Muslim Education in a Technological Society

By Anas Coburn

Let me be clear from the start. I am not an expert in education. I have, however, been submitted to the typical educational experience in this society: Public schools followed by a State University. My particular interests lay in understanding the influence that technology has upon our society and the individuals that live in it. This paper is primarily an examination of education from a sociological perspective. It is roughly divided into two parts. The first part defines technique in general and educational technique in particular, examines its role in our society, and touches on some of unintended consequences of educational technique inherent in it. The second part considers briefly the difficulty in discerning the course that raising Muslim children entails, then offers some recommendations concerning that process.

Defining Technique and Educational Technique.

> "*In our technological society, technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity.*" (Ellul, 1964) p. xxv.

A totality of methods….not just manufacturing, or what we call high-tech, but also advertising, politics (think of the subtlety with which "spin" is applied), management, psychology, economic, and educational. This totality is brought to bear in every field of human activity…there are instruction manuals and self-help books for everything. By the way, an easy image to grasp this is to reflect on the runaway popularity of the "*Blank….for Dummies*" series. This is a series of books that focus on achieving a functional understanding of particular topics. It started, as I recall, with *DOS for Dummies*. It went on to *Word of Dummies*, *Windows for Dummies*, etc. But the series no longer confines itself to obvious technical fields like the Windows operating system or HTML. Nowadays, with the help of the *Dummies* books, we can become "functional" in many aspects of our life. On a recent stroll through a bookstore I found these guides had something for us starting quite young. *Dating for Dummies* helps us get started on the right foot. Then there's *Sex for Dummies*. There's *A Guide to Pregnancy for Idiots* (this is a different series, but the intent is the same). After pregnancy, of course there may be a few extra pounds to shed. That's when you can use *Weight Loss for Dummies*. And you'll want to make sure to have a look at *Parenting for Dummies*. Of course, the pressures of life mean you'll need *Stress Management for Dummies*. Should life take a toll on your marriage, there's *Rekindling Romance for Dummies* (I'm not making that up!) If that doesn't work, there's *Divorce for Dummies*. Left on your own you may need *Crossword Puzzles for Dummies*. Should you start questioning this entire enterprise there's *Philosophy for Dummies*, or *Spirituality for Dummies* if you're inclined in that direction. The list goes on, but you get the point. A single series of books, that is to say a single approach to a broad range of topics, that is, a totality brought to bear on a very wide range of human activity. Considered as individual methods, the range of techniques obviously have many differences between them, and perhaps not quite so obviously, common characteristics and general tendencies. But the technical consciousness allows us to take a common approach to all these areas of life and more.

The technical phenomenon is, however, much more complex than any synthesis of characteristics common to individual techniques. We must differentiate between the technical operation and the technical phenomenon. "The technical operation includes every operation carried out in accordance with a certain method in order to attain a particular end." What characterizes technical operations is the search for ways to improve it, to make it more productive, efficient, etc. In other words, the technical operation occurs at the level of the practitioner. But two factors intervene, rational judgment and consciousness. Aspects of the operation previously unexamined are brought to light, new techniques are elaborated. A science springs up whose object is the technical operation, or field of application to which the operation was applied. Experts are born, not expert practitioners but students of the field of practice and the most efficient way to approach it. This is the technical phenomenon. It results in a rapid multiplication of fields of inquiry. So we have teachers, (the educational technicians) and we have all the various kinds of educational experts…curriculum specialists, educational philosophers, childhood development specialists, etc. What characterizes the technical phenomenon in general is the quest for the "one best means" in every field. Given a certain set of starting conditions, the experts search for the single best way currently available to achieve the desired end. It is in a society characterized by the technical phenomenon that education takes place in the United States and Canada.

The Role of Educational Technique in Society

Next we turn our attention to the question of what constitutes the desired end in education? Thorough historical analysis of the development of compulsory schooling reveals all too clearly a dark side to our society's answer to this question. (Gatto 2001). Let us set this aside for the present and examine the nature and role of "progressive" education.

