

# The Educationist as Painkiller

By Neil Postman<sup>1</sup>

For more articles, see [www.neilpostman.org](http://www.neilpostman.org).



*I intended this essay for the consideration of educationists, but wrote it with laymen in mind, or at least those citizens who have wondered why there is so much failure in our schools. Failure of teachers, not students. As is usually the case with me, I conclude that at the heart of significant reform is language education, and the essay adds to what I have said on the matter in "Defending Against the Indefensible." In a somewhat different form, this essay was presented as the keynote address at the annual convention of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, in New Orleans, March 1987.<sup>2</sup>*

Of all the popular prejudices nurtured by academics, one of the most enduring is their vigorous contempt for the subject of education and especially for educationists, a word often pronounced with an unmistakable hiss. As I consider myself an educationist, I have had to endure the burden of this prejudice for many years, and, as a consequence, have given some considerable thought to its origins. The prejudice is peculiar, of course, because many of the world's most esteemed philosophers have written extensively on education and may properly be called educationists.

Indeed, Confucius and Plato were what we would call today curriculum specialists. Cicero was less specific in his writing on education than Confucius and Plato, but he too was an educationist if we may take that word to mean a person who is seriously concerned to understand how learning takes place and what part schooling plays in facilitating or obstructing it. In this sense, Quintilian was an educationist, and so were Erasmus, John Locke, Rousseau, and Thomas Jefferson. The great English poet John Milton was so moved by the prospect of writing an essay on education that he called the reforming of education one of "the greatest and noblest designs to be thought on."

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is copyright 1988 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission. "The Educationist as Painkiller" was originally published in *English Education* (1988), 7-17. It was also published in *Conscientious Objections* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 82-96.

<sup>2</sup> Postman, Neil. *Conscientious Objections* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 82.

In modern times, the list of educationists continues to include formidable intellects—William James, for example, whose *Talks to Teachers* is among the best books on education ever written. Two of the greatest philosophers in this century, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper, were elementary-school teachers who of necessity would have thought deeply about educational issues. Wittgenstein's professor at Cambridge, Bertrand Russell, founded a school, and Russell's colleague, Alfred North Whitehead, wrote the impeccable *Aims of Education*. And, of course, America's greatest homegrown systematic philosopher, John Dewey, was an educationist par excellence. In other words, the history of Western philosophy is so bound up with the subject of education that the two can hardly be separated. One might even say that just as it is natural for a physicist upon reaching his deepest understandings to be drawn toward religion, so it is natural for a mature philosopher to turn toward the problems of education.

Why, then, this persistent prejudice against the subject and those who make a profession of its study? Definitive Answers await a rich and extensive research project to which sociologists, psychologists, historians, perhaps even anthropologists must contribute their perspectives. I mention anthropology because I suspect the intensity of the prejudice varies from culture to culture. There are places—China, for example—where the prejudice may not exist at all. But if we confine ourselves to the West, we are almost sure to find that it is in the United States that the prejudice is maintained in its most active state. There are great universities in America—Yale, for example—where a student cannot major in the subject. There are even universities where the subject is held in such low esteem that it is possible for a student to major in, of all things, Business Administration but not Education. Of course, Business Administration alumni are usually better positioned to give large gifts to a university than are Education alumni, but this fact by itself cannot explain the pervasiveness of the prejudice. After all, in many universities where the subject of education is considered a side issue, if considered at all, students may major in such subjects as Social Work and Nursing, neither of which promises its graduates the wherewithal to bestow large gifts on Alma Mater. No, I do not think the economics of universities will tell us very much. My own attempts to look into the matter have led in another direction, and by following that path, I believe I have found a way of reversing the prejudice entirely. Even better, I believe my inquiries point toward a solution to a more formidable problem; namely, how to increase our own self-respect.

The usual reason given by standard-brand academics for their distaste for the subject of education is that it is trivial. This they say without much forethought, as if by rote, as if they neither expected nor could resist a rebuttal. When rebuttal comes in the form of a few well-chosen questions of the type "Is it trivial to examine what is meant by learning, and what relation, if any, teaching has to learning?," their attack shifts to a different ground. It is not the triviality of the subject, they say, but the

triviality of its professors, many of whom have no deep knowledge of the works of Plato, Cicero, Locke, Rousseau, and other philosophers of similar weight and complexity. This accusation is probably true but is fairly easy to parry, since the same sort of deficiency may be found in professors of other subjects and probably not in smaller measure. Who can deny that there are professors of economics who have not read Ricardo or Marx or even Adam Smith, from beginning to end? Or professors of political science who know little of Machiavelli, let alone Aristotle and Plato? Or professors of psychology who, though Freud considered him his equal, know nothing of the works of Arthur Schnitzler? It is to be doubted that professors of education are as a group more ignorant than professors of other subjects.

