> But, of course, all we are actually concerned with is to fulfill the demands of the examiner and, in this regard, the aforementioned scheme has proven its worth.

It seems as though our schools and educators are blind to our carefully considered strategies. For example, it almost appears that our professors are totally oblivious to our pretense of being far more skilled and knowledgeable than we actually are. Academic institutions act to encourage and reinforce this deception: those students who are set on getting the right answer regardless of the means of doing so are the ones likely to win at this game. Our schools, however, are often very discouraging places for those who attempt to consider the meaning or rationale of a particular problem or exercise.<sup>6</sup> Many will not admit that they do not understand the material and are afraid to ask a question for fear of appearing foolish. Ultimately, these students are penalized though they are willing to learn. If the above were not the case (i.e. If our educators were aware of the existence of the game), they would "teach their courses and assign their tasks so that students who really thought about the meaning of the subject would have the best chance of succeeding, while those who tried to do the tasks by illegitimate means, without thinking or understanding would be foiled."<sup>7</sup>

It is disappointing and disheartening to find that very few of us ever master the learning process in the way that our instructors intend. Many of us get humiliated, frightened, and discouraged. Most are obsessed with failure or doing badly. As a result, we use our minds, not to learn, but to avoid that which we are told to make us learn. We search for a shortcut, not to knowledge, but to our individual objec-

tive, be it a professional degree or merely an advance to the next level in the educational system. In the short run, these strategies seem to work. They make it possible for many of us to get through our schooling even though we learn very little. In the long run, however, these schemes are "self-limiting and self-defeating and destroy both character and intelligence."<sup>8</sup> Those who indulge in such games and rituals "are prevented by them from growing into more than the limited versions of the human beings they might have become."<sup>9</sup> As John Holt notes, "This is the real failure that takes place in school; hardly any (of us) escape."<sup>10</sup>

Who is to blame for our cleverly executed strategies? Surely they serve a positive function and would not exist if we did not benefit from them. Is it possible that they are a necessary and integral part of the educational process, a preparation for the playing of similar games that are required for success in the real world? Or are they simply a result of the failure of academic institutions to comprehend the ways, conditions and spirit in which we may learn best? Perhaps it is time for our educators to search for a new way to mobilize the intellectual potential that is inherent in most of us. It is only then, as John Holt claims, that "school...may become a place in which all (students) grow, not just in size, not even in knowledge, but in curiosity, courage, confidence, independence, resourcefulness, resilience, patience, competence and understanding."<sup>11</sup>

There is no doubt that the games we play and the rituals we perform are but a means to an end. We cannot, however, applaud their effectiveness. In the final analysis, it is probably the lesson of gamesmanship that is learnt best. If this is the case, maybe we should be training for an academic olympics. But let's face it, with the ever rising cost of education, we can't afford to play games.