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A ‘simple fix’ for school curriculum (and it’s not Common Core)

By Marion Brady

For more than 20 years, in language as strong as the editors of mainstream media will allow, I’ve been slamming the stupidities of the education “reforms” dreamed up by amateur educators in Congress, state legislatures, and corporate offices.

For more than 40 years, in equally strong language in journal articles, op-eds, newspaper columns, letters to editors, and books, I’ve been telling professional educators that the lack of genuine education reform was creating the vacuum that sucked in those stupidities.

Neither group is happy with me.

I’ve been specific about what I see as a fundamental problem—the inadequacies of the so-called “core curriculum” put in place in the 19th Century. It wasn’t very good when it was adopted, and it works less well with each passing year.

In the 1980s, I wrote about problems with that curriculum, suggested a simple fix, and sent the manuscript off to the State University of New York Press. Philip L. Smith, editor of that publisher’s *Philosophy of Education Series*, reviewed the manuscript, and in a letter to Acquisitions Editor Lois Patton, said:

“Let me begin by saying that I liked this manuscript very much. Before I studied it I did not expect that I would. It appeared to be rather pedestrian, even simpleminded. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is actually a well-thought out, beautifully presented defense of humanistic general education. It is an important manuscript both for what it aspires to and how it accomplishes its goals.”

A couple of pages later he concluded:

“If you were to publish this manuscript, as I hope that you do, it would be important to advertise it as more than a technical proposal for increasing teaching effectiveness. It should be promoted as a manifesto that incorporates a working strategy for making education more than the development of instrumental reason. Serious-minded educators who begin to read this manuscript are very likely to finish it and to be influenced by it for the better. Those who are not serious-minded, if there is any hope for them at all, might start to be serious-minded if somehow you can get this manuscript into their hands.”

SUNY Press published the book, but the education establishment wasn't interested in a curriculum fix.

A few years later, suspecting educators were unable to imagine how that fix would look in the classroom, I wrote an illustrative course of study — a series of ready-to-use activities for adolescents and teachers. “Published by Books for Educators,” it asked users to look closely at everyday, taken-for-granted experience until that experience became “strange enough to see” and analyze with a degree of objectivity. Gradually, their sense-making process would become apparent to them.

The education establishment wasn't interested.

Before there was email, I wrote letters to policymakers at the U.S. Department of Education, to members of Congress, heads of foundations, state governors, chief state school officers, union officials, mayors and other politicians, politely pointing out that nothing they were doing was making much of a difference, suggesting their efforts were enormously handicapped by the curriculum they were taking for granted, and asking if they'd be willing at least to talk about a fix for its problems.

They weren't.

So, what is this “simple fix” for the familiar, traditional curriculum?

It should go without saying that an organized mind is more productive than an unorganized or a disorganized mind. Humans — even infants — have an amazing, built-in system for sorting, organizing, and making sense of the apparent chaos of ordinary experience. The process is called “learning.” Watch little kids. They use the system effortlessly, and find great satisfaction, even joy, in it.

Joy and satisfaction in learning — in following where curiosity leads, in answering one's own questions rather than merely trying to remember answers to someone else's questions — is an idea that doesn't seem to compute for today's reformers, the politicians whose attention they've bought, or those educators who've climbed on board the standards and accountability fad with them.

Maybe that's not surprising. If you start a country with people imbued with the Puritan Ethic with its demand for toughness, self denial, and no-nonsense hard work (as we did), then import a Prussian, top-down, authoritarian scheme for organizing schooling (as we did), then hand control to business types with patron saints like Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Ayn Rand, true believers in the idea that free-market competition and privatization can cure all social ills (as we've done), the present situation isn't surprising.

Our cultural heritage asserts itself. When rigor, order, competition, and privatization don't work, we just conclude that what's needed is more rigor, more order, more competition, more privatization.

Wrong. Kids learn. Period. School or not. It's natural. They do it using an extremely efficient system for organizing knowledge to construct understanding. If they're helped to move from constructing understanding, to understanding how they construct understanding, they move to new levels of learning and creativity.

The traditional curriculum doesn't take kids to this second, understanding-how-they-construct-understanding stage. It just hands them a done deal — the invented core curriculum — and orders them to swallow it or be labeled failures. The first “reform” dose was No Child Left Behind; the second, Race to the Top. The new Common Core State Standards, and the national tests that will soon surely follow, deliver the dosage.

Be clear. I don't want to do away with school subjects. I want to put them in context and show how they fit together to form a mutually supportive, interconnected whole. Kids do that for themselves (and more) until about third or fourth grade. That's when the core curriculum starts to really kick in. From then on, schooling is more and more about remembering canned answers to questions which traditionally schooled specialists think they should ask.

I'm addressing a long-recognized problem:

The Association of American Colleges: “*We do not believe that the road to a coherent education can be constructed from a set of required subjects or academic disciplines.*” Project On Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees, 1985)

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: “*The disciplines have fragmented themselves into smaller and smaller pieces, and undergraduates find it difficult to see patterns in their courses and relate what they learn to life.*” Prologue to “College: The Undergraduate Experience In America,” November 1986

Do I think a curricular fix is The Answer to America's education problems? No. It won't feed kids breakfast, repair their teeth, fit them with glasses, counter the effects of lead poisoning, stabilize their families, give them a place to sleep, counter the stresses to which they're subjected, or address the many other problems stemming from poverty, bureaucratic excess, legislative irresponsibility, corporate control, anti-intellectualism, and all else that gets in the way of learning.

But it's AN answer to a fundamental problem to which scholars have been calling attention for centuries, a problem that, until it's dealt with, will continue to doom every education reform effort. It's simply not possible to build a viable knowledge-based institution on a flawed understanding of the nature of knowledge and how it's acquired.

Do I want authorities to mandate school use of what I'm talking about? Absolutely not. I want Congress, the Obama administration, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the U.S. Department of Education, the Gates, Broad, and Walton Foundations, the mayors who've taken over big-city schools, the publishers of tests and other educational materials, and so on — I just want them to get out of the way.

Get out of the way of real reform. What they're offering (accompanied by threats and bribes) is more of the same old same old 19th Century thinking, now "legitimized" by rich philanthropists, big-business CEOs, politicians, lawyers, and hedge fund managers, all supported by mainstream media that think Arne Duncan, Joel Klein, Jeb Bush, Michelle Rhee, and other high-profile pontificators really know how to fix schools. They don't.

In a recent book (<http://www.infoagepub.com/products/Whats-Worth-Learning>), (priced as low as I can get the publisher to go) I argue, in simple, jargon-free language, the merits of our ancient, built-in organizer of knowledge. In a free course of study (<http://www.marionbrady.com/Connections-InvestigatingReality-ACourseofStudy.asp>), I show how to use that organizer to help kids think better, and do so without it costing taxpayers a dime. Working together, teachers and kids across America (and beyond our boundaries, if my mail means anything) could hammer my crude "beta version" instruction guide into a curriculum that would be better than anything commercial publishers or centralized authorities will ever be able to produce, at any price.

What's standing in the way of that right now is an institution paralyzed by fear. I can't even get a low-profile pilot program in place because teachers are afraid of administrators, administrators are afraid of state politicians, state politicians are afraid of Washington, Washington is afraid of losing corporate support, and corporatists are afraid of damaging their bottom lines. The whole dysfunctional operation is driven by scores on standardized tests incapable of measuring the truly consequential.

It's hard to imagine a poorer system for preparing the young for coping with the mess that system has helped create.

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