

Megafailure

By Marion Brady

What's the bottom line objective of general education? Prepare students for democratic citizenship? Equip them for useful, satisfying work? Teach them cultural knowledge? Expose them to the disciplines? Make them think?

In a forced-vote runoff among these and the other familiar choices, the last on the above list would probably place first. Most educators seem to agree that if students leave school with sophisticated cognitive skills, the other objectives of general education will take care of themselves. Not knowing what tomorrow may bring, the best instruction sends graduates off with intellectual tools for dealing with whatever may come.

But educators would probably also agree that, thus far, not much progress toward this major instructional objective has been made. Most often, we simply teach biology, history, mathematics, and the rest of the traditional curriculum. It's a rare teacher who sees disciplinary content as less important than enhancing student ability to categorize, draw inferences, generate hypotheses, generalize, value, synthesize, or engage in other complex thought processes. As our final exams demonstrate, the ability to recall is about the only cognitive skill of consistent concern to us.

Why does traditional instruction do so little to engage thought processes? Because it gives students almost nothing to think about. It deals primarily in the currency of conclusions, and conclusions are extremely shallow material for exercising complex mental processes.

Scholars in the knowledge-based disciplines say, "This is what we know." The educational establishment then rummages through these pronouncements, pulls some of them out, translates them into an appropriate level of complexity, and presents them via textbooks, lectures, films, and computers.

What's a student to do with this vast body of information? There isn't much he or she *can* do with it. Except try to remember it. All the "thinking"—the hypothesizing, the generalizing, the other sophisticated cognitive processes—has already been done. It's like handing a student a crossword puzzle with the blanks filled in. The challenge and the fun have been drained out of it.

Three or four generations ago, Alfred North Whitehead said, "The secondhandedness of the learned world is the secret of its mediocrity." This is what he meant.

But, some will say, requiring students to mentally store the accumulated wisdom of scholars is what schooling is all about. It prepares them for thinking on their own.

It does no such thing. We learn to hypothesize by hypothesizing, to generalize by generalizing, to synthesize by synthesizing. We can't have it both ways. Students who sit for years passively absorbing information are, at best, learning to absorb information.

Studying conclusions based on others observations of phenomena remote in time and space leaves students with little or no worthwhile intellectual work to do. The solution? Study immediate, unmediated, observable, “here and now” phenomena. Every known cognitive process will be used.

When I say students should study here and now phenomena, I mean it literally. We should discard, at least initially, all secondhand versions of reality. Shelve the books. Put away the lecture notes. Shut off the projectors and the computers. Close the library. (Close the library!?) Put the chairs in a circle (or in storage), turn to the students, and say simply, “Look around you. What’s going on here?”

For most of the educational establishment, that’s a very frightening, perhaps even unthinkable, scenario.

We ought to ask ourselves why it’s frightening. After all, there’s probably no question more central to our task. If the proper subject matter of general education is reality, and we slice off a tiny bit of that reality for study—the bit that, because it’s right here, right now, should be the most intellectually manageable—why should we find ourselves at such a loss about how to proceed? Or perhaps even find ourselves questioning whether such a project is educationally legitimate.

Understanding immediate experience is general education’s challenge presented in its simplest form. Realizing that we’re little or not at all concerned with that challenge, and wouldn’t know what to do if we suddenly became concerned, should shake us thoroughly. It tells us we’re failing, failing in the most basic, fundamental sense possible.

The primary source of our paralysis in the face of what ought to be the simplest of instructional tasks isn’t hard to identify. It’s the academic disciplines. We’re so wrapped up in these random, fragmented, awkward, narrow studies, we haven’t bothered to ask if they’re doing what they were originally developed to do—help us explain reality to ourselves.

If the disciplines were working tools for understanding ordinary experience, our students, when asked “What’s going on here?” wouldn’t miss a beat. They’d start explaining. But they don’t, and they can’t. Choose at random a dozen Phi Beta Kappans who’ve come up through our educational system. Tell them to pull from their academic backgrounds a systemically integrated, coherent, useful description of the present moment. None will be able to do it. They may not even know what you’re talking about.

I’m not advocating eliminating the disciplines. In a world growing daily more complex, specialized study is essential. I’m saying that the disciplines are not, either singly or in combination, the materials from which a coherent general education curriculum can be fashioned.

