

America, Oregon must start saving education

OUR OPINION: The top priority of the country should be education

The Oregon education system seems to be trapped on a roller coaster of positive reforms, such as the proposed pre-paid tuition program, but more commonly, negative drawbacks, such as the recent layoffs in Springfield's School District 19.

In an attempt to cut \$3 million from next year's budget, the district laid off 22 of its employees. Unfortunately, most of the younger, more enthusiastic teaching staff, counselors and librarians have been the ones predominantly targeted by the cut, leaving the older and more experienced teachers in their solid positions.

Though these cuts probably could have been made in other aspects of the district, less violently impacting people's lives, the bottom line is that the district should not have to cut such a large amount from their budget.

In Oregon and the rest of the United States, there never seems to be any money for education anymore. Whenever money is needed in other areas, funds are removed from the education system. We, as Americans and Oregonians, should not only be frightened, but screaming for these repeated cuts to stop.

But budget cuts are not the only dilemma that schools across the country are facing.

There is a current crisis in major cities nationwide concerning a shortage of teachers. Though one could say

that is a good thing because all of these recently unemployed Springfield teachers can run to Portland and get jobs, the problem is much more involved, threatening the quality of education in these cities. (But with our nation's priorities focused on everything else but education, it is no surprise that the quality of education anywhere is declining.)

Certain areas are suffering from these shortages more so than others. The vital areas that desperately need teachers are: special education, bilingual and minority education, math and science. These are the areas where uncertified teachers are being hired to fill the gap.

This sort of bottom-feeding is not only unacceptable, but completely unfair to students. Imagine what the outcome would have been if you had been taught two of the hardest classes of your academic career — science and math — by a teacher that was even more confusing and incompetent than the one you remember having. Imagine being a recent transfer student from a non-English speaking country, relying on an educator who has never learned how to manage a classroom, let alone a classroom of students who do not speak English.

Inner-city schools have enough deficiencies without the problem of weak teaching staffs. With recent surveys finding that 77 percent of major city school districts hired uncertified teachers because of shortages, one thing is evident: America desperately needs to get its priorities straight and stop neglecting education.



Cultural custodians could be charlatans

We're all living in a so-called post-modern age that nobody, not even the minds who came up with the label, can define. Post-modernism made it acceptable for pre-presidential Bill Clinton to play his sax on MTV and for gonzo political journalists to write about all the drugs they took on the campaign trail. It explains why plastic clothing and kiwi salads are chic, why camp is art and why falafel tastes better in London than it does in Lebanon. It has given us exciting new ways to read Jane Eyre without ever actually reading Jane Eyre. It shows us how language works, or rather, how it does not. It even explains once and for all why women secretly envy penises.

Postmodernism replaced common sense with deconstruction, post-structuralism and a host of five-syllable "isms" that make contemporary learning an adventure, if not a full-scale safari. Just when we thought we knew all the right books to read, we're faced with anti-books, or books about books, or books that tell us books are dead.

Fortunately for all the students, academicians and chefs who don't know their signifier from their signified, a New York University professor has stepped forward to assure us that yes, it is all bullshit.

When NYU physicist Alan Sokal hoaxed the editors of the prestigious critical journal *Social Text* by getting them to publish his nonsense-essay, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," (*Social Text*, #47) he made a statement about academia too rude to print.

Sokal's essay is a sampling of the most absurd quotations he could garner from the lips and texts of prominent contemporary thinkers. He includes lengthy footnotes and a couple hundred bibliographic references citing big names in post-modern theory.

The essay's underlying goal, apart from ridicule, is to assert that trendy theories have turned academia into a cerebral free-for-all in which buzzwords are more convincing than logic. The drive to dismantle old modes of thinking, Sokal implies, has resulted in sloppy thinking. What scholarly standards remain in a culture in which Rosanne is a more acceptable subject for study than Descartes?

Bad ones, according to Sokal.

Social Text is the Jean-Paul Gaultier of scholarship. It is the printed equivalent of a cappuccino breve. If it were a person, it would be someone you hated but wanted to know. A band, Smashing Pumpkins. It is a clearinghouse of postmodern ideas built in a very nice neighborhood.

The subjects it discusses (that is to say, discourses on) are as faddish and novel as kiwi salads. Even though the editors privately thought Sokal's article was "hokey," they printed it as a genuine critique. They accepted it because it quoted all the right people, bolstered the pre-

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vailing viewpoints, and was submitted by an author with the correct credentials.

If that's all it takes to get published these days, who's to say that all the articles and anti-books being assigned in Universities aren't gags, too? When respected scholars "in the know" don't even know when one of their own is blowing smoke, how are students to know? A worst-case scenario is that some of these scholars do know that what they're espousing is junk, but generate more of it anyway.



For a society that can't seem to come up with anything new, reinventing the old has given everyone something to think about. Post-modern theories began by showing how literature can be "creatively misread" to reveal coded meanings. They have since been applied to everything from haute cuisine to quantum mechanics. There are no limits to where creative misreading, misinterpreting, and misleading can take one. It's a fascinating field because it's lawless. It's popular because it's an intellectual game. Kant, Kierkegaard and Descartes were good, but they never gave anyone the tools to deconstruct Spam or analyze James Bond.

Unfortunately, it has also made it possible for somebody such as Sokal to convincingly "misread" established laws of physical reality. When pseudo-scholarship passes for the real thing one has to wonder who is willing or able to detect double-talk.

The men and women who contribute to *Social Text* are typically top-notch professors at leading universities. The editors themselves are established brains. And one of the publishers, Stanley Fish, has written articles used all over the country to train undergraduates in the art of misreading. These are the custodians of our culture. Or are they, as Sokal suspects, the charlatans?

According to the father of post-modernism, Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, a signifier is smoke, and a signified is fire. If you are ever trapped in a fire, just yell, "Signified! Signified!" and several dozen cultural constructs will appear to test your physical reality with gender-neutral, non-hegemonic water.

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