The equal distribution of ignorance among a university faculty, however, invites a question whose answer opens the way to a solution that can free us of both the prejudice and some of our own inadequacies. The question is this: Is there anything worse about an ignorant professor of education than an ignorant professor of economics, political science, or psychology? The answer, I believe, is "Yes." All professors are ignorant, but not all ignorances are of equal importance. And there is nothing worse than ignorance on the subject of education. This is so because the subject of education claims dominion over the widest possible territory. It purports to tell us not only what intelligence is but how it may be nurtured; not only what is worthwhile knowledge but how it may be gained; not only what is the good life but how one may prepare for it. There is no other subject—not even philosophy itself—that casts so wide a net, and therefore no other subject that requires of its professors so much genius and wisdom. A professor of political science or economics who lacks insight and brilliance is far from contemptible; indeed, the deficiency may be hardly noticeable. But without brilliance and insight, an educationist is a pitiful sight, bereft, fumbling, nakedly stupid in a way that can never appear as obviously negligent in other subjects. To address the questions posed by Plato, Erasmus, Locke, and Dewey but without their intellectual power, not to mention their spiritual strength, seems arrogant and makes the garden-variety educationist such as myself an object of pity and ridicule.

Those of us—whether schoolteachers, administrators, or professors—who wish to claim the name "educationist" have a problem with what the Greeks called *hubris*. How can we solve it? The solution is simpler than one might suppose. The solution is to diminish the extent of our limitations by diminishing the scope of the subject. In so doing, we may increase not only our stature but also our competence and potency. If I may put it this way: Smaller is better.

Let me take the question of intelligence as my principal example. It is neither seemly nor necessary for educationists to claim to know what intelligence is and how it is nurtured. The claim is grandiose, intelligence too vast and elusive. Educationists like ourselves are not up to the task of understanding the infinite varieties of

intelligence, and we fool no one by generating a giant vocabulary that pretends to take hold of the matter. “Where understanding fails,” Goethe wrote, “a word will come to take its place.” He did not have the vocabulary of educationists in mind, but the aphorism fits. To put it plainly, we know next to nothing about intelligence, in the same sense that medical doctors know next to nothing about health. That is why doctors do not concern themselves with health, and give all their attention to relieving us of sickness. Indeed, their definition of health is the absence of sickness. This is a perfectly sensible way for them to approach matters and accounts in part for the success they have had compared to teachers. By concentrating on the elimination of sickness, doctors give a focus to their objectives and procedures that teachers have not been able to match.

Something quite similar may also be said of lawyers. When have you ever heard of someone consulting a lawyer in order to improve the quality of justice or good citizenship? Whether acting as prosecutors or defenders, lawyers do not trouble themselves about justice or good citizenship—of which, in any case, they know no more than the grocer down the block. They trouble themselves about injustice and bad citizenship, of which they know more than anyone else, and which, it turns out, are much more profitable fields of expertise. Doctors and lawyers, in other words, are painkillers. They are sought out by people who in one way or another have found themselves in trouble and are in need of remedies.

This, then, is the strategy I propose for educationists—that we abandon our vague, seemingly arrogant, and ultimately futile attempts to make children intelligent, and concentrate our attention on helping them avoid being stupid. You may be inclined to think that I am playing with language, proposing a semantic trick. Perhaps. But it is no “mere” semantic trick. By changing the way we talk about our role as teachers, we provide ourselves with necessary constraints and realizable objectives. To return to the medical analogy: The physician knows about sickness and can offer specific advice about how to avoid it. Don't smoke, don't consume too much salt or saturated fat, take two aspirins, take penicillin every four hours, and so forth. I am proposing that the study and practice of education adopt this paradigm precisely. The educationist should become an expert in stupidity and be able to prescribe specific procedures for avoiding it.

