

Literacy and the Workplace 2000

For the Workplace Literacy Award Banquet
Governor's Council for Literacy, and
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Let me add my voice to all of the others congratulating you on the contribution which you are making to increasing literacy in the workplace, and thus throughout society. As a person who earns his paycheck from an institution somewhat involved with perpetuating literacy, and which depends on literate people to keep it going, I thank you from the bottom of my pocketbook. If it weren't for endeavors like yours, I don't know what would keep the University of Hawaii in business. In the last few weeks, I had been counting on Wag's Brave Boys, but I am afraid they rather let me down in a bad way last Saturday. I am doubly concerned, too, because I can usually rely on Na Wahine in the Fall, but they are rather in the doldrums this year, though they certainly have been splendid soldiers for literacy in the past.

Of course, if Murakami's boys of early summer can make it to the World Series (or at least the Regionals again) this Spring, my future will be temporarily secure. And what if the predictions about Wiley Wallace's and Vincent Goo's basketballers turn out to be true? What bliss that would be! The bucks ought to be rolling in for higher education then, for sure.

Now, you might wonder why I am focussing on predicting the future so much. The answer, of course, is that I was invited to speak briefly today on the future of literacy and the workplace. I am happy to do that, because I have given a lot of thought to both.

For example, I was approached by the people in charge of student advising at the UHM some months ago. It seems that students have been asking the advisors what they should major in so that they can get good jobs in the future. The advisors hoped I knew the answer. And I do. So for the last two weeks, members of the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies, which I direct, have been engaging the advisors, some UH students and faculty, and some folks from downtown--perhaps some of you here today--in a series of exercises intended to help everyone involved think more usefully about the future of work in Hawaii.

We hope that not only might students thus be able more wisely to choose their majors but also--and this is probably a vain hope indeed--that the faculty involved might reflect on whether what they are teaching is likely in any way to be useful to anyone in the future, and, if not, to consider what they might be teaching instead!

I have long argued that no teacher should stand up in a classroom and teach anything until she has asked and answered for herself the question: "What is the future environment of my students likely to be, and how is what I am about to teach likely to be useful to my students in their future?"

No self-respecting teacher should have the guts to teach anything until she has tried to answer that question. But very, very few have.

Moreover, I believe that no self-respecting parent should tell a child what to do or what not to do about anything until she also has asked the same question about her child's future. And I can assure you that an even smaller percentage of parents have asked that question of themselves. Indeed, very few have even thought about what it means to be a parent before they have somehow managed to become one, but that's another matter.

Now, don't get me wrong. I am not saying that predicting the future is easy. And I certainly am not saying that I know beyond a shadow of a doubt what will be the future of literacy and the workplace. No way. I'm not able to predict anything of any significance with any accuracy.

Let me illustrate what I mean:

Before the present UH football season, when it came time for me to decide whether to get up at 2 AM in order to stand in line to buy UH faculty football tickets (yes, that is what we have to do, and that is pretty typical of the way the faculty is treated by the administration of the University, maybe for good reason), anyway, I looked over our schedule, reflected on our record last year and our troops this year, and almost decided not to buy tickets for the first time in 22 years. I predicted that UH would win only one game this year.

You will be happy to know that we did in fact win the one game I predicted we would, and by just about the score that San Diego beat us on Saturday. So I was right about that. And I was also correct in predicting that we would lose to Utah and San Diego on the road. But, as you know, I have been wrong on all the rest--so far.

So I certainly wouldn't take what I am about to say about the future of literacy and work too seriously, though I am as serious about what I am going to say as I can possibly be.

Let me start with the future of work and the workplace.

When I first entered the futurist business back in the mid-1960s, the stock-in-trade of all futurists was the prediction that, as a consequence of the transition of first North America, then Europe, and then Japan from an industrial society to a post-industrial society, by the early 21st century, the need for human labor, mental as well as manual, would dwindle to almost nothing. Primarily because of the rise of automation, robotization, and eventually artificial intelligence, we really wouldn't need to have many people working in order to produce all of the goods and services which everybody in the world could possibly want, much less could possibly need.

I used to tell people that if I were to run for governor, or president, I would do so on the pledge that I could guarantee a world of full unemployment, and that anyone who promised anything approaching full employment was either lying or stupid, or both.

I used to say that this did not mean that everyone would be poor, or even that only the few people who did get the few jobs still requiring human attention

and the human touch would be the only ones able to gain access to goods and services. No, I envisioned a future where the connection between work and access to goods and services was cut; where, as a consequence of being human, everyone was guaranteed free access to all of the goods and services anyone wanted. Rather than receiving only a bare minimum of goods and services, I repeated the slogan of Buckminster Fuller that we would be able to guarantee everyone a bare maximum--whatever they wanted--goods and services being so easily and cheaply created, and so abundantly available and distributed.

