Marion Brady | Education Reform: An Ignored Problem, and a Proposal

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The "standards and accountability" education reform effort began in the 1980s at the urging of leaders of business and industry. The reform message preached by Democrats, Republicans, and the mainstream media is simple. 1. America's schools are, at best, mediocre. 2. Teachers deserve most of the blame. 3. As a corrective, rigorous subject-matter standards and tests are essential. 4. Bringing market forces to bear will pressure teachers to meet the standards or choose some other line of work.

Competition - student against student, teacher against teacher, school against school, state against state, nation against nation - will yield the improvement necessary for the United States to finish in first place internationally.

Major Reform Premises

Education policy, the new reformers argue, should be "data driven." Standardized tests produce the necessary data in the form of scores. The scores are valid because the tests are valid. The tests are valid because they're keyed to standards. The standards are valid because they're keyed to the "core curriculum." And the core curriculum's validity has never been questioned.

Or, to sequence the logic differently: tradition legitimizes the core curriculum, the core curriculum legitimizes certain school subjects, those subjects legitimize the standards, the standards legitimize the tests, the tests legitimize the scores, and the scores legitimize the reform strategy.

Imagine an inverted pyramid, with the reform effort resting on the assumption that the math-science-language arts-social studies "core" prepares the young for what's shaping up to be the most complex, unpredictable, dangerous era in human history.

Simple. Logical. Wrong.

The Problem

The core was adopted in 1893. Custom and the conventional wisdom notwithstanding, it's deeply flawed. (1) It directs random, complex, often abstract information at learners at rates far beyond even the most capable learner's ability to cope; (2) It minimizes or even rejects the role that free play, art, music, dance, and social experience play in intellectual development; (3) It is so inefficient that it leaves little time for apprenticeships, internships, co-ops, projects, and other links to the real world and adulthood; (4) It neglects extremely important fields of study; (5) It has no built-in mechanisms forcing it to adapt to social change; (6) It gives short shrift to "higher order" thought processes; and (7) It makes no provision for raising and examining questions essential to ethical and moral development.

The core (8) has no agreed-upon, overarching aim, (9) lacks criteria establishing what new knowledge is important and what old knowledge to disregard to make way for the new, (10) makes educator dialog and teamwork difficult by arbitrarily fragmenting knowledge, (11) overworks learner memory at the expense of logic, (12) emphasizes reading and symbol manipulation skills to the neglect of other ways of learning, (13) is keyed to students' ages rather than to their aptitudes, interests, and abilities, (14) doesn't move learners steadily through ever-increasing levels of intellectual complexity, and (15) ignores the systemically integrated nature of knowledge and the way the brain processes information.

As it's usually taught, the core (16) penalizes rather than capitalizes on individual differences, (17) encourages futile attempts to quantify quality and other simplistic approaches to evaluation, (18) fails to adequately utilize the single most valuable teaching resource - the learner's first-hand experience, (19) requires a great deal of "seat time passivity" at odds with youthful nature, (20) is inordinately costly to administer, (21) emphasizes standardization to the neglect of the major sources of America's past strength and success - individual initiative, imagination, and creativity - and, (22) fails to recognize the implications of the very recent transition from difficult learner access to limited information, to near-instantaneous learner access to prodigious amounts of information.

If, as the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, *Race to the Top*, the *Common Core State Standards Initiative*, and the conventional wisdom assume, the core is sound, the present education reform strategy is probably on the right track. But if poor performance isn't a "people problem" but a *system* problem - a poor curriculum - these programs are at best a diversion and at worst counterproductive. They maintain and reinforce the same curriculum that helped bring schools to crisis.

Any *one* of the 22 problems noted above is serious enough to warrant calling a national conference to address it, and the present curriculum suffers from *all* of them. If the young and their parents really understood how poorly they're being served, they'd be in open revolt.

The most useful thing Congress and state departments of education can do is abandon authoritarian, centralizing initiatives and legislation that dictate what's taught. By propping up an obsolete, dysfunctional curriculum, they're making a very bad situation much worse.

A Proposal

Facts must be faced. First, the traditional curriculum is a confused, incoherent, disorganized mess. Second, standards and tests do nothing whatsoever to improve it. Third, it can't be fixed by "top down" mandates from Congress, state legislatures, or district offices. The fix will have to come "bottom up" and spread from school to school, propelled by its success with average teachers working in ordinary classrooms with learners of all ability levels.

The idea with the most potential for triggering fundamental education reform isn't new. Alfred North Whitehead stated it succinctly in his 1916 Presidential address to the Mathematical Association of England. The education establishment, he said, "must eradicate the fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of the modern curriculum."

That hasn't happened. Thinkers have been saying for centuries that it's not possible to educate - help learners make better sense of reality - by breaking it apart and studying the parts. The reason is obvious: It's the parts *and* their relationships that explain reality. Think "jigsaw puzzle." The more pieces fitted together, the more sense the puzzle makes. What's taught needs to form an organized, logically coherent, systemically integrated structure of knowledge, and do it in a way every kid can understand. Until that happens, schools at all levels will continue to waste learner time and potential at a criminal rate.

A few educators, sensitive to the problem, try to integrate knowledge using themes, projects, problems, concepts and other information organizers. Good work often results, but learners are still sent on their way without a comprehensive, seamless, functional mental map of reality.

As unlikely as it may seem, there's a simple fix for the curriculum - an easy way to weld its seemingly unrelated parts into a coherent whole. Most of the core's 22 problems stem from a wrong aim. As the *Common Core State Standards Initiative* makes clear, policymakers think education's aim is to improve math, science, language arts and social studies instruction, but they're wrong. The main aim of education is to help learners make more sense of experience - of themselves, each other, the world, and reality. Proper standards don't say what a kid should know about this or that school subject; they say what kind of person it's hoped an education will help the kid become.

