

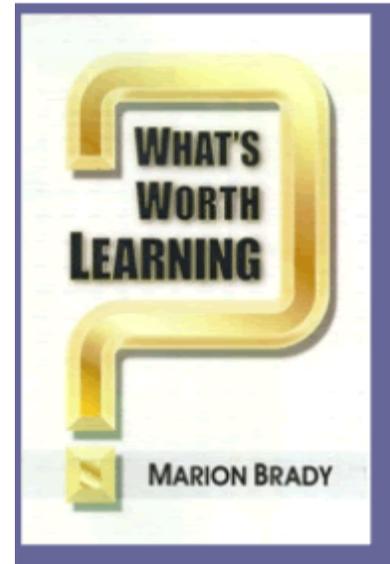
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What’s worth learning?

By Marion Brady

A few days ago I watched a Public Broadcasting System, Independent Lens video titled “The Revisionaries” (<http://www.itvs.org/films/revisionaries>). It follows Don McLeRoy, dentist and longtime conservative member of the Texas Board of Education, as he campaigns for the position of chairman, then, later, to continue to serve on the board.

The video follows proceedings as board members argue whether or not creationism should get equal billing with evolution, and if Thomas Jefferson deserves to be considered a Founding Father of the republic.



Arguments are settled by board vote.

About forty years ago, I (with my brother’s help) wrote a couple of textbooks for Prentice-Hall, Inc. The books were unorthodox, and the Internet hadn’t yet been invented, so I spent a lot of time in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, working with editorial staff.

I learned a lot. Along with much else, they explained to me the importance of Texas in the textbook business. Leave something out of a book that a majority of the Texas State Board wants in, or put something in that it wants out, and your chance of landing a multi-million dollar contract for your book evaporates.

Because textbook evaluators in other states don’t always see eye-to-eye with the Texas board, textbook authors have to walk a very narrow, please-everybody line if they hope to be published.

Prentice-Hall editors also explained what they saw as the industry’s typical textbook-creating strategy: Study the current bestseller in a particular field, copy it as much as possible, but fatten it up a bit to make it seem more comprehensive than the competition. Finally, add a flashy gimmick in the text, in the teacher edition, or in a companion package, and train the sales force to pitch the gimmick.

At some stage in this process, get some big name in the field to add her or his name to the project (for a cut of the profit, of course).

The weight of the contents of student backpacks suggests that the textbook design strategy described to me all those years ago is still being used.

Which is a major reason why I don't think commercially produced textbooks have much to do with educating. If that sounds odd, chalk it up to my belief that the sheer volume of information in the typical textbook, the rapid rate at which the material in it is covered, the colorless writing, the abstract nature of most of the content, its lack of immediate usefulness, and the passive role it forces readers to play, all combine to assure that little of lasting consequence results from textbook use—certainly nothing that would justify its cost.

Textbooks are designed to deliver information, but kids aren't designed to receive it.

The real world of the student's own school in all its physical and social complexity is a far richer, more comprehensive, more intellectually stimulating "textbook" than anything likely to meet with the approval of textbook adoption committees. Kids should design and execute plans to make sense of that complexity, a task that will require them to spend much of the school day out of their seats. Challenging them to use their increasingly detailed knowledge of the school to improve it will engage them emotionally, and the mental model of reality they'll construct will provide a solid foundation for life-long learning in any specialized field they choose to enter.

My opinion notwithstanding, textbooks (or online versions of them) are here to stay. Tradition, the conventional wisdom both inside and outside the education establishment, and publishing company lobbyists, will see to that. The challenge, then, is to improve them.

That's a lot harder than most people think, and it has to begin with understanding and accepting the fact that, in educating, "less is more." Indeed, a lot less is a lot more. Learners, hungry for knowledge, are being stuffed with mere information.

That's unacceptable. In the effort to make sense of our selves, each other, and the human condition, a relatively few ideas have an explanatory power of such magnitude that teaching them thoroughly is an absolute must. Send kids on their way with a solid grasp of everything in the Common Core State Standards but ignorant of those powerful ideas, and—notwithstanding top scores on standardized tests—they'll be as poorly educated as those responsible for the present thrust of education reform.

One of those "super ideas" (which the Common Core Standards don't even mention) is "worldview"—the framework of largely unexamined ideas, beliefs, and values by means of which an individual, group, society, or culture make sense of reality and interact with it. As ideas go, "worldview" is of first-order importance. Everything we do, individually and collectively, can be traced back to it.

Worldview explains why we brush our teeth, go to work, save and spend money, get married, pave highways, join clubs, pass laws, buy, sell, vote, play the stock market, pray or don't pray—and so on and on. It shapes emotions, arts, sciences, social institutions—whole ways of life. Differences in worldview trigger divorce proceedings, strikes, religious schisms, advertising campaigns, stupid foreign policies, world wars, the decline and fall of civilizations.

Worldview shapes every way of life on the planet, but the Common Core Standards ignore it, just as they ignore much else of fundamental importance. Millions of kids are busy picking up mandated acorns of information, unaware of the tree of knowledge from which they fall.

Enamored of wealth, power, and celebrity, America has handed over a system of education that was once the envy of the world to the likes of Bill Gates, Eli Broad, the Waltons, Jeb Bush, Joel Klein, Michael Bloomberg, Arne Duncan, Rahm Emanuel. Add Michelle Rhee to that list and the lot of them have a total of eighteen months of actual teaching experience.

Sensible education reform begins with a serious, society-wide dialogue about what's worth learning. It's a dialogue we've yet to have.

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