> Progressive education has as its end the "happiness" of the child. It entails bright classrooms, understanding teachers and pleasurable work. [Such education] seeks, rather, to develop in a balanced way all their [i.e. children's] faculties, physical, manual, psychic, and intellectual, and in this last, it must seek to stress personal observation and reasoning instead of rote learning. Moreover, the whole process is supposed to take place with the minimum possible use of force. It is essential to respect the person of the child and to individualize instruction to the maximum. Instruction is part of total education and is not addressed to the intelligence alone. (Ellul, 1964 p. 345)

One of the difficulties with this is that it takes a very skilled teacher with very highly refined technique to be capable of pulling it off. The child who does receive an education of this sort will be much more balanced and in a better position to develop his own personality. It is the direction in which this development of personality takes place that must concern us. The typical argument is to conceive of the problem as being one of placing the child in the best possible situation to prepare him/her optimally for the tasks that await him. As Maria Montessori put it in a speech before UNESCO:

> We must awaken the child's social conscience. I know that it is a complicated educational question, but the child who will become the man must be able to understand life and its needs, the fundamental reason for all existence, the search for happiness. . . He must know exactly what he must do and what he must not do for the good of humanity. . . To reach these ends we must prepare the child to understand the meaning and necessity of the entente among the nations. The organization of the peace devolves more on education than on politics. To secure peace practically, we must envision a humane education, psychopedagogy, which affects not one nation but all men on earth . . . Education must become a truly humane science to guide all men to judge the present situation correctly. (Ellul 1964)

There are several points worth noting here. First, this statement of the role of psychopedagogic technique is placed in the best possible circumstances, within a liberal and democratic conception of man, state and society. Second, that in order to reach the desired end, such an education must reach <u>all</u> men. Of necessity, this means state control of education, for who but the state has the means and breath to carry it out. With rigorous state control of education comes the end of private instruction and therefore of a traditional freedom. Another implication of the necessity for such an education to reach all men is that such education must be compulsory. For anyone who is left uneducated may rise to demagoguery or foment social unrest. This technique of psychopedagogy cannot achieve its end if only a minority are educated. This is the most important characteristic of this technique: its effectiveness depends upon a forced orientation toward it. It is a social force directed toward a social end.

> This technique of alleged liberation of the child cannot be oriented differently, even if it were so desired. The technique permits the broadening of the child, the development of his social personality and happiness, and consequently, of his equilibrium. Opposition to society, the lack of social adaptation, produces serious personality difficulties that lead to the loss of psychic equilibrium. One of the most important factors in the child's education therefore is social adaptation. This means that—despite all the pretentious talk about the aims of education—it is not the child in and for himself who is being educated, but the child in and for society. And the society, moreover, is not an ideal one, with full justice and truth, but society as it is.
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> When a society becomes increasingly totalitarian (and I say "society," not "state"), it creates more and more difficulties of adaptation and requires its citizens to be conformist in the same degree. Thus, this technique becomes all the more necessary. I have no doubt that it makes men better balanced and "happier." And there is the danger. It makes men happy in a milieu that normally would have made them unhappy, if they had not been worked on, molded, and formed for just that milieu. What looks like the apex of humanism is in fact the pinnacle of human submission: children are educated to become precisely what society expects of them. (Ellul, 1964 p. 348)

Unintended Consequences

When there is talk of educational reform, it usually refers to the lack of success in implementing the kind of pedagogy for which Montessori was calling. The discussion of possible reforms centers on more effective ways to implement this vision of education. While there has not been any success for the masses, the elite schools in the United States have, to a much greater degree succeeded. David Brooks writes in the April, 2001 *Atlantic Monthly*

> In short, at the top of the meritocratic ladder we have in America a generation of students who are extraordinarily bright, morally earnest, and incredibly industrious. They like to study and socialize in groups. They create and join organizations with great enthusiasm. They are responsible, safety-conscious, and mature. They feel no compelling need to rebel—not even a hint of one. They not only defer to authority: they admire it. "Alienation" is a word one almost never hears from them. They regard the universe as beneficent, orderly, and meaningful. At the schools and colleges where the next leadership class is being bred, one finds not angry revolutionaries, despondent slackers, or dark cynics, but the Organization Kid. (Brooks)

Brooks paints in this article a picture of the product of successful education. This picture conforms to the results expected by Ellul in his analysis. It is not without blemish. Brooks writes:

> One sometimes has the sense that all the frantic efforts to regulate safety, to encourage academic achievement, and to keep busy are ways to compensate for missing conceptions of character and virtue. Not having a vocabulary to discuss what is good and true, people can at least behave well. It's hard to know what eternal life means, but if you don't smoke you can have a long life. It's hard to imagine what it would be like to be a saint, but it's easy to sea what it is to be a success. (Bloom, 2001, p. 54)

This is merely one of a set of unintended consequences that arise from current educational practice. Ellul analyzes in detail the complex ambivalence of technical progress in his 1990 book, *The Technological Bluff*. He emphasizes that technical progress is neither good, bad, or neutral. It is a complex mixture of positive and negative elements. He analyzes this ambivalence based on four propositions. Though we can't examine them in detail here, they are worth at least mentioning:

1. *All technical progress has its price.*

2. *At each stage it raises more and greater problems than it solves.*

3. *Its harmful effects are inseparable from its beneficial effects.*

4. *It has a great number of unforeseen effects.*

These propositions apply to the educational technique applied to the Princeton students Bloom writes about. The extremely intense pace of activity in a large number of diverse activities crowds out time for reflection. The lack of conceptions of character and virtue about which Bloom writes is an unintended consequence that cannot be separated from the educational process that molds the complex lives led by these elite students.