Get the aim right, and the 22 problems go away. Get the aim right, and learners will stop being bored or frustrated and dropping out. Get the aim right, and attendance officers, cops in hallways, and pay-for-performance schemes won't be needed. Get the aim right, and taxpayers will stop defeating school bond issues, politicians will stop firing simplistic reform bullets, and the public will realize that "the race to the top" can't be won by beating up on teachers and kids. Get the aim right, and the deepest of all human drives - the need to know, to understand, to make more sense of life - will take over and propel a true education revolution.

There's an easy way to pursue education's proper aim - improving learner ability to make sense of reality. An ideal laboratory is already in place. It puts school subjects to work. It's "hands on." It's instantly accessible. It adapts to every ability level. It's unfailingly relevant. It requires learners to use every known thought process. It stimulates imagination and creativity. It erases the artificial walls between school subjects and between the "two cultures" - the sciences and the liberal arts. Its use requires no special teacher training or expertise. Using it doesn't cost a dime. In fact, the laboratory's efficiency can both radically reduce general education costs and free up time for instructional options and innovations not now possible.

That laboratory is the school itself, and its immediate environment. It's all there - a rich, concentrated, "representative sample" of reality, a "textbook" every kid can read, understand, and use.

If teachers and learners see the task as making more sense of immediate experience, if they use their school as the initial focus of study to create a descriptive, analytical "template," and if they're then challenged to make the school a true *learning* organization, an education revolution will be inevitable. A social institution all but paralyzed by a static curriculum and bureaucratic ritual will become dynamic, adaptive, and creative, capable of playing its proper role in shaping learners and guiding collective action.

The major instructional strategy is simple - teachers and students learning by doing what all humans must do in order to survive - asking and answering questions about what's happening, why, and what should be done next. Geography, math, economics, physics, history, and so on, stop being abstract bundles of information to be memorized to pass a test, get a job, or win admission to college. School subjects become practical, useful tools for making sense, helping learners construct sophisticated models of reality they'll use every day for the rest of their lives.

The questions asked are whatever learners can think of to ask. What's a school for? Where, exactly, is this one? What does it look like on Google Earth? When was it built? How is it constructed? What's the size and shape of the space it occupies? How many students does it serve? How does its ethnic composition compare to the larger society of which its population is a sample? What's the school's purpose? Who says so? Is it succeeding in doing what it's supposed to do? Why or why not? How much does it cost to operate? Who pays? How do they feel about that? Why? Who owns it? What resources does it use? Where do they come from, with what environmental consequences? How does its climate control system work? What waste does it generate, where does the waste go, and where will it be when I'm 60 years old? How many people run the school? What do they do? Who makes which decisions? Should they or somebody else be making those decisions? Why? How do taxpayers feel about what they're getting for their money?

Then, questions of a different sort, questions that turn learners' attention inward, raising consciousness, supporting the transition from mere "knowing," to "knowing what they know." What's the best way to organize all the information being generated by our questions and answers? Is a system of mental organization important? Are school subjects good information organizers? Is there a better approach? How does what I forget differ from what I remember?

The skills of observation and description developed by this kind of work, the analytical strategies devised, the complex thought processes exercised, the causal sequences traced, the mental models constructed, are those learners will use for the rest of their lives to make more sense of workplace, community, town, region, nation, and world.

Finally

There's a "looseness" in learning by actually *doing* that's worrisome, even unacceptable, to many both in and out of education. It runs counter to the current reactionary, get tough, tighten-the-rigor-screws school reform effort. Some see it, mistakenly, as soft, anti-bookish, child-directed, John Dewey-Progressive. It's at odds with the ancient, naive assumption that the elders know

enough about individual human potential, the range of differences in the young, and the shape of the future to decide what should be taught.

There's some truth in that assumption, of course, but not nearly enough to support the traditional core curriculum and the present effort to standardize learners rather than capitalize on their differences.

Whitehead again, same speech: "The second-handedness of the learned world is the secret of its mediocrity." The transition from second-hand to firsthand knowledge, from two-dimensioned text about reality to three-dimensioned reality itself, from "How much do you remember?" to, "How much sense can you make of what's happening right here, right now? Wouldn't be easy. Many educators, fearful of abandoning the familiar, or fearful that their specialization had been slighted, would resist. Those making billions from standardized testing and test preparation materials would lobby furiously against change. Letters to editors would continue to say that kids should be in their seats, facing front, quietly writing down teacher words. Ideologues in reactionary think tanks and legislative chambers would continue to insist that the rigor of market forces could cure all educational ills.

But those reactions to genuine change are unlikely, because genuine change is unlikely. Over the last two decades, corporate America has spent millions in a sophisticated campaign to convince politicians and the public there's nothing wrong with American education that vouchers, charter schools, merit pay, standardized testing, alternative teacher licensing, and union destruction, can't cure. They're now in the final stages of wrapping up a successful effort to install national standards in preparation for national tests.

That done, Thomas Jefferson's dream will be dead. Corporate America will be America's school board, and the heavy hand of 19th Century industrial standardization will snuff out the last small flames of individuality, imagination and creativity that have survived *No Child Left Behind*.

"Human history," said H.G. Wells, "is more and more a race between education and catastrophe." As any day's newspaper surely affirms, catastrophe has a commanding lead. In the next few months, Congress will very likely clinch it.

Note: An example of an integrated curriculum for adolescents and older students is available free here.