The Mechanical Man

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Abstract

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OUT-OF-STATTERS, when they send mail to faculty members or students here, generally address their letters either to “Iowa State University” or to “Iowa State College.” Both of these addresses are wrong.

Iowa State is not, in the classic sense, either a college or a university, and its correct title should be something more like “Iowa State Trade School of Agriculture and Mechanics.”

Why is it that Iowa State turns out well-trained animal husbands (that must be the correct word) who can tell you in a minute the exact chemical composition of the glop to be fed to swine, but who do not know Wordsworth from a hole in the ground?

Why do Iowa State graduates wind up with 50 hours of chemistry, 25 hours of physics, 15 hours of in-between stuff, and nine hours of English and three hours of history?

Well, suppose we follow a typical student to a conference with his advisor. Perhaps we can find out.

First, we must know what an advisor is. Generally, an advisor is an old-fashioned way of doing what is done better now with mechanical check-writing machines. That is to say, he signs his name a great many times upon each student’s schedule, but he does not usually serve any other constructive purpose.

Very well, then. The student, whom we shall call Joe Btfsplk, knocks timidly upon the door of his advisor, Prof. Etaoin Shrdlu, of the Department of Theoretical and Applied (mostly applied) Technology. There is a snarl from within, which Joe interprets correctly to mean, “Come in.”

He enters. Prof. Shrdlu looks up from the galley proofs of his ninety-second book and mumbles, “Whdywnt?” Translated, this means “What do you want?” Joe explains that the quarterly time of suffering has come around again, that the hour of making up schedules and of pre-registration has arrived.

The professor groans. He puts aside his proofs and seizes his fountain pen, casting a catalogue at Joe’s feet. “Whdywntatak?” he growls.
"Well," ventures Joe, "I thought this quarter I might take your three courses in T. & A.T. You know — 741, 834 and 4381 — Advanced, More Advanced, and Damned Advanced T. & A. T." At this the professor almost beams.

Joe continues, "And then I was thinking about taking English 333 — Development of English Literature."

Professor Shrdlu grows purple. He shouts at Joe, "Whdy-wntatakthtf? Wnduynyg! Tksmthn PRACTICAL!" These words signify "What do you want to take that for? Won't do you any good! Take something PRACTICAL!"

"Well," he quakes, "maybe it would be better to take Practical Plumbing."

That's one reason Iowa State is not a university, nor even a college. Now let's follow Professor Shrdlu to a meeting of his department, to learn another reason.

The head of the department coughs loudly. The bridge game and the three tic-tac-toe games break up. Conversation dies away to a slow simmer.

"Mr-r-r-r-m!" begins the head of the department, Professor Cmfwyp. "We are to consider today the question of determining a curriculum for our students. Particularly, we must consider which courses in the department shall be required for graduation."

A small professor in the back of the room jumps up. "My courth!" he shouts.

After he has been suppressed, Professor Cmfwyp continues, "You know, of course, that at least 45 hours of T. & A. T. are required by the Division. We are privileged to determine what the 45 hours shall include, and whether any more shall be required."

"You mutht require my courth in Thtrength!" shouts the little professor.

Again he is suppressed, and the head of the department reads the list of the 25 of the department's 31 courses which are required for graduation. "These add up to 78 hours," he observes. "Has anyone any additions to suggest?"

A dignified professor rises. "I feel that students should be required to take the five courses in Impractical Practicalities," he states. "Hear, hear," say the rest. The motion is carried.
The thmall profethor jumpth up. “What about my courth?” he athkth — asks.

“Please!” says the department head severely, “Our students are adults! We must not plan their entire curriculum for them. We must leave them some freedom of choice!”

And the third reason why Iowa State graduates are not educated is Joe Bfsplk himself.

“A-a-a-a-h,” he says. “Why should we have to take English 103? What good does it do? It ain’t practical!”

Well, possibly you can’t educate Joe against his will. No doubt he will inevitably become a first-class manufacturer of plumbing supplies with a third-class mind. He will never read anything more difficult than a Sears Roebuck catalogue or the Reader’s Digest, and he will never think about anything except plumbing.

But Professor Shrdlu and Professor Cmfwyp ought to know better.

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**Cats on the Clothesline**

Who tied together the cats’ tails and threw them
Over the clothes line? I did, not knowing if I’m
Sorry or sad. Listening, I hear the howling, hissing,
Biting, scratching, feel the cut of the claw as it
Rips the costly coat that I’ve kept sprayed
With DDT and brushed now and then.

Must I concentrate on this seventeen-jeweled movement
Despite this awful racket? It does remind me of
The noise they made while making love but fiercer
Still with lessening pain instead of more.
I am humane; I lift them gently off the line
And stitch the clawed-over coats, inject a cat unit
Of tetanus antitoxin and apply iodine where it is needed.
A saucer of warmed milk to hoist the ego of them both
And then return to wheels and cogs and springs.
A calm, a peace at last; this wheel goes here
This cog fits there and then the spring is—
Oops, the springy thing has leapt away—
I search and find a wheel, a cog a spri—