

Editorial

The Customer is Always Right

At the 1955 annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, two individuals squared off in what was anticipated by some to be the verbal/intellectual equivalent of a heavyweight boxing bout: the Rogers-Skinner debate. Unlike Carl Rogers, who contended that individuals are largely autonomous beings that create their own phenomenological reality, Skinner contended that it is largely factors external to the individual that shape behavior. In spite of such opposed positions regarding learning, both agreed that insofar as education is concerned, the wants and needs of the student should be considered uppermost (Hergenhahn, 1990). Both participants provided few details as to how this philosophy was to be put into practice. Although Rogers (1969) later wrote that learning is largely "self-initiated," and therefore individuals must receive their autonomy and freedom to learn (p. 5), debate continues as to what is the optimum level of student autonomy and freedom.

In more recent times some educators, and many individuals in the lay public, have interpreted the idea of recognizing the individual learner to be synonymous with the mercantile maxim that whatever the client or customer wants is what they should receive. As in a fast food restaurant, when an extremely obese customer orders a super-sized burger with extra fries and a creamy milkshake, nary a word of caution or criticism should be voiced by the restaurant staff for fear of alienating or insulting the customer. After all, if customers want to harm themselves, that is not the concern of the restaurant, because the customer is always right. This is a naïve though common view of the food industry, especially fast food establishments. Is this view really a valid reflection of sound business practice? If it is, should educational institutions strive to do the same thing metaphorically? Especially within the last decade, in part as the result of governmental demands for "accountability," educational institutions from schools through universities have adopted the mantra of what the customer wants the customer should get, usually without much question or reflection.

Before considering the merits of whether educators should accept the student's desires as always being valid and appropriate, we should examine whether businesses unswervingly follow the dictum of the customer always being right. Not all business establishments are the same, even those offering the same services. If I go to a restaurant specializing in French cuisine and order jerked chicken with a pint of Guinness, either I will be told that such a selection is not available, or I will be asked to leave. Similarly, at a fast food restaurant that claims that one can have a burger "anyway you like," try ordering a raw chicken burger and see whether as the customer you are right. Health regulations and the fear of a lawsuit resulting from food poisoning will probably be reasons why you will not have your way. Clearly the customer is not always right, even in business. It is a combination of the customer's desires, what is available, and laws and regulations that determine the acceptable range of goods and services that may be offered to the customer.

Usually laws and regulations exist to protect the majority of individuals, as do traffic laws, although some and occasionally the majority contend that certain laws and regulations have deleterious effects on group and individual rights. If a few people argue that mandatory use of seatbelts infringes on individual choice, should the law either be suspended in their case or rescinded altogether? Most people recognize that seatbelt laws encourage the use of a safety device that will probably save lives and reduce the severity of injury. The welfare of the many, therefore, outweighs the objections of the few. Unfortunately, this view is not always so clear when considering other laws and regulations. For example, it can be argued that mandatory "high-stakes" testing can result in greater numbers of students failing courses and grades, and ultimately dropping out of school prematurely, rather than what happened before the use of such examinations (Hargrove et al., 2000).