I grant that, unlike the study of sickness and injustice, the study of stupidity has rarely been pursued in a systematic way. But this does not mean that the subject has no history. In fact, there are many honorable books that take it as their theme and pursue the matter diligently. My own favorites include the *Analects* of Confucius and the early *Dialogues* of Plato, which are little else but meditations on stupidity. Acknowledging that he did not know what truth is, Socrates spent his time exposing the false beliefs of those who thought they did. I am also partial to Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and, in a more modern vein, Jacques Ellul's

*A Critique of the New Commonplaces* and Stephen Jay Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man*. But no matter how many books you read, I believe you will find that there are three conclusions about stupidity that all writers on the subject have reached. These conclusions give educationists a foundation to build on. The first is that everyone practices stupidity, including those who write about it; none of us is ever free of it, and we are most seriously endangered when we think we are safe. That there is an almost infinite supply of stupidity, including our own, should provide educationists with a sense of humility and, incidentally, assurance that they will never become obsolete.

The second conclusion is that stupidity is reducible. At present, educationists consume valuable time in pointless debates over whether or not intelligence is fixed, whether it is mostly genetic or environmental, and even how much of it different races have. Such debates are entirely unnecessary about stupidity. Stupidity is a form of behavior. It is not something we have; it is something we do. Unlike intelligence, it is neither a metaphor nor a hypothetical construct whose presence is inferred by a score on a test. We can see stupidity, and we can hear it. And it is possible to reduce its presence by changing behavior. This should provide educationists with a sense of potency.

The third conclusion is that stupidity is mostly done with the larynx, tongue, lips, and teeth; which is to say, stupidity is chiefly embodied in talk. It is true enough that our ways of talking are controlled by the ways we manage our minds, and no one is quite sure what "mind" is. But we are sure that the main expression of mind is sentences. When we are thinking, we are mostly arranging sentences in our heads. When we are thinking stupidly, we are arranging stupid sentences. Even when we do a nonverbal stupid thing, we have preceded the action by talking to ourselves in such a way as to make us think the act is reasonable. The word, in a word, brings forth the act. This provides educationists with a specific subject matter: the study of those ways of talking that lead to unnecessary mischief, failure, misunderstanding, and pain.

A sense of humility, a sense of potency, a specific subject matter. This is precisely what doctors and lawyers have, and this is what is to be gained if educationists adopt the metaphor of educationist as painkiller. But, of course, this would not be the end of the matter, just the beginning. Two more giant steps are needed to complete the transformation. First, we must construct an anatomy of stupidity, including a thorough taxonomy of it. Just as doctors have identified, named, and described forms of sickness, we must identify, name, and describe forms of stupidity. Then, of course, we must invent two kinds of curricula: one intended for those who teach education to those who will become teachers; subsequently, another for use in schools in various subjects and for children of various ages.

My background does not allow me to presume to say how this might be done. But I want to insist on one point: following the analogy of medical prescription, the

curricula must be thought of as strategies for releasing students from the pain of both practicing stupid talk and being victimized by it. Stupidity is like sickness in that some of it we produce ourselves, like ulcers, and some of it is inflicted upon us, like smallpox; our students need protection from both. In this, I fancy that I might make some contribution.

Over the past twenty years, I have made several attempts at constructing an anatomy of stupidity, using as case material, I might add, my own tendencies in that direction. I do not claim to have been entirely successful, but I have been able to isolate thirty-two varieties of stupid talk. These include some of the more obvious forms, such as either-or thinking; overgeneralization; inability to distinguish between facts and inferences; and reification, a disturbingly prevalent tendency to confuse words with things. For the rest of this essay, I should like to give a few additional samples so that you will have a clearer view of what educationists would be experts in remedying, at least as I see it.

I am aware, by the way, that some people do not approve of my using the word “stupidity” as a label for these linguistic practices. Apparently, they feel that the word is too harsh and judgmental to suit the dignity of an educational enterprise. My friend and colleague Henry Perkinson, who has himself tried to construct an anatomy of stupidity, prefers the word “error,” as in his wonderful book *The Possibilities of Error*. But I have another friend and colleague, Charles Weingartner, who prefers the word “bullshit,” not only because the kind of talk we want to study deserves harsh judgment but also because the word stresses the point that stupidity is mostly a kind of talk. I have rejected Professor Weingartner’s suggestion, although I will confess that I can think of no more uplifting thought in this matter than to imagine a college catalogue offering courses with such titles as Beginning, Intermediate, and Advanced Bullshit. In any case, here I will use the word “balderdash,” as a kind of compromise between Perkinson’s gentleness and Weingartner’s forthrightness. But whether we call these forms of talk stupidity, errors, mistakes, bullshit, balderdash, or anything else, what they amount to are forms of language behavior that produce unnecessary confusion, pain, and misunderstanding. In some cases, they are conscious tricks people use in order to delude others; in some cases, they are unconscious habits with which we delude ourselves. In either case, someone is victimized.

