

Note: A somewhat "calmer" version of this, titled "A big unexplored idea in school reform," is at: *Washington Post*, "The Answer Sheet" blog by Valerie Strauss

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An any-century curriculum

By Marion Brady

The big new thing in education reform is the *Common Core State Standards*—lists of what kids are expected to know and be able to do in math, science, language arts, and social studies.

Not everyone is a fan. Gene Glass, former president of the American Educational Research Association, calls the *Standards* "idiots' solution to a misunderstood problem. That problem: an archaic curriculum that will prepare no child for life in 2040 and beyond."

I'm with Dr. Glass. I oppose the *Standards* because they reinforce rather than rethink a curriculum that can't do the job.

Evidence of the traditional general education curriculum's inadequacy is overwhelming. As every adult surely knows from firsthand experience, it dumps so much raw, disorganized information on learners that most of it is quickly forgotten. It neglects important new fields of knowledge. It has no agreed-upon aim. It tries to dumb kids down to performance levels simple enough to be tested by machines. It chops up information, ignoring the seamless way the brain learns. It doesn't engage kids' emotions. It's time-consuming and unnecessarily expensive.

That barely begins a list of serious problems with the 19th Century curriculum being locked in permanent place by the *Standards*. Worse, the high-handed, sneaky, fear-based strategy being used to force those *Standards* on America's teachers and kids make it all but impossible to explore alternative curricula. Resisting the Common Core Standards juggernaut can end one's career in education.

Full disclosure: I have a dog in this fight. I've written books, chapters for others' books, dozens of journal articles, myriad op-eds, and years of nationally distributed newspaper columns, all calling attention to a simple, no-cost way to salvage the traditional curriculum. But up against bureaucracy and institutional inertia, up against lobbyists for test manufacturers and education publishers, up against the millions being spent by the Gates, Walton, and Broad Foundations to reinforce the educational status quo, up against the naiveté and hubris of the U.S. Secretary of Education and policymakers for both political parties, up against wishy-washy teacher unions, my dog can't get out of the kennel. School administrators are so paralyzed by fear I can't even get pilot programs in place to test the idea about which I've written hundreds of thousands of words.

In a review of my first book on the subject (State University of New York Press, 1989), Dr. Philip L. Smith, editor of SUNY Press's *Philosophy of Education* series, wrote:

[This is] a well thought out, beautifully presented defense of humanistic general education... I see the audience going well beyond professors of education or students of curriculum. I think it should be read by primary and secondary school teachers, by administrators, school-board members, and the general public. Many of these people want more from their schools than specialized academic preparation or narrow vocational training. Brady gives them something more. She [sic] provides a serious, concrete proposal for civic education and the development of the human spirit. To my knowledge there is nothing now available in print that is even of mediocre quality to compete with it... Serious-minded educators who begin to read this book 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 they read it.

Who decides what's taught? Generally speaking, nobody. What's taught is taught because it's what has long been taught. Period.

That's the main reason meaningful change in the curriculum is all but impossible. Reformers, either not understanding that sense can't be made of a dynamic world using a static curriculum, or else understanding but deliberately pursuing a dark objective, cripple young minds with ill-conceived policies.

I'm angry enough about the beating America's teachers and kids are taking from those policies, worried enough about America's future, and frustrated enough with the educational naiveté and hubris of those now controlling American education to do something I wouldn't have done when I was younger and poorer. Hoping to trigger a long-overdue dialogue about what the young are being taught (and not taught), and why, I've bought back from my publisher the rights to my most recent book, *What's Worth Learning?*, and put it online as an e-book, free for the downloading.

It's a quick read:

Part One: What's wrong with the "core." curriculum—12 pages.

Part Two: A "fix"—45 pages.

Part Three: Meshing the fix and the core—15 pages.

Part Four: Notes on teaching—19 pages.

Recognizing the enormous difficulty of translating a genuinely new idea into classroom instruction, an appendix to *What's Worth Learning?* titled *Connections: Investigating Reality*, offers an illustrative course of study suitable for adolescents and older students.

I'm convinced that classroom teachers—not test manufacturers, not publishers of textbooks and other educational materials, not leaders of business and industry, not the U.S. Department of Education, not federal, state, or municipal politicians—are best positioned to develop and maintain the general education curriculum. No one else is better able to adapt it to learner

abilities, take account of local conditions and resources, capitalize on individual differences, and evaluate learner performance.

But teachers need tools they don't now have—a clear, defensible aim, a shared vocabulary, a sound philosophy, a comprehensive conceptual framework, a working teaching model, and a way to communicate with each other about the work they share. For this reason, in the spirit of “open source,” I've also put the course of study online.

Links to both the book and course of study are below.

But first: For about the last twenty-five years, the main obstacles to acceptance of genuinely fresh thinking in education have been erected by amateurs—business leaders, lawyers, economists, celebrities, state and federal legislators, mayors and other politicians—who know little about educating, don't know how little they know, and refuse to talk to those who've spent their working lives eye-to-eye with students, all the while thinking hard about what they were doing.

But professional educators erect their own obstacles to fresh thinking. From failed efforts to get my peers to give serious thought to a simple but different idea, I've identified at least some of the reasons for their resistance.

First, my idea is dismissed because it's threatening. It calls into question the undergirding premise that shapes school organization, teacher training, textbook design, testing, and much else. For many, maybe most educators, the idea even threatens their identity. That's not much of an incentive to read or think about the idea.

Second, the idea is dismissed because it sounds too simple to take seriously. A few sentences before that long quote above from Philip Smith, he wrote, "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 simple-minded. Nothing could be further from the truth."

“Before he studied it,” Smith dismissed the idea. If he hadn't been asked to read the book manuscript, he wouldn't have done so. It's sad but true that most teachers don't read much, and those who do aren't likely to want to read about an idea that initially strikes them as too simple to take seriously.

Third, the idea doesn't “compute” for most people, especially educators. Accepting it requires imagination and a genuine paradigm shift—replacing a taken-for-granted idea about the nature of knowledge with an idea to which no thought has been given. Those who've studied paradigm shifts know that mere words don't trigger them.

Fourth, the idea is ignored by those whose assistance it most needs—creative, original thinkers. Always unhappy with the status quo, they devise alternatives. But immersed in their creations, they often suffer from what's sometimes called the NIH (Not Invented Here) Syndrome. They've little or no interest in someone else's idea.

Here, simply stated, is the idea I've been pushing for nearly a half-century, the idea that suffers from that worst of all possible fates: It's neither accepted nor rejected. It's ignored:

THE BRAIN COPESES POORLY WITH DISORGANIZED INFORMATION, AND SCHOOL SUBJECTS ARE POOR ORGANIZERS.

THE BRAIN USES A BETTER SYSTEM. HELPING KIDS LIFT THEIR NATURAL ORGANIZER INTO CONSCIOUSNESS AND MAKE INTENTIONAL USE OF IT MAKES THEM A WHOLE LOT SMARTER.

Download the book. (No strings, no cost, no signup, no ads): [*What's Worth Learning?*](#)

Download the illustrative course of study. (Same deal): [*Connections: Investigating Reality*](#)