

The Standards Juggernaut

It is hard to resist the notion that what is important is whatever we and our peers happen to know. But if we buy that simplistic idea, the clones we create will be poorly prepared to cope with changing reality, Mr. Brady points out.

BY MARION BRADY

WHAT should the young be taught? No question we can ask ourselves is more important. Nothing less than the survival of humankind hinges on our choice of answers. Perhaps surprisingly, the question rarely generates “deep” debate. Of course, there have been long-running arguments about creationism versus evolution, phonics versus whole language, the acceptability of certain novels for classroom use, and whether or not some textbooks encourage socialist or other “anti-American” perspectives.

But these are arguments over details. There has been very little dialogue focusing on fundamental curricular issues — little debate about the ultimate goals of education, little debate about what new knowledge belongs in the curriculum, little debate about what old content can be abandoned, little debate about whether or not the traditional disciplines are the best organizers of knowledge, and little debate about the appropriateness of the arbitrary boundaries that separate fields of study.

We have had no comprehensive national conversation about these questions. Hands are wrung about almost everything else connected with the schools discipline, standardized test scores, teacher qualifications, funding, vouchers, charters, and so on but the most important questions about schooling are not being answered. Indeed, they are not even being asked.

There is almost no dialogue about fundamental curricular issues because it seems to be widely assumed that there are no serious problems with the traditional curriculum. What should the young be taught? Without hesitation, policy makers and politicians answer, “They should be taught what those of us who are educated know.” This is the philosophical underpinning of the latest educational fad: the standards movement.

Enter, center stage, the people Susan Ohanian has called the “Standardistos.” No need, in the Standardisto view, to identify and clarify an overarching reason to educate. No need to



decide what new knowledge belongs in the curriculum. No need to agree on what old knowledge to discard to make room for the new. No need to weigh the merit of alternative ways of organizing knowledge. No need to introduce students to the integrated, mutually supportive nature of all knowledge. From the Standardist perspective, all that is necessary is to determine what most “well-educated” people know, organize it, distribute it to the schools, and demand that teachers teach it and students learn it. In the name of reform, the Standardists are freezing in bureaucratic place the worst aspects of traditional education.

The standards movement has a lot going for it. Its promoters are true believers who have ready access to the media because they are considered authorities. The movement has massive political and corporate backing. Educators who oppose the movement are not well organized. It enjoys an inspired label who can reasonably oppose the setting of standards? Perhaps most important, it meshes well with simplistic, popular views of what educating is all about.

Every day, across America, committees are at work embedding and reinforcing the standards fad. Sadly, because the consequences of their actions will take so long to manifest themselves, the causal link between what they are doing and its ultimately calamitous consequences may not become apparent in time to do anything about it. The perspectives of the Standardists demand much closer scrutiny than they are getting.

Your Facts or Mine?

It hardly needs to be said that we are experiencing an information explosion that is unprecedented in human history. We can teach only the tiniest fraction of all there is to know, and that fraction grows smaller by the hour.

To the question “What should the young be taught?” the Standardist answer is the one noted above: that body of general knowledge that those of us who are educated already know. That generations should share a large body of general knowledge makes good sense. Every society needs a “language of allusion” in order to function. Such statements as “The Monroe Doctrine is still a sensitive issue for many Latin Americans” or “He has the patience of Job” have meaning only if the speaker and the listener share some level of understanding of the Monroe Doctrine and of the Biblical story of Job's troubles.

A shared language of allusion provides a significant means of holding a society together. However, it is a mistake to assume that whatever members of the dominant elite know should determine what is taught to the young. The importance of a fact has nothing whatsoever to do with either the status of the people who know it or their number. What counts, finally, is societal survival, from which it follows that *the relative importance of a bit of knowledge depends on the long-term effects of its being generally known*. That is a very different criterion.

A fact-based curriculum that teaches students about ancient Rome's battles with Carthage but fails to explore the differing value systems that underlie most conflict is missing a significant learning opportunity. A curriculum that requires students to learn the names of major rivers or mountain ranges but leaves them unaware of the implications of a gradual drop in the level of their region's water table tacitly invites eventual disaster.