There are so many varieties of balderdash that I can hope to mention but a few, and to elaborate on even fewer. I will therefore select only those varieties that have some transcendental significance. Now that last sentence is a perfectly good example of balderdash, since I am not certain what “transcendental significance” might mean and neither are you. I needed something to end that sentence with, and since I did not have any clear criteria by which to select my examples, I figured this is the place for some big-time words. Thus we have our first variety of balderdash: pomposity.

Pomposity is the triumph of style over substance, and generally it is not an especially venal form of balderdash. A little pomposity at a graduation ceremony is surely bearable. But it is by no means harmless. Plenty of people are daily victimized by pomposity—made to feel less worthy than they have a right to feel by people who use fancy words, phrases, and sentences to obscure their own insufficiencies. Many people in the teaching business dwell almost exclusively in the realm of pomposity and quite literally would be unable to function if not for the fact that the profession has made this form of balderdash quite respectable.

Generally speaking, pomposity is not a serious affliction among the young, although they are easily victimized by it. There seems to be a correlation between pomposity and aging, as I am beginning to discover myself. Young people, however, suffer badly from a related form of balderdash—what might be called earthiness. Earthiness is based on the assumption that if you use direct, off-color, four-letter words, you somehow are speaking more truth than if you observe the proper language forms. It is the mirror image of pomposity, because, like pomposity, it hopes that people will be so dazzled by the manner of speech that they will not notice the absence of matter. Earthiness becomes dangerous when we convince ourselves that four-letter words are the natural mode of expressing sincerity or honesty or candor.

Another, far more distressing variety of balderdash is called euphemism, and it is exemplified by the word “balderdash” itself. By using the word, I am guilty of euphemizing. But my guilt is not nearly as serious as the guilt of some other, more prominent people. One of the best examples of euphemizing in the past several decades was provided by President Nixon’s press secretary, Ronald Ziegler, who instead of using the four-letter word “lies,” as in the sentence “The President’s previous statements were lies,” chose the eleven-letter word “inoperative.” President Nixon went Ziegler one better when he chose to say that members of his campaign organization were guilty of an excess of zeal. This was the first time to my knowledge that the word “zeal” has been used as a euphemism for illegal entry, stealing, bribery, and perjury. In any case, euphemism seems to be playing an increasingly important role in American public life. We have had to endure such phrases as “protective reaction strike,” “preventive detention,” “pacification programs,” and one of my all-time favorites, “disinformation.” The Reagan administration says it did not lie to the American public about Libya; it merely disseminated disinformation. And on the subject of the present administration, I am obliged to mention one of its more creative euphemisms concerning President Reagan, of whom it is said that he favors a “hands-off managerial style.” I assume that the reader understands that this means he doesn’t know what the hell is going on.

Euphemism, then, is that form of balderdash wherein we attempt to obscure the nature of reality. Like pomposity, this process is not always harmful, for there are many occasions when simple good taste or good manners require euphemism.

But when euphemism becomes a dominating mode of expression in our institutional life, it is dangerous and ought not to be tolerated. The same is true of euphemism's closest cousin—word magic. Word magic is the process of using language not to obscure reality but to replace it altogether. Word magic is a serious affliction among the young, but they are not the major carriers of the disease. The idea that merely saying something will make it true is the fundamental strategy of America's largest private enterprise—advertising. The advertising industry relies heavily on a population that believes in the magical powers of words to create realities that do not exist. There are many people roaming the streets who appear to believe that the use of Listerine will improve their sex lives or that All-Purpose Tide, if used in abundance, will help solidify their family situation. Actually, if Tide solidifies anything, it is our rivers, not our families, and I am not sure how much more of this balderdash our environment can take.

Word magic is an ancient form of balderdash and is never to be taken lightly. But there is another that is just as ancient and perhaps even more malignant: what some people call fanaticism. There is one type of fanaticism, usually called bigotry, of which I will say nothing—not only because it is so vulgar and obvious but also because teachers are very well aware of it and have made strenuous efforts to help students overcome it. But other forms of fanaticism are not as obvious and therefore may be more dangerous. One of them is what I call Eichmannism, in honor of Adolf Eichmann, who expertly managed to transport about 1 million Jews to the gas chambers but who to the end of his life could see nothing wrong with what he did. Eichmannism is that form of balderdash which accepts as its starting and ending point official definitions, rules, and regulations without regard for the realities of particular situations. The language of Eichmannism is the voice of the organization, which is why it is usually polite, subdued, and even gracious—in a plastic sort of way. A friend of mine actually received a letter once from a mini-Eichmann which began: “We are pleased to inform you that your scholarship for the academic year 1981–1982 has been cancelled.” Eichmannism is the cool, orderly, cynical language of the bureaucratic mentality alienated from human interests. It is especially dangerous because it is so utterly detached. That means, among other things, that some of the nicest people turn out to be mini-Eichmanns, and that includes most of us.