This takes us back to the realm of education, where the concept of "service" is often conflated with "pleasing the customer" and naïve concepts of business expediency. Most schools and universities do their utmost to provide satisfactory service to their students, from accommodating individuals with special needs, to offering particular courses to meet local, linguistic, or cultural needs, and to making courses available at nontraditional times or through distance delivery. Such changes to "traditional" models of education strive to accommodate a variety of student needs while also respecting the educational laws, regulations, and standards of the jurisdiction. The boundary between accommodation and pandering is, however, often unclear, especially in the mind of the lay public. Much of the funding received by educational institutions is allocated on the basis of enrollment. Institutions with fewer students usually receive fewer funds. From one perspective, it is in the best interest of a school to minimize student loss. For this reason, some institutions adopted, either officially or tacitly, a "social promotion" policy, where instructors are strongly discouraged from awarding students failing grades. Apart from the stated benefits of keeping individuals with their peer groups, the receipt of failing grades might prompt the recipients or their parents to abandon that institution for another, thus diminishing enrollment and the financial resources of that institution (Fine, 1991). Unfortunately, social promotion policies have sometimes been rationalized by aphorisms such as, "a student does not fail, the institution/teacher fails," or the wonderful "there are no failures, just individuals who define success differently." Students thus promoted may be cheated, as they often do not receive education that is effective for them. Moreover, if they are repeatedly told that their need to be "satisfied customers" is being met, a notion is instilled that anything challenging or difficult is undesirable and should be objected to. As a reaction, some jurisdictions have instituted extensive testing to ensure that standards are adhered to (Denton, 2001; Hauser, 2000; Parker, 2001; Rothstein, 2000). It might appear to some "customers" that they will be better served by a return to retention, because they will be given an education that will meet their needs (Parker). All too often, however, blanket retention policies signal a return to the "bad old days," where students were retained until they became too old to attend (Hauser).

Besides the vacillation between social promotion and retention, another consequence of being unclear as to the extent to which an educational institu-

tion can serve individual students is that misconceptions among the public and among some politicians are engendered, reinforced, and propagated. Examples of such misconceptions are that teaching is absurdly easy, there are no standards, and that teachers work only five hours a day and receive two months paid vacation (Barrett, 2002; Holubitsky & Jeffs, 2002). When combined with the idea that "the customer is always right," these misconceptions can create an attitude in some individuals that is potentially dangerous to the integrity of education at all levels.

During the past five years, for example, many individuals have approached me who claim they want to become teachers. Noteworthy are those who state that they should spend only half as much time as other students to complete a BEd degree because of their skills and experience in areas unrelated to education. When I demur on the basis that professed skill competence or life experience does not necessarily equate to teaching ability, or even to the knowledge of how to teach that subject or skill, I am told, "I'm the customer, and I want to be a teacher in two years. You're supposed to accommodate my needs." When asked why they want to be teachers, the responses range from "It's easy work with two months off" to "I can't do my trade/skill commercially anymore, and this is a good second career." Invariably the conversation is all about their needs and desires exclusively. Certification requirements and institutional standards are not perceived by these individuals as opportunities for personal growth and an expansion of knowledge. Instead they are seen as objectionable obstacles that should be removed because, as customers, they are right in their contention that they do not need the sort of courses offered by the university.

In spite of my hints and prompts, most of these people fail to mention anything about wanting to work with students, or even to engender a love of learning in themselves or possibly in others. The idea of professional development or broadening one's knowledge just for the sake of learning something new is also a concept foreign to them. In part the concept of "customer" has blinded these individuals to the real purpose of education: the nurturing and facilitating of others not only to acquire knowledge, but also to grow intellectually. Imagine the "customer service" students in schools would receive if such aspiring "service providers" were to get their way as customers at the university. At present, institutional standards and provincial regulations concerning teacher education uphold the ideal that the "customer" is not always right.

Attitudes that focus only on the needs of the institution, or on the stated needs and desires of individuals in isolation, disregard the common needs of the many and the collective experience of educators. Although it may seem that the maxim "the customer is always right" helps ensure that students receive their "freedom to learn," without placing that thought within the context of effective and sound educational practice, the student is harmed through over-indulgence and an absence of direction.

A balance, therefore, must be maintained between the needs and desires of the individual and a careful consideration of what students should be exposed to and receive in educational institutions. Besides our desire to work with students and to strive for improvement, we have our positions because we possess more knowledge of and competence in teaching than most of the lay

public, especially politicians. If we forget this, or downplay our importance in education, then we abrogate our professionalism and leave ourselves in a weakened position to contend with whatever notion, idea, or mantra politicians and/or segments of the public try to impose on education.

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