The phenomenon of the "Organization Kid" is the end result of successful educational technique. It is built on a series of lessons reinforced throughout K-12 schooling. These lessons have been designed to mold children into well-adapted participants in the social project. John Taylor Gatto, the celebrated and award-winning teacher from New York, summed these up in devastating fashion in the speech he gave on the occasion of being named "New York State Teacher of the Year."

1. The first lesson I teach is confusion. Everything I teach is out of context.
2. The second lesson I teach is class position. I teach that students must stay in the class where they belong.
3. The third lesson I teach is indifference. I teach children not to care too much about anything.
4. The fourth lesson I teach is emotional dependency. By stars and red checks, smiles and frowns, prizes, honors, and disgraces, I teach kids to surrender their will to the predestined chain of command.
5. The fifth lesson I teach is intellectual dependency. Good students wait for a teacher to tell them what to do. It is the most important lesson, that we must wait for other people, better trained than ourselves, to make the meanings of our lives.
6. The sixth lesson I teach is provisional self esteem…. I teach that a kid's self-respect should depend on expert opinion.
7. The seventh lesson I teach is that one can't hide. I teach students they are always watched, that each is under constant surveillance by myself and my colleagues.

The final products of successful schooling are well-adjusted adults who have been taught, as Ivan Illich puts it:

> …to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His imagination is "schooled" to accept service in place of value. Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rate race for productive work. Health, learning, dignity, independence, and creative endeavor are defined as little more than the performance of the institutions which claim to serve these ends, and their improvement is made to depend on allocating more resources to the management of hospitals, schools, and other agencies in question. (Illich in "Deschooling our Lives")

Even this list of consequences does not exhaust the effects of educational technique. With technical growth comes the rapid growth of knowledge. The amount of necessary, useful knowledge that must be learned for the functioning of the technological system serves to put pressure on the educational system to focus narrowly on functional literacy and numeracy. The increasing use of standardized testing reflects technical necessity. But as teachers focus on making sure their students have learned this functional knowledge, arts, music, even physical education are dropped from the curriculum. According to the Centers for Disease Control, daily physical education classes are vanishing across the country. 42% of schools had them in 1991, but by 1997, that figure had dropped to 27%. *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer* on May 1, 2001

carried a report on Obese Children by Betty Ann Bowser. In it, Laverne Van Zant, Principal of Los Angeles' 42nd St. elementary School, commented "Many of the things we have to do on a daily basis-- teaching reading, teaching math-- take priority. And with all the other state mandates and trying to raise test scores, PE doesn't fall at the top of the list. But I truly believe having a good body will generate a fit academic mind."

In addition, there are more and more different subjects to learn: computer graphics, computer programming, robotics, fashion design, etc. As the number of "subjects" in the curriculum increases, we may even succeed in teaching them these subjects…time to teach how to learn is squeezed out. This is due in large measure to the success in teaching the lesson of intellectual dependency Gatto talks about. However, no emphasis is placed on learning how to learn.

Evaluating Possible Solutions

Note first that even using the word "solutions" ties us into the world of technique, where for every problem, there is a solution. This is an indication of the extent to which the technological system shapes our thought. We are all participants in this system. How then, are we to deal with this situation?

 As an initial step we must recognize that the very manner of thinking we employ to approach the education of children has been thoroughly conditioned by the system in which we live. That means our own thinking about all this is susceptible to pitfalls to which every endeavor that takes place in a technical milieu is subject. It may be the case that the society finds ways to ameliorate some of the worst problems that have arisen as a result of the ways schools function. We can re-introduce physical education, get private groups to underwrite arts and music instruction, increase in the curriculum the weight given to learning to spot logical fallacies. This is not the point. The constant feature with technical solutions is that they are ambiguous. Each solution will bring more problems. The fact of the matter is that with additional problems comes the need for more experts, so the problems actually help keep the economy growing!

