

Air Bands and Power Point

Peg Tittle

I still remember the feeling I had when I saw my first air band performance. It was a sick kind of feeling.

I hadn't known what an air band was. The announcement came over the p.a. at my school-for-the-day, and I dutifully shepherded the class to the gym. Then I watched, incredulous, as group after group of high school students came on stage and pretended to play their favourite songs. I mumbled a query to the teacher standing next to me. Apparently this air band stuff was quite big. Students spent weeks practising. They really wanted to get it right. 'It' being the appearance, the pretence.

In my day, the guys actually did play, guitars and drums mostly. Each school had a couple bands. From time to time they even played at our dances.

But I tried not to go there. That was then, this was now. There is some skill required for this, I thought. It does take practice to get it right. But still. It bothered me. As everyone applauded--faking it.

I was reminded of that sick kind of feeling just the other day. I heard a new technopop piece on the radio; it was based on a sample from a Gene Krupa drum solo. That's how technopop is 'composed': someone uses bits and pieces (samples) of other people's music and puts them together--often at random, mostly in repetition. That is to say, there's no coherent development, no substance.

It's sad to see that the ability to play, let alone compose for, a musical instrument is on the wane. But it's frightening to think about the why and the therefore.

I read somewhere that playing a musical instrument is the most mentally challenging task humans perform. Certainly the daily practice requires a level of both concentration and discipline that I just don't see in young people today. Is it that our kids don't have the mental stamina needed to learn how to play a musical instrument? Or is it that because they don't learn how to play a musical instrument, they don't develop such mental stamina. Either way, it's cause for concern. And my guess is it's both.

That is to say, attention to pretence/form instead of to substance/content is both the cause and the effect of a paucity of higher cognitive skills. True, content without form can be incomprehensible. But form without content isn't anything at all. One must attend to content before one attends to form. At best, content determines form. Further, inattention to content entails inattention to quality of content. And that makes things so much worse.

Consider the current fascination with the internet. Surfing the net is like watching the news (and browsing the encyclopedia). It's kibbles and bits of information. That's all. It's pure content. Sure, it's knowledge. But is it valuable knowledge? Is it relevant, is it adequate? Is it usable? One has to have some of those higher level cognitive skills to go beyond acquisition and comprehension into analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and application.

And, well, I've read about the increase in kids' television viewing time. I've heard about their inability to play games at recess: they just stand around, or maybe they play with a ready-made single-purpose toy for a bit and then they're bored. I'm told that kids, young people, don't go to the library anymore; they don't go to the used bookstores either, to trade in one handful of paperbacks for another. I know about the increase in learning

disabilities. And I found out about grades inflation: Cs are now Bs, Bs are now As--'So what do I give to students who really do get an A?' 'Trust me--you won't have that problem.' An exaggeration?

I teach courses from time to time at a university now. Basically I teach applied philosophy--Informal Logic, Contemporary Moral Issues, Business Ethics. I discovered in the first course that essays on controversial issues were way over most of the students' heads. I now give an open book reading comprehension quiz for each essay I assign--it doubles as a guide to the main points of the essay. I can't teach them to assess what they can't even understand.

And in three out of three courses, students have told me that the kind of thinking I'm demanding, essentially critical thinking, is a new way of thinking: they haven't had to do this before. Arts majors, Science majors, and Business majors, even third and fourth year students--they all say the same thing.

I happened to be in an Accounting class recently, watching students present case studies. The second group was very impressive. They sure had their act together. Respectfully in their suits and ties, standing at business attention, their voices projecting confidence, they introduced themselves as Wannick, Smith, and Pratsk: 'We thank you for choosing us as your Accounting consultants, and we are happy to present to you today our analysis...' They had rehearsed, that much was clear. And the power point presentation sure was slick: titles variously fonted with fade-ins and fade-outs, points neatly aligned and bulleted, graphics full of colour and icons--it looked just like the real thing. The class applauded.

I mumbled a query to the prof sitting next to me. 'Suitcoats and power point aside, which group had the better analysis?' 'The first group--these guys missed some important discrepancies in the accounts.' Hm. And if they didn't get an A, there's hope.

(Postscript: I take that back. There is no hope. The Student Union is holding an air band competition next week.)