Editorial

The Möbius Strip

Considerable media attention has been directed toward recent corporate scandals in many parts of the world. Besides deceiving their employees and robbing shareholders, the questionable practices undertaken by some chief executive officers and other administrative personnel have led to legal action. Indeed, it is alleged that what has been done by these so-called corporate stewards has harmed many individuals whose pension investments were plundered in the manner of 17th-century pirates. In other words, instead of contributing to the public good, such individuals have harmed the public. As I noted in my previous editorial, a tendency in North America, in the 20th century at least, has been to attribute perceived societal problems or shortcomings to deficits in the educational system. The examples of reading and the apparent lag in the space race were noted. Given such precedents, does the unconscionable behavior of a seemingly increasing number of corporate executives occur because of deficits in their schooling, or is it rather that a changing corporate ethos is affecting education?

Most individuals are aware of the *robber barons* of the 19th century who either made vast fortunes or augmented already large fortunes by engaging in enterprises that succeeded largely by exploiting segments of society or subjugating cultures and countries in the name of civilization or progress. Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) comes to mind, especially because in academic circles, a lasting legacy has been the Rhodes Scholarship. Herein lies a conundrum often not considered by educators, namely, is public service in and of itself a good thing, or should it be scrutinized? While education benefits by the legacy of Cecil Rhodes and others, are we, tacitly at least, condoning the means by which the gifts were made possible?

Some individuals contend that indeed the ways Rhodes and others made their money are known and are deplorable, but that gifts such as the Rhodes Scholarship or the land given by Leland Stanford for Stanford University are examples of what Albert Bandura termed *reciprocal determinism*. What this means is that although such individuals had an effect on society, reciprocally society had an effect on them. The giving of their money may be seen as either giving back to society or as atonement for the methods used to garner the money in the first place. Rather than regarding such behavior through the frame of reciprocal determinism, which is limited in scope, I see the relationship between community service, educational institutions, educational research, and high-profile individuals as much more complex. This is where my analogy of the Möbius strip comes in. A Möbius strip is a polygon that has neither a discernible beginning nor end point. If one could stand on a large Möbius strip, one could see only part of it. If one were to walk along the strip and defy gravity, one would eventually end up at the same place, but there would be twists, turns, and inversions along the way. It would be difficult to anticipate all the changes and effects along the journey. In other words, com-

munity service and the actions associated with it may not always be exactly what they seem when considered in greater depth and context.

An example of what I mean can be gathered by considering the respective public service of two important Canadian business leaders during the 1920s and 1930s. These individuals headed the two transcontinental railway systems in Canada, which were also the largest employers in the country at that time. I select these two individuals because much like now, captains of industry, especially those representing vast wealth, were highly regarded and thought of as examples that the rest of society should follow. The President of the Canadian National Railways (CNR), at that time a publicly owned corporation, was Sir Henry Thornton (1871-1933). In spite of his title, he was an American who earned his knighthood because of wartime contributions in Britain. Thornton's upbringing in the American midwest provided him with first-hand knowledge of public education and how it struggled to provide good education to a diverse multitude of students. Partly because of his upbringing, and in part because he headed a public company, much of Thornton's community service entailed providing support for public endeavors. The cutting-edge technology of the CNR radio network, for example, was made available for the dissemination of instructional broadcasts for schools, free of charge, beginning in 1926 (Thompson, 1926). This was done at a time when the use of radio for education was being touted as revolutionary an educational innovation as the introduction of movable type by Gutenberg (Morgan, 1930). School boards and most provinces did not have the resources to purchase such infrastructure. Of course, recipients of the broadcasts were reminded of who provided the service, but this contribution represented a considerable expenditure in kind. Moreover, the type of service provided, unlike what is now provided to schools by some multinational corporations, did not entail an enticement to buy a product; there was nothing to drink or eat. Although the impact of Sir Henry's contributions on the direction taken by education in Canada is arguable, his initiative encouraged Canadian universities and provincial governments to conduct research into distance education and to develop the use of educational radio. In passing, it should be noted that the CNR radio network comprised the basis of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which continues to survive as a national publicly owned radio and television system.

In contrast, Thornton's opposite number was Sir Edward Beatty (1877-1943), President of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). Beatty was Canadian by birth, came from a privileged background, and went to private schools. Although Beatty also believed that community service was important, his ideas were quite different from Thornton's, and Beatty was determined that both he and the CPR would outdo anything that Thornton and the CNR undertook. Rather than making infrastructure of the CPR available to schools, however, Beatty funded and sustained a private school for orphaned and underprivileged boys (Cruise & Griffiths, 1988). Unlike Thornton, Sir Edward got directly involved in social service, serving as Chancellor of Queen's University in Kingston from 1919 to 1923 and Chancellor of McGill University in Montreal between 1921 and 1943 (Canadian Pacific, 1947, September, p. 25). Beatty's contribution as Chancellor of McGill was not purely *pro forma*, as he involved

himself in many activities of the university that were not the purview of the Chancellor. Indeed to some, his involvement was regarded as unwarranted interference (Cruise & Griffiths, 1988). It might seem that Beatty's idea of social service was to support private educational endeavors and universities, which some individuals might regard as elitist institutions.