Ironically, a version of Eichmannism may be identified in the language of its victims, people so overwhelmed by establishments and systems that they have accepted as unchangeable all the rules and regulations that bureaucrats administer.

This acceptance frequently takes the form of deifying “they” and “them,” as in “They won't let me do this,” or, “There is no way of dealing with them.” The fact is that every system, no matter how impersonal, is in the end controlled by people and is therefore susceptible to modification. There is, of course, no great harm in using a word like “establishment” as long as it is understood that the term is merely a

metaphor for organized power. But to the extent that terms like “the establishment” and “the power structure” are assumed to mean a non-human agent that perpetually frustrates individual human enterprise, then they are the equivalent of saying, “The Devil made me do it.” It is the greatest achievement of Eichmannism that in the end the language of the oppressor and the language of the oppressed are identical. They both end up saying, “I can’t help what I am doing.”

Two other varieties of balderdash require a word or two of explanation here, and one of them is what is usually called superstition. Superstition is ignorance presented under the cloak of authority. A superstition is a belief, usually expressed in definitive terms, for which there is no verifiable, factual basis; for instance, that the country in which you live is a finer place, all things considered, than all other countries. Or that the religion into which you were born confers upon you some special standing with the cosmos that is denied to other people. The teaching profession, it grieves me to say, has generated dozens of similar superstitions—for example, the belief that people with college degrees are educated, or the belief that students who are given lessons in grammar will improve their writing, or that one’s knowledge of anything can be objectively measured. For me, the most perilous of all these superstitions is the belief, expressed in a variety of ways, that the study of literature and other humanistic subjects will result in one’s becoming a more decent, liberal, tolerant, and civilized human being. Whenever someone alludes to this balderdash in my presence, I try to remind myself that during the last two decades men with Ph.D.s in the humanities and social sciences, many of them working for the Pentagon, have been responsible for killing more people in any given week than the Mafia has managed since its inception.

Finally, I want to mention an exceedingly depressing form of balderdash that never seems to diminish in popularity, namely, sloganeering. Sloganeering consists largely of ritualistic utterances intended to communicate solidarity. The utterances themselves may have meanings quite contrary to those the sloganeers intend—as in the mercifully obsolete expression “Power to the People.” Very few sloganeers who used this expression could possibly have wanted the people to have all that power since, were it possible, most of the people probably would have put an immediate end to campus dissent, women’s liberation, black activism, and other troublesome political movements. What “Power to the People” really meant, of course, was “Power to Our People,” a perfectly legitimate sentiment provided you have made clear to yourself and others that that is what you are saying. The major problem with sloganeering, whether shouted from a picket line or convention hall, or displayed on a car bumper, is that it is a substitute for thought, indeed a repudiation of thought. The young are afflicted badly with this sort of balderdash, of course, and if we could get them to restrict its use to cheering at football games, we would be making some progress. But

as long as slogans are used to simulate ideas, no matter in whose name, we have a serious problem in need of treatment.

Now, I know that the ways in which I have stated these forms of stupidity are inadequate. Nor do I claim that these are necessarily the most crippling habits of mind that afflict us. Even if some of them were, I assure you that I have no special expertise in imagining how we could get ourselves and our students to avoid them. I mean them to be taken only as examples of the behaviors we might identify as the focus of our activities as educationists.

Education as the art of healing the mind is in its infancy. In saying this, I intend no disrespect to the great educationists of the past. For at least 2,500 years, there were men called doctors of medicine, many of them brilliant and some of them useful. And yet, prior to this century, the whole history of medicine was simply the history of the placebo effect. Doctors have become effective, systematic healers only within the recent memory of living people. Perhaps in fifty years we shall be able to say the same of educationists.



## **About the Author**

Neil Postman (1931–2003) authored or co-authored more than twenty-five books including *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, *Technopoly*, and *The End of Education*. Postman received his B.S. from the State University of New York at Fredonia and his M.A. and Ed.D. from Columbia University. He was the Paulette Goddard Chair of Media Ecology at New York University and chair of the Department of Culture and Communication. His scholarly interests included media, education, language, and technology. For more information, visit [www.neilpostman.org](http://www.neilpostman.org).