Determining the probable or possible long-term consequences of knowing or not knowing something is, of course, no easy task. The process requires looking at the world as a system, and traditional schooling does not encourage that. Ordinary experience may tell us, say,

that medical research increases life expectancy; that increased life expectancy expands the total population; that increased population expands the demand for food, water, and living space; and that those needs are on a collision course that could have disastrous consequences.

But what ordinary experience tells us is not addressed by the traditional curriculum that the Standardists are so eager to reinforce. Tracing even a simple causal sequence like the one above touches on physiology, technology, geography, economics, and sociology. In our schools, such subjects are taught, if at all, at different levels and at different times, as if they had little or nothing to do with one another. Standards are written for disciplines. It is a rare standards document that tries to promote the exploration of relationships *between or beyond* the familiar disciplines.

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Depth or Breadth?

Two theories about how students learn best have long been in competition. One of them is summarized by the old saying "Throw enough mud on the wall, and some of it is bound to stick." This view acknowledges that not everything taught is learned, but it suggests that there is nevertheless merit in bombarding students with information because at least some of it will be remembered.

The second theory is summarized in the statement "Less is more." Early in the 20th century, mathematician, teacher, and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead maintained that dumping vast amounts of information on students was counterproductive. He argued that humans are simply not mentally equipped to handle a great deal of random, "inert knowledge." The young Whitehead said, need to study in great depth a relatively few really powerful ideas, ideas that encompass and explain major aspects of human experience.

For example, Whitehead probably would have approved studying the concept of polarization. This process, by means of which minor differences between humans become major ones, touches almost every dimension of life. Polarization gradually turns complex, "gray" issues into ever simpler "black and white" ones, attaches to those issues ever greater significance, and loads them with ever more emotion until effective communication becomes impossible, and conflict becomes all but inevitable. A shared, thorough understanding of the process of polarization sheds light on the dynamics of friendship, marriage, neighborhood incidents, labor/management relationships, barroom brawls, religious schisms, international relations, and much more.

There are concepts even broader than polarization, concepts that cut across all fields of knowledge and disclose their inherent interrelations. For example, concepts such as "pattern," "structure," "relationship," and "system" are central to all disciplines, including those not yet developed. By focusing on these kinds of large-scale mental organizers, students will be equipped to expand existing fields of study and to explore intellectual territory of which we currently have little or no knowledge.

Such organizers are essential. Give adults the exams they took a few years earlier in high school or college, and their poor performance will prove that facts that are not made part of an often-used larger scheme of meaning are soon forgotten.

The Standardistos pay lip service to the necessity for both breadth and depth, but nowhere in evidence in their efforts are “big” ideas that organize the myriad facts they demand that students remember. Indeed, most are convinced that the young cannot handle big ideas, that facts must come first, and that, given enough facts, some master pattern will eventually emerge to bind them together in a way that makes useful sense.

Here or There?

Effective teachers of the young are much concerned with what, in educational jargon, is called “developmentally appropriate material.” Certain sequences are taken for granted. The simple is taught before the complex, the tangible before the intangible, the concrete before the abstract.

Most Standardistos have little use for such ideas. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., surely a closet Standardisto, asks, “What, exactly, does ‘developmentally appropriate’ mean?...Must children in the second grade have their horizons bounded by the local mall, as opposed to...learning about China and India, ancient Greece, and the Civil War?”¹

The question, of course, is whether reach equals grasp. Learning about China, India, and ancient Greece involves learning about extremely complex cultural systems that are shaped by deep-seated assumptions about life, death, the individual, significant others, nature, causation, the good life, the supernatural, and much more. The assumptions that undergird these cultural systems manifest themselves in myriad social institutions and physical productions and arrangements. There is no doubt some merit in teaching second-graders how to locate China and India on a globe, but it is surely naive to think that an ability to recall rehearsed answers to a few carefully chosen and phrased questions about those countries is of value.

What's more, the local shopping mall to which Hirsch gives such short shrift deserves more respect than most Standardistos give it. To those who have not thought much about the matter, it might seem too mundane to merit the attention of second-graders. But choose any field of study — physics, language, economics, art, sociology, even history — and any randomly selected mall will provide enough raw study material to keep a team of graduate students occupied indefinitely. It is only the extreme familiarity of shopping malls that keeps their inherent complexity below our threshold of awareness.