Muslim educational institutions and curriculums are not exempt. The relative underdevelopment of our Muslim educational institutions vis-à-vis the larger society means that we are not yet so rigidly constrained in the course our institutions must take. To succumb to the notion that placement in prestigious universities is the measure of success of our institutions is to allow the requirements of the technical milieu to replace Islam as a criterion for the way we live our lives. To take a course which resolutely insists that being Muslim to our dying breath is the fundamental criterion of success is to struggle with our entire beings against the distractions of a system designed to make of us obedient servants. *Jihad* is obligatory until the end of time. Our struggle to prepare our children to be Muslim in the world they will live in does not rest on the development of effective Islamic schools teaching state-approved curricula along with Arabic and Islamic studies. Our struggle is far more difficult than that. Let us turn to a few preliminary notions on the approach we might take to this *jihad*.

Towards Muslim Education

1. **Make parental involvement mandatory.** One of the most pervasive effects of the technological system is that of stripping us of individual responsibility in area after area of our lives. (See "The Experts") As Muslims, we know that we are accountable. Taking responsibility for our children has to become a priority in the Muslim population. A crucial step is involving parents in their children's education. It is vital that Muslim educational institutions build into their operation ways to involve parents. Given the huge number of Muslim children out there and the small number of Muslim schools, most schools have waiting lists. That gives the school leverage through its admissions policy. Make parental involvement a requirement. This involvement should have three facets:

1)   Involvement with their children in educational activities: homework, school activities, community service programs, etc. and

2)   Mandatory participation in on-going education of the parents themselves—about Islam, parenting practice, and in cultural literacy.

3)   Special attention to the Islamic education of mothers, who as we know are the first madressahs. The approach here should be based on in-home, small gatherings, even one-on-one, with sisters teaching that portion of knowledge that they have to those who don't have it. The Qubaysiyyah movement in Syria is an example of this. This education may well be the most important step we can take.

2. **Use a value-centered approach.** Belief and righteous conduct are at the core of Muslim Society. Values and practice go hand in hand. But while most Muslims schools already teach Arabic, *fiqh*, and other traditional disciplines, they do so in manner that is abstract. They teach about Islam, not about *being Muslim*. Dawud Tauhidi writes: "We have not met the challenge of developing a systematic program to teach our children about 'being Muslim'—which requires a more subtle and profound understanding of both the nature of children and Islam itself." (Tauhidi *A Vision of Effective Islamic Education*) He presents a vision of a valued-centered approach to Islamic Education and begins the work towards developing a program to teach about being Muslim. Taking hold of this approach and applying it is yet another way of putting our children first.

3. **Teach children how to learn**. Our children must be given the tools to learn, and know how to employ with sufficient skill to guide them in the life long learning process that applies first of all to knowledge of our deen and secondarily to the rapidly expanding and changing realm of technical knowledge. Following Dorothy Sayers (and Aristotle before her) these tools begin with grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric.

Grammar is not just how to correctly phrase a request for a hotel reservation in a foreign language. It refers to the structure of a language, how it is put together, how it works. In this sense, this tool has very wide application. Being able to apprehend how any field of knowledge is structured, what the elements of its discourse are, how they are put together and how they work with each other is a powerful tool.

Dialectic has to do with how to define terms, make statements, construct arguments, and detect fallacies in arguments. Were this tool more widely applied by the general population, the "spin doctors," advertisers, and propagandists would have a much more difficult time.

Rhetoric entails an appreciation for excellence, and so is traditionally taught around the time of puberty. It is the study of rhetoric that will assist in sharpening writing and speaking skills (which by the way do not receive nearly the attention they deserve in public schools). Understanding of the larger concept of rhetoric plays an important role in developing an appreciation of excellence wherever it is found.

It is interesting to note that traditional Islamic education emphasizes these tools, which Aristotle called the *trivium*. There are four other subjects: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy that Aristotle called the *quadrivium* and that also appear in traditional Islamic education. In the Islamic tradition the study of poetry with its patterns of verse and rhythms replaced music.

4. Protect our children by teaching them cultural literacy. The pervasive influence of the technological system in all its manifestations is rapidly shaping mankind into a creature far from *fitra*. We do not escape these influences, nor will our children. To arm ourselves with Islamic values and Islamic knowledge will help us discriminate those portions of the system that present the greatest danger. But these values and this knowledge do not in and of themselves give us insight into the ways in which the system erodes our deen.

We often hear the call for *'ulama* who are from America: "we need scholars who understand American conditions of life." Given the power of the system, and therefore the severity of its unintended consequences, everyone in the society needs a higher degree of familiarity with the way the system functions than is currently the case.

The *News Hour* report on "Obesity in Children" also included a segment about a curriculum in healthy living that was aimed at teaching elementary schoolchildren to be more active. They were taught some of the negative effects of television as part of that curriculum. The results at the end of the school year were that the waistlines of children who had received the curriculum grown a full inch less than those who had not received the curriculum.

