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Letters

On schooling, Christina Romer, ethics, Brazil, Cambodia, Chevron, asylum seekers, pay, verbs

Jul 2nd 2009
From The Economist print edition

The lazy days of summer

SIR - Before Lexington disparages American children for their comparatively short school day he should take a closer look at the arguments (June 13th). First of all, international education surveys regularly compare the children of the elite in the developing world, such as China and India, with the mass of children in developed countries. We should compare like with like before moving to generalisations. Second, children in the upper socioeconomic classes in America regularly attend extra-curricular activities—art, sport, extra maths—that extend their day. This way I get to tailor my children's education rather than have them sit bored in a classroom for up to nine hours.

Third, rote learning does not equal intelligence and memorisation does not equal learning. Finally, studies show that grades and SAT scores are not always a predictor of career success.

My experience is that mass testing is replacing creative learning with worksheets, even as young as pre-school (kindergarten). Yet the skills required for this century will not be based in rote- and test-based-learning but in creative thinking. This is America's comparative advantage (look at Bill Gates). Maybe we have it right after all.

Jodi Detjen
Newton, Massachusetts

America's economy

* SIR - Christina Romer's comparison of the present economic situation to the 1930s was excellent, except for the glaring omission of the automatic economic stabilisers that exist today, such as unemployment insurance, food stamps, etc (Economics focus, June 20th). These programmes weren't around in the 1930s. But now they are causing government spending to increase hugely, which makes the \$787 billion stimulus package largely unnecessary.

Dennis Fulmer
Canton, Ohio

* SIR - Ms Romer's parallels with 1937 should have mentioned the fact that America was a net exporter of oil products, led the world in steel production, dominated global automobile technology and production, and was a creditor nation. Perhaps the best lesson of 1937 is that historical parallels are generally

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Gene Cesari
South Ryegate, Vermont

Business ethics

SIR – We read your article on the efforts by Harvard’s MBA students to develop a Hippocratic oath for managers (“*Forswearing greed*”, June 6th). Although you are right to point out the differences between management and medicine, this does not prevent managers from adopting professional values. In many ways, professions define and sustain themselves with a collective agreement to be bound by regulations. So there is no reason why managers and business graduates should not sign up to a code of conduct.

The benefits are that, with time and enforcement, businesspeople will be held in higher regard and will be able to refer to the code when asked or tempted to do something that they believe not to be in the best interests of their company. In the early days of modern medicine some people may have thought it “naive” to ask physicians to put the interests of their patients before their own. This is now expected practice.

Michael Money Penny
Helen O’Sullivan
Centre for Excellence in Developing Professionalism
University of Liverpool
Liverpool

* SIR – Medical ethics is certainly a more developed discipline than business ethics. Nevertheless, one of the primary motivations for medicine’s ethical code is the asymmetry of information that exists between doctor and patient. It is the inability of the patient to assess the medical practitioner’s actions accurately that makes a strong ethical commitment on the part of the doctor essential to the success of the relationship.

This is analogous to relationships between managers and shareholders. There is a long way to go until we have a settled approach to business ethics, and the end result will undoubtedly be specific to business and not be a simple reworking of the Hippocratic oath.

However, it is not naive to work towards such a goal. What is naive is the thoughtless repeating of the same clichés that have traditionally held back progress in a discipline that is now more relevant to businesspeople than ever.

James Dempsey
Stirling

Down to earth

SIR – As a farmer and journalist who has followed the development of agriculture in Brazil for the past 50 years, I think you missed a very important point in your briefing on deforestation in the Amazon: the vast improvement in conservation methods (“*The future of the forest*”, June 13th). This is partly explained by better education, but also because these methods have been applied in a “no till” system, known as *plantio direto* in Brazil. This plants seeds directly in the refuse of former crops, protecting the land from erosion, creating organic matter and building soil in the process. Proof lies in the fact that production on soyabean farms is increasing.

