

Washington Post, “The Answer Sheet” blog by Valerie Strauss

Posted October 17, 2014:

What the Common Core standards can't do

By Marion Brady

“Mr. Brady, you have to read this book!”

The year was 1961. Nancy Hoover was home for the Christmas holidays at the end of her first semester at Georgetown University. Earlier in the year, as a high school senior, she'd been one of my students. Now, she was standing at my front door, shoving a book at me in a way that said, “Read this! No excuses!”

The book was “The Evolution of Civilizations” by Carroll Quigley, one of her professors in the Georgetown School of Foreign Service.

I read it, so wasn't surprised many years later when President Bill Clinton mentioned Quigley's influence on him, or when Quigley's obituary in the *Washington Star* in 1977 said that many Georgetown alumni considered his two-semester course on the rise and fall of civilizations the most influential in their undergraduate careers.

Nancy picked her book up a few days later. I ordered a copy for myself.

Quigley wrote at length about a social process called “institutionalization,” arguing that it played an extremely important role in societal health. To solve problems, he said, societies create “instruments”—hospitals to care for the sick, police forces to control deviant behavior, highway departments to build and maintain roads, schools to educate the young, and so on.

But gradually, over time, those instruments become “institutions,” more concerned about perpetuating themselves than solving the particular problem that prompted their creation. Hospitals put procedures ahead of patient care; charitable organizations channel increasing amounts of money into administration. Generals and admirals cling to strategies and weapons that once worked well but are no longer effective.

Schooling—not just in America but worldwide—has institutionalized. School subjects took shape as means to the end of improving sense-making. Gradually, however, they've taken on lives of their own. We don't, for example, ask if algebra is so central to adult functioning and societal well-being that it should be a required subject, so important that failure to pass the course is sufficient reason to deny a diploma. We treat the subject as a given, arguing only about how many years to teach it, at what grade levels.

What's true for algebra is true for every school subject. The core curriculum adopted in 1893 moves inexorably toward ritual, largely untouched by classroom experience, research, and societal needs. Standards keyed to that curriculum—standards reflecting

the biases of the writers, standards not subject to professional debate before adoption, standards not classroom tested—have been imposed top-down. Tests scored by machines, tests that can't evaluate original thought, tests with built-in failure rates, tests that directly affect the life chances of the young and America's future—are shielded from the eyes of parents, teachers and the general public.

Schooling is supposed to help the young make the best-possible sense of themselves, others, and the world. To that end, schools focus their attention on the core subjects, and those subjects can't do the job. Trying to make sense, the brain doesn't click from core subject to core subject. The information feeding into it from eyes, ears, and other senses, filtered by emotions and past experience, is far too complex to be explained by the subjects that make up the core curriculum.

I tried to illustrate this complexity in a column distributed to newspapers by Knight-Ridder/Tribune Information Services on April 3rd, 2000:

“...In the real world, the world we're trying to help the young understand, everything connects to everything. We want a pair of socks. Those available have been knitted in a Third World country. Power to run the knitting machines is supplied by burning fossil fuels. Burning fossil fuels contributes to global warming. Global warming alters weather patterns. Altered weather patterns trigger environmental catastrophes. Environmental catastrophes destroy infrastructure. Money spent for infrastructure replacement isn't available for health care. Declines in the quality of health care affect mortality rates. Mortality is a matter of life and death. Buying socks, then, is a matter of life and death.

“Making sense of this simple cause-effect sequence requires not only some understanding of marketing, physics, chemistry, meteorology, economics, engineering, psychology, sociology, political science and a couple of other fields not usually taught in school, **it also requires an understanding of how all the fields fit together.**

“Preparing to put a jigsaw puzzle together, we study the picture on the lid of the box. It's the grasp of the big picture—the whole—that helps us make sense of the individual pieces. Formal education doesn't give kids the big picture. It gives them instead a little biology, a little poetry, a little history, a little of this, a little of that, but nothing about how the bits and pieces are connected...”

The curriculum is to schooling as blueprints are to builders, as maps are to travelers, as patterns are to clothing manufacturers, as models are to designers, complicated by the fact that what needs to be understood is dynamic, therefore impossible to model with a static curriculum.

Common sense says that getting schooling right begins with getting the curriculum right, but that fact doesn't seem to have occurred to the business leaders and

politicians—educational amateurs all—now pulling the education policy strings. Instead of funding a rethinking of the blueprint, the map, the pattern, the model, they’ve spent billions locking a deeply flawed curriculum in rigid, permanent place with the Common Core State Standards.

In a properly functioning educational system, the curriculum isn’t fixed. It capitalizes on local resources. Its relevance and practicality are obvious to all learners. It reflects their infinitely varied needs, abilities, hopes, conditions and situations. It continuously evolves to adapt to inevitable environmental, demographic, technological, and worldview change.

The Common Core State Standards may or may not improve the teaching of math, science, language arts, and social studies, may or may not inch up the scores on standardized tests. *What the Standards can’t do is lift learners to the levels of intellectual performance that are possible when everything they know becomes an organized, systemically integrated, mutually reinforcing structure of knowledge.*

Note: In [journal articles](#)ⁱ and a recent [book](#)ⁱⁱ, I’ve described a relatively simple, low-cost solution to the fragmented-curriculum problem. In a [course of study](#)ⁱⁱⁱ for adolescents, I’ve illustrated how the idea can be implemented. There are educators who’d like to make use of the idea, but the boundaries created by current reforms are so narrow, and the penalties for stepping outside of those boundaries are so severe, they aren’t free to do so.

ⁱ <http://www.marionbrady.com/Articles.asp>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.marionbrady.com/documents/WWL.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.marionbrady.com/CIR.asp>