Return, now, to the scenario framed earlier, of teacher and students confronting the question, “What’s going on here?” Stripped of all else except wit, past experience, and their immediate surroundings, are they likely to assemble a useful answer?

It will take awhile, but they will. Moving back and forth between observed reality and a site-built conceptual model representing that reality, understanding will grow exponentially.

Hundreds of questions, questions cutting across every field of study, will emerge.

Where is the school? How is it sited? When, with what materials, and how was it built? Where did the materials come from? What does the structure look like? What infrastructure supports it? What climatic conditions are relevant to its operation? What resources does it use? How does it process them? How efficiently? How much does it cost to run? What art is in evidence? What tools are in use? How does the school relate physically to its surroundings?

And in every case, certain standard questions: Why? Could it have been or should it be otherwise? How does the answer to this question relate systemically to the other questions? More questions: How many students are there? Adults? Males? Females? What are the average, mean, median ages? Heights? Weights? Ratios? Characteristic physiological systems and subsystems? Capacities and capabilities of those systems and subsystems? Kind and amount of sustenance required?

And in every case, certain standard questions: Why? Could it or should it be otherwise? How does the answer to this or that particular question relate systemically to the other questions?

More questions: Who does what kind of work? How often? Where? Who makes which kinds of decisions? Who talks or writes to whom? How? What are pedestrian traffic patterns? Areas of informal congregation? What schedules and routines are in place? Who socializes with whom? When? Are sexes or other groups treated differently? Under what circumstances? What methods are used to control deviant behavior? Do they work? Is competition encouraged? Cooperation? How? What provisions are made for creativity? What ranges of emotional display are acceptable? Who's responsible for maintaining the environment? Who pays the bills? How?

And in every case, certain standard questions: Why? Could it or should it be otherwise? How does the answer to this or that particular question relate systemically to the other questions?

More questions: What assumptions, beliefs, and unexamined premises underlie the formal organizational structure of the institution? What's the dominant time orientation? Variations? How valuable is time thought to be? What causes change? Who "owns" what spaces? What are the boundaries of personal space? Does it differ from individual to individual? What appears to be the nature of human nature as exhibited in the school? What's the relative importance of various classes of individuals and groups? The prevailing ideas about inherent or acquired characteristics related to sex, race, religion, ethnic origin, etc.? What are the general directions of long-term change thought to be?

And in every case, certain standard questions: Why? Could it or should it be otherwise? How does the answer to this or that particular question relate systemically to the other questions?

Little by little, as such questions are explored, a descriptive, analytical, supradisciplinary model of reality will take shape, not just of the school, but of all reality. This model will elaborate the five major conceptual categories that we ordinarily use to orient ourselves in reality: (a) time, (b) environment, (c) participant actors, (d) cognitive system, and (e) action. It will be comprehensive, holistic, and inherently integrated, will subsume the traditional disciplines and all other knowledge, identify important but presently neglected fields of study, and suggest their relative significance. Eventually, the model will undergird, organize, and systematize everything the student knows.

And, in the process of bringing into consciousness this monolithic conceptual megastructure, students will use every known cognitive process.

Those attached to the status quo may dismiss as trivial the study of immediate reality, and as simplistic the use of our culture's five-part conceptual model to replace the disciplines in the study of that reality. Worse, if what Thomas S. Kuhn says in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* about the difficulty of making paradigm shifts is true, what's being said may not even make enough sense to them to accept or reject it. (Of course, since they control the mechanisms of standardized testing, it doesn't need to make sense. What's taught isn't going to change.)

But change is possible. In the face of overwhelming evidence of the failure of present practice—the uselessness of so much that's taught, the problems with violence and discipline, the need for mandatory attendance laws, the dropouts, the necessity for extrinsic rewards to motivate, the tragic waste of so much student and teacher potential—one can hope that the educational establishment will begin to suspect that something is fundamentally wrong and begin to look around for alternatives.

Should that happen, it needn't look very far. If the point of it all is to help students make sense of past and present human experience, and bring all mental faculties to bear on the task of surviving an unknowable future, we must make our implicit model of reality explicit, and use it to guide study of immediate experience. All else is peripheral.

##