The larger society already knows about problems with the self-image of girls and with aggression among boys as exacerbated by the media. Consumerism is a serious disease spread through the media. The point is that media literacy is a skill that we, as Muslims, ignore at our peril. Familiarity with the methodology of the advertising industry and with the workings of propaganda can be most helpful in developing the critical awareness necessary to retain one's identity in Postmodern America.

Cultural literacy reaches beyond just the media. We need to understand all the various subsystems of the society insofar as they impact us: the way politics *really* works, the difference between medical treatment and health care, or the difference between social services and community, between police and safety, the military and security, etc. To the extent that our children understand at a deep level how the system works, they have a better chance of avoiding its negative effects upon their lives.

5. Choose teachers carefully, honor them, and care for them. The importance of the teacher in Islamic education is very great. Consider the respect accorded scholars in the early centuries of Islam. (See Imam al-Zarnuji *Instruction of the Student and The Method of Learning*) The community served by a teacher must value and support that teacher. That means, among other things, real pay for real work. Is the pay scale used to determine the salaries of our teachers to be based on the pay scales used in the surrounding community in which teachers, however well intentioned, serve primarily the function of teaching the seven lessons John Gatto details? If it seems like that isn't possible because it just costs too much, seriously evaluate the costs of burnt-out or second-rate teachers, and take responsibility for the priorities chosen.

It also means that teachers must continue to develop and refine their art. If our education is truly to be centered on the child, teachers must become highly skilled observers so that they can see what the children need. Here we can learn from Montessori schools. Opportunities for our teachers to further their own education must be sought out. These must include opportunities for teachers to further their own knowledge of the *deen* of Islam and to nurture their own hearts.

Given the congested curricula and the stress under which many Muslim teachers work today, we may be better served by our teachers if we gave them significantly *less* to do. Despite the devastation wrought by compulsory education, many children come out at least somewhat intact because somewhere along the line they encountered one or two good teachers. Let us make that the rule rather than the exception in our schools.

A Final Word

Make no mistake. It is not the intent of this paper to argue for the wholesale abandonment of all educational technique. That is not going to happen. We live in a technological society organized around a technological system. The effects are profound, and there is no going back. It is like crossing the threshold from an oral to a literate culture. (See *A is for Ox*).

Rather it is a call to moral, intellectual, and spiritual exertion. A Muslim school outside the context of active practice of the deen is an oxymoron. Moral exertion means wresting responsibility away from the system and taking it back into one's own hands. It means taking responsibility for we spend our time and our money. It will necessarily involve disengaging from the larger society to some extent. It means wanting for your brother what you want for yourself, and therefore engaging them in a meaningful way in the process of forging community.

To envision the nature of an optimal (NB: that word is a sure tip-off that what follows has to do with technique!) environment for Muslim children requires intellectual exertion. We must reflect deeply on what it is we are doing when we create schools, teach classes, prepare lesson plans, etc. For the tendency is to simply reproduce extant public or private schools, and these, as we have seen, educate the child in and for society, not in and for himself. As one of our scholars has said "One of the things we fail to recognize in coming up with all kinds of agendas for our children is that children already have an agenda: it is a divine agenda implanted in their brains from the start." (Hamza Yusuf, *Beyond Schooling* 1st. ed. Page 23.) We must call into question the methodologies used in public schools: grading, segregation of children by age, the age at which school commences and the scope and sequence of the curriculum. Even the idea of a physical place called a "school" can be re-envisioned if we reflect honestly and deeply enough.

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It will take intellectual exertion to wake up from the trance induced by information overload, by the technological bluff. This aspect of the struggle is not optional. Our goal must be to see the technological society in which we live truly through Muslim eyes, to break free from viewing Islam through the eyes of a "human resource" with a technical consciousness. It takes intellectual exertion to "think outside the box" consistently. It takes intellectual exertion to go beyond knowledge about Islam and arrive to knowledge of being Muslim.

To see what we need to do we must see with the eye of our heart, and to open this eye takes spiritual exertion. We will not achieve the desired results through our exertions. This does not mean that no exertion is required. Jihad remains obligatory.

Our wealth and our children are a test for us. We cannot know the results ahead of time of the actions we take. What we can do is to purify our intentions. The results are in the hands of Allah. Our business is with the righteous actions we send forth to Allah. And whatever we send forth of good action, we will find it with Allah. He is the Good, Vast in Recompense. I ask forgiveness of Allah. He is forgiving and compassionate.

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