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“The Answer Sheet” Blog

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## Primer for ed reformers (or, it’s the curriculum, stupid!)

*My guest today is [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.*

By Marion Brady

Just about everybody who’s ever been to school has a theory about what’s wrong with education. And a good many of them have a theory about what would make what’s wrong right.

The list of those reform theories is long and getting longer: Get back to the basics! Lengthen the school day! Separate the sexes! Require more math and science! Toughen the standards! Add end-of-course exams! Increase the number of Advanced Placement courses! Put mayors in charge! Replace superintendents with retired military officers! Pay kids for good grades! Abolish teacher unions! End tenure! Lengthen the school year! Tie teacher pay to test scores! Adopt vouchers! Open more charter schools! Close colleges of education! Require school uniforms! Force parental cooperation! Give every kid a laptop! Fire the worst 25% of teachers, rank the rest, and publish the ranking in the newspaper! Adopt national standards for every school subject! Partner schools and businesses! Transfer authority from local school boards to the feds! (Just to begin a list.)

The school reform picture is chaotic, and I add to the chaos by advancing yet another theory (one almost nobody likes). I say the familiar “core curriculum” in use in America’s schools and colleges is a problem-plagued, dysfunctional, 19th Century relic that fits the 21st Century about as well as the first Model T Ford fits into I-75 traffic.

An emergency national conference should be called to rethink it.

Currently, of course, the only reforms being taken seriously are those being pushed by Bill Gates, Eli Broad, the Waltons, and other rich theorists.

They may never have taught even the first eight hours of the 10,000 that Malcolm Gladwell says is necessary to become really knowledgeable about a profession, and they may never have tried to convince a bunch of skeptical adolescents that trees don't get big by sucking stuff up out of the ground, or they may never have gotten a class of college students to accept that they can't make good sense of the world if they don't understand the Second Law of Thermodynamics, but never mind all that. It's that old Golden Rule again: Whoever has the gold makes the rules.

Given the importance of education in determining our collective fate, the time and money being spent trying to educate, and the present incoherent state of policy, we need a way to sort out all the reform proposals and decide which ones might work.

Since the whole matter comes down to getting inside kids' heads and helping them make better sense of the world, and no job is more intellectually challenging than that, the opinions of those who've actually taught should be useful. Even the best old hands will have failed more often than they've succeeded, but most will agree on some advice for the new reformers:

- Learning, real learning – trying to make more sense of what's happening – is as natural and satisfying as breathing. If your big reform idea requires laws, mandates, penalties, bribes, or other kinds of external pressure to make it work, it won't work. You can lead the horse to water, and you can force it to look like it's drinking, but you can't make it drink.
- The ability to think – to infer, hypothesize, generalize, relate, make sound value judgments, generate brand new knowledge, and so on – is the main thing humankind has going for it. If thought isn't tested, it won't get taught, so if your reform effort depends on standardized tests, you're in big trouble. That's because nobody knows how to write standardized, machine-scoreable test questions that say how well a kid can think. Nobody.
- Saying to kids, "You'll need to know this next year," is a waste of words. If they can't see the usefulness, right now, in their own lives, of whatever you're trying to teach, they won't learn it. Information may go into short-term memory long enough to pass a test, but that's it.

- They won't allow what they think is useless information to permanently clutter up their minds. Think I'm wrong? What percentage of the American history you studied in elementary school, middle school, high school, and college, do you still remember well enough to, say, cite precedent when you argue the case for or against a particular Wall Street reform?
- If the success of your reform effort depends on really smart, knowledgeable teachers or administrators, go back to the drawing board. The percentage of those in the schools is about the same as in other professions, which means there will always be a major shortage. Respecting educators enough to get out of their way and let them do their work without being micromanaged by amateurs would increase the percentage of good ones, but not enough to assure the success of your reform proposal.
- Are you convinced national standards for school subjects is a good reform idea? Forget it. First, they lock in our 19th Century curriculum. Second, the human brain doesn't make sense of experience by clicking between school subjects. Third, in the real world, everything connects to everything, and the connections are at least as important as the facts being connected. Fourth, standards should say what kinds of kids we want, not which facts we think they should have in their heads. Fifth, trying to standardize the young (especially now that the Chinese are determined to de-standardize them to encourage creativity) is a recipe for disaster. Kid creativity has declined steadily since No Child Left Behind was put in place.
- If concern for the achievement gap drives your enthusiasm for reform, know that differences in scores on standardized tests aren't going to go away as long as the test items are written by adults who've grown up in the dominant culture. Too many of the items will be stacked against minorities, a fact that will remain hidden because of test secrecy and dominant-culture hubris. Complicating the problem is the fact that the gap triggers self-fulfilling prophecies which perpetuate it.

Those six insights are a start on a primer.

Here are eight more that experienced teachers think you need to know:

- Kids are a lot smarter than today's education makes them seem.

- They learn more in small groups working together on a challenge than they do competing one-on-one.
- Without emotional involvement there's no learning (and boredom doesn't qualify as an emotion).
- Humans really do learn more from firsthand experience than from books and teacher talk.
- The brain uses a "master" information organizing system, and understanding it is important.
- For kids, passivity is unnatural, so sitting still hour after hour is anti-educational.
- The revolutionary implications of the new accessibility of information aren't being taken into adequate account.
- Both teachers and learners are more powerfully motivated by the satisfactions of doing useful, high-quality work than by winning competitions.

If the complexities of educating are discouraging, know there's a shortcut to meeting them that goes directly to the only place that really matters – what happens in kids' heads.

Dump the Common Core State Standards Initiative. Ditch the [Race to the Top](#). Abandon all theories that say coming down harder on teachers and kids will pull our fat out of the fire. The best way to teach kids how to make sense of the real world is to put them to work actually making sense of the real world.

There's a three-part real-world, real-time assignment that, if made Job One by every teacher and learner in America above the elementary level would quickly yield the smart, creative, productive citizenry America's survival is going to require.

First: "Ask and try to answer every question you can think of about everything below, above, on, and within the boundaries of the property on which your school stands."

Second: "Figure out the simplest, most logical way to organize the information you're generating." Third: "Use what you're learning to make your school a true learning organization."

There's no better textbook, no better laboratory, no better time and place for teaching and learning math, the physical and social sciences, and the humanities than right here, right now.

There's no better way to discover the myriad, unsuspected ways that school subjects connect and reinforce each other.

There's no better way to assure that schooling sends the young out with the single most important tool they can take with them into an unknown future – a comprehensive, sophisticated descriptive-analytical “template” for making sense of neighborhood, workplace, village, tribe, region, nation, world, the human condition.

Doing this wouldn't cost a dime. In fact, it would save us billions.

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