Beatty's desire to outshine Thornton and the Canadian National led to a commitment that demonstrated how the principle of social service extended throughout the vast corporate structure of the Canadian Pacific. Besides requiring his executive staff to engage in public service such as serving on school administrative boards and service clubs, Beatty was largely responsible for the introduction of tuition scholarships in the Canadian Pacific. Employees' children who wished to go to a postsecondary institution such as a university and who showed promise and academic achievement, but whose parents did not have the resources to fund such education, could apply for a tuition scholarship to the institution (Canadian Pacific, 1947, January). Such scholarships, while helping individuals attain higher education, usually meant that those children of employees would end up not working for the company. This ran contrary to the tradition that children would follow their parents' career paths. In most cases these children would probably obtain jobs that would be more intellectually challenging and remunerative than those held by their parents. For example, one scholarship holder, the son of a sectionman, was able to complete his studies to become a chartered accountant (Canadian Pacific, 1947, January, p. 18). In other words, at least some people in the Canadian Pacific believed that service to the public meant betterment of the public even though such improvement might not directly benefit the bottom line of the company.

Beatty's successor, D'Alton C. Coleman, continued the scholarship program. In addition, Coleman had been granted an honorary degree by the University of Manitoba in 1931 for his long service to that university and for his efforts in improving education in Manitoba while he was based in Winnipeg as Vice-President, Western Lines. Coleman also told his executive staff that public service for the goal of providing greater opportunities for individuals was essential, as no one could predict who would become an "important" person or what contribution they might make (Coleman, 1946, January, p. 1). Although it is likely that on his own Coleman would have been as magnanimous as Beatty, Coleman had both the example set by Beatty as well as the expectation of engaging in beneficial community service. As time passed, such explicit expectations for public service diminished as a result of increasing calls for greater corporate profit and expediency. Moreover, some individuals perceived a divide between private enterprise and public education: the latter being supported by taxpayers' money, whereas the former was independent and entrepreneurial. Although Thornton, Beatty, and Coleman lived many years ago and their actions might be considered irrelevant today, their views and actions embodied both an ethos and an expectation of the companies that they worked for. Moreover, each believed that it was his duty to give back to the community rather than to take from it continually, although their motives for doing so differed. Unfortunately, this tradition has not always continued in many circles, as evidenced by the corporate scandals mentioned above. Could

it be that educational institutions are in part responsible for the seeming erosion of the sense of public duty by some corporate executives? Of course, education, or the home environment for that matter, does not remove an individual's free will. However, it is acknowledged by many individuals that at least some learning occurs through the observation of modeled behavior and interactive social behavior (Miller & Dollard, 1941; Bandura, 1986).

At present most universities claim that they desire three main attributes of professors: an active research program, good teaching, and community service. Developments within the last 20 years at many universities, as reflected by the decisions of tenure and promotion committees, suggest that community service is either discounted altogether or accorded much less importance than research and teaching. With a minimal expectation of community service and little reward for undertaking such service, professors and university administrators will probably engage in less community service than in the past. Not only will this fail to provide a good example for students to follow, but universities risk traveling in the same general direction as some corporations: do only those things that "count," and get as much as you can for yourself. With few examples, is it too much to expect others to engage in apparently socially desirable community service? Moreover, if a main goal of universities is now to garner as much money as possible and increase research "productivity" at the expense of teaching and community service, will it be simply a matter of time before universities, and individuals within the institutions, make the sort of headlines that we have seen in respect to particular corporations and their executives?

George H. Buck

References

Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Canadian Pacific Railway. (1947, January). *Staff bulletin, 130.*

Canadian Pacific Railway. (1947, September). *Staff bulletin, 138.*

Coleman, D.C. (1946, January). Message from the Chairman and President. *Staff bulletin, 118.*

Cruise, D., & Griffiths, A. (1988). *Lords of the line.* Markham, ON: Viking Penguin Books of Canada.

Miller, N.E., & Dollard, J.C. (1941). *Social learning and imitation.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Morgan, J.E. (1930). Radio and education. In M. Codel (Ed.), *Radio and its future* (pp. 68-82). New York: Harper & Brothers.

Thompson, W.S. (1926). Radio invades the silent world. *Canadian National Railways Magazine, 12*(2) pp. 28, 56-57.