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Improving schools with ‘The Project’

By Marion Brady

A few days ago I got an email from Phil Cullen. Before he retired, Phil was director of Primary Education for the state of Queensland, Australia. He now lives in New South Wales.

Responding to something I’d posted [on my website](#), he wrote:

“I was visiting an Outback, one-teacher school of 21 pupils in Windorah. At the morning tea break, they were climbing and swinging on the windmill tower, a simple construction of iron...four long legs, some cross beams and triangles for strength. When they returned to the room, I asked them to draw the tower. Not one child did. They played all over it every day, but no one had seen it...”

They’d seen it, of course, but the too-familiar tends to slip below ordinary levels of awareness. After awhile we stop seeing pictures on walls, patterns in carpets, views from windows, even family members and friends.

What’s true of our eyes is true of our ears. We stop hearing the ticking of a clock, the hum of a fluorescent light, the wind and road noise when we’re driving.

And it’s true of our noses and mouths. Those who live downwind from a dump can’t smell the odors, and after a few days of drinking chemically treated water the taste disappears.

Interesting. “Experience is the best teacher,” we say, and it’s true. We learn to pound nails by pounding nails while thinking about pounding nails, learn to drive a car by driving a car while thinking about driving, learn to think about experience by experiencing and thinking about what we’re experiencing.

Everything we know about what’s happening to us comes to us through our senses, but as soon as the senses do their job, they turn themselves off. Why isn’t this obstacle to learning — our blindness to the too-familiar — a matter of major interest to educators? As far as I can determine, the problem illustrated by Phil’s little unmet assignment isn’t even talked about, much less addressed.

I was reminded of this a day or two ago as I read [the transcript of a](#) speech by David Coleman, an author of and cheerleader for the [Common Core State Standards](#) being promoted by “reformers.” It was loaded with advice to teachers, but it wasn’t advice about how to help kids make more sense of experience. It was about helping them make more sense of “text” — words that grew out of somebody else’s experience.

Students, he said, have to be made to pay closer attention to text. They need to read “complex text,” be exposed to “academic text,” be challenged by “difficult text,” and climb “staircases of text complexity.”

It goes without saying that kids need to know how to read. But something is surely wrong with an education that puts reading about experience ahead of experiencing experience.

I have a proposal. We think of schools as places where the young are prepared for life. I say we discard that idea and instead think of them as full-blown, rich, fascinatingly complex, real-world slices of life.

Let’s treat schools themselves as powerful learning resources, as things to poke, prod, measure, examine, investigate, analyze, describe, take apart, and put back together differently to see if they work better.

Simple questions focusing on immediate school experience can result in hours of deep, effective learning. For example, “What’s the per-day cost of getting everyone in this class to school and back?” or “What ethnicities are represented in this school’s population, how many are in each group, what’s their history, and how are the groups evolving?”

It makes no difference if schools are old or new, large or small, rural or urban, public or private, magnet or charter, ordered or chaotic, thoroughly wired or technologically primitive, loved or hated. The actual buildings and grounds, the people who spend their days there, the routines they follow, the beliefs and values that explain their actions, and the systemic relationships between these various “moving parts,” model in miniature the world that schooling is supposed to help the young understand.

Let’s use the schools we have to operationalize the schools we need, call it “The Project,” and make it the only universally required course.

No other project will stretch learner intellect farther. No other project will make more direct, effective, memorable use of reading, writing, math, history, physics, economics, and every other school subject. No other project will be more relevant, do a better job of making abstract ideas concrete, adjust more readily to individual needs and abilities, offer ranges of difficulty more appropriate for every kid, or even come close to it in return on educational investment.

Equally important, no other project will more thoroughly engage emotion. Challenging kids and their teachers to put The Project to real-world use by continuously improving their own school shows a respect for firsthand experience and those who have it that’s presently non-existent.

It maximizes autonomy—the engine of imagination, creativity, ingenuity, and successful adaptation to social change. It puts our actions where our mouths are when we talk about liberty, democracy, and individual worth. It replaces top-down mandates (which have never, ever improved classroom instruction), with the only kind of innovation that works and sticks—bottom up.

And it breaks through the too-familiar-to-see barrier to learning.

What's not to like?

If you're concerned about all that material you studied in school that you don't think The Project would "cover," accept the fact that "covering the material" isn't educating. It's ritual. Covering the material is what has brought education to crisis. It's what drives mile-wide-inch-deep "learning" that evaporates as soon as tested. It's why adults retain so little of what they were once "taught." It's what underlies the institution's fad-prone but static nature.

The Project won't take more than a couple of hours a day, will link logically to all traditional content, and leave the rest of the time for capitalizing on America's greatest asset and hope for the future — individual differences.

Freed from "seat time" laws and an onerous list of required subjects, schools can get serious about individualizing instruction, developing specialized courses, meeting local needs, making extra-curricular activities curricular, and breaking free of innovation that merely gives old ideas new names.

If America is to have an educational system as good as [Finland's](#), we'll have to get serious about educating, follow Finland's lead, attract the cream of the crop to the teaching profession, and let them alone so they can do their job.

If America is to have an educational system better than Finland's, we have to get past the assumption that rigorous math, science, language arts, and social studies instruction add up to a quality education; past the notion that educating is mostly a matter of transferring information; past the denigrating idea that the point of it all is just to prepare the young for college or work.

Humanness has far more to offer than that, and America is better positioned than Finland and every other country to explore its potential because we're ethnically diverse. If we treat that as a wonderful educational asset to exploit rather than a liability to be minimized by standardization and social pressure, we'll go back to the head of the class.

One more thing: Accountability. Those hostile to public schooling have blown it far out of proportion, so the public demands that the matter be addressed. Because The Project will trigger thought processes far too complex and idiosyncratic to be evaluated by standardized tests, contracts will have to be cancelled. Period. There's no way that test items written in cubicles at McGraw-Hill, Pearson, Educational Testing Service, or at any other remote site, can cope.

But that's no problem. The job can be returned to those who had it before corporate heads, rich philanthropists, and politicians undermined respect for and confidence in them — classroom teachers. They're on top of the problem. They talk to their students every day, read their papers, watch their body language, listen to their dialogue, laugh at their jokes, cry at their misfortunes, look over their shoulders as they work. No one else is more qualified than teachers to say how well students are doing.

And using the already employed will save taxpayers billions of dollars.