Now of course, some jobs--I used to estimate maybe 20% of those presently available--would still be around. There were some things that no robot, especially no intelligent one, would do, or should do. There are things that only humans should do, and many of those jobs have to do with caring for other humans (though many aspects of those jobs can and probably should be automated as well).

So in order to move into a society of both abundance and leisure, I used to say that two major problems needed to be addressed. One was to be sure that everyone had ready access to all goods and services whether or not they "worked" for them. The other was to find a way where everyone shared equitably in the "burden"--and the "opportunity"--of doing whatever work any humans actually had to do.

I considered those to be difficult, but by no means insurmountable, problems.

Now, twenty or so years later, here we are. Was I correct? Are we closer to a society of leisure and abundance now than we were ten or twenty years ago?

Let me ask you. You be the judge:

(Ask and respond).

I think we definitely are closer to a society of full unemployment now than we were ten or twenty years ago, and that, as the decade of the 1990s turns into the 21st Century, we will be closer still. Absolutely nothing has happened to make me change my forecast. Indeed, I interpret everything that happened from the late 1970s--in the latter days of Jimmy Carter's presidency--through Reaganomics and George Bush's reign, up to, and now through, the election of Clinton and Gore as pushing us even faster away from conditions that either require human labor in the production and distribution of most goods and services or, as importantly, are even able to provide jobs just to keep people off the streets.

In my opinion, the specter--or opportunity, or at least the possibility--of the US becoming a society of full unemployment is what Carter actually faced in the late 1970s. While it is possible that Carter himself, or some of his colleagues, understood it for what it was, most other political and economic figures either did not, or did not want to acknowledge the implications. In any event, they responded by heating up the nearly dead Cold War and by otherwise initiating many of the policies that a few years later were to be called Reaganomics. That is to say, a decision was made even before Reagan became president to keep the obsolete economic system going through military welfarism on the one hand and by encouraging massive public, corporate, and

consumer debt on the other, and, I should add, by basically "hollowing out" US industry and giving it away to East and Southeast Asia and to Europe.

Thus, the pace of the destruction of old, secure, necessary jobs in and around industry was enormously increased, and while there was a temporary upsurge in new and more jobs in so-called "money management"--"rapid indebtedness to bankruptcy" might be a better term--many of these jobs also have come, or are coming, to an end. I am sure you all know that layoffs nowadays--for the last five years or so--are not primarily in blue collar, but in white collar, occupations, because there just aren't that many blue collar jobs left. You probably also know that while some new high paying and perhaps high tech jobs are coming on line, the future of full employment in secure and good paying jobs is virtually non-existent.

If I were to factor in what will happen to the old-fashioned economy when the new and emerging technologies of genetic and molecular engineering come on line in the early 21st Century then whatever hair left on your head would be standing quite upright, I'm sure.

But I don't have time to go further in that scenario now. Let me just conclude my remarks on the future of the workplace by asking you: what workplace? and what workers? Many of you here are in some kind of a service industry now, and you may assume that human labor will always be necessary for that from management to maids. Maybe so, but maybe not. And anyway, given what I've just said about the rest of the global economy, where do you think the money is going to come from for people to be able to fly to Hawaii for a vacation anyway--especially the mobs of middle class tourists upon whom you have built your industry to service?

And I'm not even going to comment today on what new environmental conditions--sea-level rise which will inundate Waikiki and the airport; climate change which might end our trade winds and leave us with perpetually muggy weather; or ozone depletion which will vastly increase the chance of skin cancer on even brief exposure to the sun--I'm not even going to mention them today, or ask what you think the future of sun-based tourism in Hawaii might be.

Instead, I'm moving on to make a few comments about the future of literacy.

And, as you might have guessed by now, I am no more sanguine about the future of print-based literacy than I am about a job-based economy.

In fact, my argument about literacy is very close to the one I have already made about jobs: we don't really need to be stressing print-based literacy now to the extent we are. As in so many areas of life, in my view, we are fixing up yesterday's problems rather than addressing today's and preparing for tomorrow's.

Briefly put, my point is this: most people today get most of their information about the world not from newspapers, magazines, or books. Very, very few people who know how to read ever do read, and if they do read, it is for fun or for profit, not for information about the world.

The overwhelming majority of people everywhere in the world, and for every social class or level of education, even the highest, get most of their ideas and beliefs about the world from television, movies, radio, and other nonprint media.

Let me give you some examples of what I mean.