The same could be said for the study of a student's school. There is no concept appropriate for the general education curriculum that does not manifest itself in some teachable way within the physical boundaries of a school.

To the casual observer, attempting to teach the young about China or India might seem to indicate more respect for the intellectual capabilities of the young than does a focus on the mall or other topics drawn from student experience. In fact, just the opposite is the case. Because they know little or nothing about things remote in time and space other than what they are told, second-graders have few options other than to parrot such information back. But make their own experience a legitimate focus of study, and their insights and critical powers can begin to be displayed, sometimes in startlingly impressive ways that demand genuine respect.

I do not mean to suggest that schoolwork should be confined to the study of immediate reality. Even the very young have imaginations that can transport them almost anywhere. But surely, given the difficulties inherent in dealing in a systematic way with the complex, the abstract, and the remote, immediate reality is the place to begin to build the descriptive and analytical conceptual models that will eventually take students to wider experience. Standardists, unaccustomed to the instructional use of what students know rather than what they themselves know, rarely write standards that exploit the teaching power of a student's own experience.

There is yet another reason for focusing primary attention on the student's "here and now" rather than on preprocessed, canned information. Back in the 1960s, the education establishment's thinking about thought became somewhat more sophisticated. "Thinking" began to be seen as actively engaging in a wide range of mental processes. Recalling was just one of those processes. Categorizing, translating, hypothesizing, valuing, generalizing, and synthesizing were others. Even the very young, it became apparent, use a great many thought processes in the course of ordinary experience.

When teaching is seen primarily as telling by means of teacher talk or textbook reading, the mental processes available to students dwindle down to just one: recall. Students may not be able to put their fingers on the reason schoolwork so often frustrates and bores them, but its lack of genuine intellectual challenge is surely a major factor.

Here, again, is why the study of immediate, firsthand experience the mall, the school, the street can be so engaging. Its inherent complexity demands the use of every known thought process, and the level of difficulty automatically adjusts to that which is most appropriate for the individual student.

The Appeal of the Simplistic

In times of uncertainty, easy answers have great appeal. This is such an era, and well-meaning politicians and policy makers are quick to supply them.

Unfortunately, more often than not, behind legislation and new initiatives lies a gross lack of understanding of education. Many share the view of Standardist Louis Gerstner, Jr., CEO of IBM, who apparently believes that educating has to do primarily with "the distribution of information." If only it could be that simple. Teaching, real teaching, involves the altering of the images of reality in the minds of others, a challenge inherently far more complex than those presented by rocket science.

The educational establishment has itself to blame for the fact that so many who do not know what they are doing are promoting simplistic approaches to educating. The establishment has drifted along thoughtlessly, assuming that the major curricular issues have been solved and that all that is needed now is a bit of touching up of what was taught last year, a task that can be handled by the subject-matter specialists.

In eras when knowledge changed little from generation to generation, that view was probably an acceptable one. Today, it is not. The perspectives of subject-matter specialists are too narrow; their interest in the whole, of which their specializations are parts, is too restricted; the rate of societal change is too rapid for reform of the "touching up" sort. Freezing the status quo in place, assuring that what the young should be taught is merely what the educated happen

to know, ensures that, as the years pass, school curricula will bear less and less relationship to reality.

There are other wrongheaded views shared by many Standardistos — that somehow just “raising the bar” increases students' ability to clear it, that before the standards movement there were no standards, that the talent wasted by one-size fits-all programs is not worth developing, that students who will be turned into “failures” by the standards will not present a serious problem, that standardized tests tell us something really important, that market forces have a magical ability to cure the ills of education, that extrinsic rewards are dependable motivators, and so on. However, behind the standards juggernaut and impelling it forward is the single, primary, simplistic, and unexamined assumption that what the next generation most needs to know is what this generation knows. Surface that assumption and carefully examine it, and every other Standardisto assumption will begin to show itself in a different light.

Teaching to lists of what is “important” that have been devised by the elders is the ultimate “back-to-basics” program. If we proceed down the road we are now on and succeed in replicating ourselves, we will have an America in which everyone understands and is comfortable with everyone else – as we slide toward oblivion.

¹ E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).