Farmers using these methods are a stabilising element as they set down roots rather than destroy the land and move on. Communities have been established where soil conservation is essential to progress. What is now needed is legislation to enable property rights and to assure that sensible forestry laws make it possible to achieve a decent living. This may require something that simply does not exist in Brazil: a forestry-police department with rangers who are trained, well paid and equipped to get where they need to go.

Ellen Bromfield
São Paulo

Cambodia's sex industry

SIR – Your article on the sex industry in Cambodia shed light on the problem of identifying sex-trafficking victims among female prostitutes (“The traffic police”, June 13th). However, I would like to point out that the State Department’s most recent “Trafficking in Persons Report”, released by Hillary Clinton in mid-June, put Cambodia back on the ranking of “tier two watch list”. This is partly because: “during 2008, there were reports of prostituted women being detained and physically abused by police and Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation officials.”

The American government has not and does not condone the indiscriminate use of prostitution sweeps as a tool to identify sex-trafficking victims. We do, however, encourage law-enforcement operations that remove suspected victims of trafficking from sites of commercial sexual exploitation, with particular urgency in cases of children in prostitution. We will continue to work to improve the measure of care that is available to victims.

Ambassador Luis CdeBaca
Director
Office to Monitor and Combat
Trafficking in Persons
Department of State
Washington, DC

Chevron in Ecuador

SIR – You published a letter from Steven Donziger, a lawyer representing Amazonian communities in Ecuador in a legal action against Chevron (June 13th). Mr Donziger writes of “toxin-laden formation water”, but he has not submitted evidence to support the allegation. He objects to the suggestion that his case is proceeding under a law that is being applied in an unconstitutional, retroactive manner, yet he forgets that his colleagues claim to have had a hand in writing the very law in order for his case to proceed.

Finally, he states that Texaco, now Chevron, endorsed the use of Ecuadorean courts in the 1990s. The United Nations, the International Bar Association, the State Department, and others, have concluded that Ecuador’s judicial system was compromised following the 2004 presidential purge of the country’s Supreme Court.

Chevron stands by Texaco’s performance in Ecuador. The facts warrant such a posture. Despite Mr Donziger’s best efforts, facts are stubborn things.

Dave Samson
General manager, public affairs
Chevron
San Ramon, California

Asylum in Britain

* SIR – One reason why the number of asylum applications refused in Britain is much higher than the number of asylum seekers being deported is that, all too often, Home Office asylum caseworkers and adjudicators refuse claims in a hasty, ill-considered, prejudiced and incorrect manner (“After the backlog, a backlog”, June 20th). Such decisions are challenged and go to appeal. This forestalls deportations, but also increases the number of those in limbo awaiting appeal or even judicial review.

As a former professor of politics and development I produce expert-witness reports for asylum seekers. A better alternative, in my opinion, would be a fairer and more reliable procedure for initial assessment, bringing in high-quality independent expert advice at an earlier stage. Unfortunately, there seems to be growing government pressure on solicitors not to seek the best independent advice, but to engage in a bidding process for expert witnesses in which cost is the paramount concern. This creates a risk of selecting cheaper “experts” of possibly lower quality.

It would be a sad day if politically motivated pressure to reduce the number of

asylum seekers applying for asylum resulted in reduced numbers largely because of inadequate and unfair procedures.

David Seddon
Norwich

Pay racket

SIR – I find it farcical that those who do not want to limit executive pay find no fault with limiting the pay of workers (“Principles, not pitchforks”, June 13th). Labour has already been deprived of its fair share of the profits during the past decade and has seen no gain in wages. But when it comes to deciding how bosses are paid, we want to invite the fox into the henhouse to baby-sit the chickens. Ask yourself what would happen to a company if every employee stayed at home tomorrow. Then ask yourself what would happen if the executive committee were to take a day off.

Brian Muckle
Ottawa

Verbs can add something

SIR – The rather lengthy opening sentence to your article on France’s relationship with Africa did not contain a verb (“They came to bury him, not to praise him”, June 20th). I realise that we all have to face cutbacks in these uncertain economic times. But no verb in a sentence to confusion.

David Killam
Moraga, California

* Letter appears online only

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