A few years ago an automobile crashed through the plate glass front of a laundromat in Kapahulu. A woman who was waiting inside for her laundry to dry was interviewed after the accident. She had been in the back of the room, and she described how the car came roaring through the window, glass flying, washers and dryers tossed aside, water spouting. What were her thoughts, perhaps her last living thoughts, as the car plunged towards her? "I thought I was watching television," she said. I can imagine her vainly trying to change channels to get away from the onrushing engine of potential doom.

In Nebraska, a man whose parachute failed to open until just the last second before he smashed into the earth said the same thing. As he was free falling to his likely death he said he thought he was viewing it all on television.

And then also a year or two ago, an airplane loaded with kids and parents heading back north after a vacation in the pleasure domes near Orlando, Florida, suffered engine loss and crash-landed. A surviving mother with her three small children was interviewed following their evacuation from the smoldering ruin. What were their, perhaps last, thoughts as the airplane plummeted to earth? The family answered in unison: "We thought we were on a ride at Disney World."

One of the biggest thrills at Aloha Stadium is to see yourself on the Jumbotron Screen, and perhaps be chosen the Sony Fan of the Game. And I must admit that I am pleased to see the literacy program being touted on that same gigantic scoreboard recently by, of course, little kids singing and dancing, sort of.

One of my favorite items in the newspaper (harumph!) is the comic strip, "Calvin and Hobbes." As usual, they state my case in its clearest form. Calvin and Hobbes are having one of their intriguing philosophical discussions as they are about to careen dangerously down a snow-covered hill on their sled.

"Let's hurry down this hill and go home," says Calvin to Hobbes.

"What's the rush?" Hobbes wants to know.

"There's a TV show on sledding I want to watch," replies Calvin.

He continues: "In my opinion, television validates existence." (By now, they are careening down the hill, as the distorted face of Hobbes makes clear). "Take this sled ride, for instance," Calvin goes on. "The experience is fleeting and elusive. By tomorrow, we'll have forgotten it, and it may as well have not even happened. But if we were on TV now, countless viewers would share in the event and confirm it! This ride would become part of mass consciousness. And on TV, the impact of an event is determined by the image, not its substance. So with some strong visuals, our sled ride could conceivably make us cultural icons! Instead of being boring ol' Calvin and Hobbes, we'd be

'Calvin and Hobbes--as seen on TV!' Wouldn't that be great? Don't you wish we were on TV?" asks Calvin, smiling blissfully, as the sled flies off a cliff tossing Calvin and Hobbes to sail free in the air.

"At this moment," replies Hobbes, covering his face with his paws, "I like my anonymity."

As an after thought, and moments before landing in a snowbank, Calvin adds, "I think we should go for the high-brow Public TV audience, don't you?"

Now I think Calvin is dead wrong about that. But his basic point is absolutely correct: "Instead of being boring ol Calvin and Hobbes," they'd be "Calvin and Hobbes--as seen on TV"! Once you've been seen on TV you are real. If TV hasn't noticed you, you haven't been noticed at all, no matter how rich you are. And if you are rich enough, like ole Ross Perot, you can buy all the TV exposure the audience can possibly endure.

I won't even mention the theme park studio production that played to big TV audiences on CNN a year ago last January under the title, "The Gulf War". That certainly was the biggest piece of skillful brainwashing Americans have ever witnessed. Having learned well the lesson of Vietnam, the first TV War, the Administration brilliantly and cynically presented an entirely staged bit of puppetry which convinced most Americans that the erstwhile Madman of the Desert got the licking he deserved without the brave American boys and women so much as soiling their doilies.

In the future, many, many more people will get their ideas about the world not from print but from increasingly sophisticated audio-visual sources, such as what is now being called "virtual reality," and eventually from sources which by-pass even our eyes and ears and link up directly to our central nervous system.

Frankly speaking, I wonder whether the fact that our schools, and now our jobs, stress reading and writing so much is not so that people can be liberated into the wonderful world of knowledge which is locked away in books, but in order to divert people from realizing how brainwashed they are by television and the movies, and, more importantly, preventing them from learning how to talk back to their television sets by enabling them, skillfully and effectively and engagingly, to produce movies and videos expressing their own views of their own identities and perspectives.

That, in my opinion, should be the future of literacy, and of literacy programs such as this one we are honoring today: in helping people learn how to be media literate and in assisting them in getting their polished and sophisticated video productions actually shown in prime time on the popular channels. I challenge everyone here to undertake that essential next step in literacy for the future.

But as I said at the outset, what do I know about the future? If I couldn't even come close in predicting how the Rainbows were going to do in football this year why should you take seriously my views about the future of literacy and the workplace?

Also, I am sure all of you noticed that I have been reading my remarks, which I lovingly prepared in writing several days ago. If I think media literacy is so important, how come I didn't just plug a video into a VCR somewhere and turn you on?

Well, I did at least think about it.

Maybe next time.