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Standardized tests are canceled and many kids won’t be graded. So what’s worth learning right now?

By Marion Brady

An old English proverb says, “It’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good.”

The novel coronavirus, or covid-19, certainly qualifies as a very ill wind, and it’s thrown schooling into mass confusion. However, it has the potential for freeing teachers and kids—at least for now—from weeks of test prep for near-useless machine-scored tests.

Consider using the time to let middle-school and older kids get at least a taste of what schooling looks and feels like when their potential for thinking for themselves is respected enough to ask them to actually do so—to infer, hypothesize, generalize, synthesize, imagine, predict, extrapolate, estimate, and so on—to exercise the dozens of thought processes that make humanness and civilized life possible.

It won’t cost a penny.

Internet-based learning activities, as they’re usually done, almost always fail. Boredom sets in quickly, and evidence from years of attempts to make it work indicate abysmal results. However, the kind of activities my brother and I have been creating for years—puzzles and projects—quickly get learners away from computer screens and into work that’s interesting, unfailingly relevant, and intellectually challenging.

A project

The subject of history has taken a beating for the last several decades, but when it’s treated not as an account of “one damned thing after another” to be remembered but as a rich resource for creating projects *specifically designed to improve learner ability to think*, its potential is vast.

Here’s one of many suggested projects:

In 1547, King Philip II of Spain issued “Ordinances for the Government of the Indies” which applied to the parts of the Western Hemisphere controlled by Spain. The Ordinances laid down very specific rules for designing the new towns that were being built in South and North America.

The Ordinances read like this (in Spanish, of course).

Royal Ordinance 110: When the settlers arrive at the place where the towns will be built, they must make a plan. The plaza, streets, and building lots must be laid out exactly, beginning with the main plaza...

Royal Ordinance 114: Four main streets must run from the plaza, one starting from the middle of each side. At each corner of the plaza, two streets should begin and should line up with the sides of the plaza.

Royal Ordinance 121: The hospital for the poor and those sick with non-contagious diseases must be built near the church buildings. The hospital for those sick with contagious diseases must be built so the wind will not blow from it toward the rest of the town.

We give kids a made-up map to download of a section of seacoast, a more complete copy of the Ordinances, and ask them to design a town.

They read, translate abstractions into graphic forms, visualize spatial relationships, integrate concepts, solve mathematical problems involving scale, estimate the necessary street width to turn a horse-drawn wagon. In short, they *think*.

From the town design, a way of life can be inferred, and from that way of life, inferences can be drawn about interpersonal relationships and the ideas, beliefs, values, attitudes and assumptions shared by inhabitants.

Will kids get it exactly right? Of course not. But the complex thought processes they'll be exercising will serve them for a lifetime. And even though the main point isn't to teach history but improve their ability to think clearly, coherently, logically and productively, learning by doing makes it far more likely they'll actually remember what they've learned even though it isn't tested.

This activity is the first in *Investigating American History*.¹ It's followed by other, reinforcing activities that compare the Spanish town with a New England Puritan village and the neighborhoods where learners live.

Again, all instructional activities are free—no strings, no obligations, no advertisements—for educators and homeschooling parents for use with their own learners.

Puzzles

Decisions made by various levels of government or business often have unintended consequences, many of them painful or dangerous. Change one policy, and a cascade of other changes results. As I write, the U. S. Congress has just put in place strategies intended to make recovery from the Coronavirus-19 quicker and easier. It's a safe bet that few to none of the senators and representatives doing that work will in adolescence have been required to diagram a "causal chain" of probable and possible, expected and unexpected systemic consequences of particular policies or actions.

Below is a simple puzzle from our course *Introduction to Systems* that helps develop the necessary logical thought processes:

¹ <https://www.marionbrady.com/documents/InvestigatingAH.pdf>.

Before the Middle Ages in Europe, armies of Greece and Rome mostly fought on foot. Some light cavalry (soldiers on horses) was used, and some “barbarian” horse-mounted troops fought effectively against Greek and Roman forces. However, cavalry troops became much more powerful after they attached stirrups to saddles (probably first done in Asia). The change was so significant, it contributed to a new age in Europe.

Below, in random sequence, is a list of 14 changes that followed the invention of stirrups. Rearrange the list to show as many direct cause-effect relationships as you can. (Copying the 14 items on slips of paper may make them easier to shuffle and arrange.) Show the changes in a diagram.

- Horse saddles with stirrups
- Improvements in metallurgy and metal-working skills
- Armor for men and horses
- Increase in need for grain
- Increased social class and wealth differences
- Increase in cost of fighting
- Greater stability on horseback
- Help in donning armor, mounting, care of horses
- Need for bigger, stronger horses, and more of them
- More land under cultivation
- Taxation of farmers and peasants
- Bridge construction
- More effective use of lance and battle axe
- Advances in animal husbandry and breeding

This puzzle is on page 11 of part 4 of *Introduction to Systems*.² It’s part of a sequence of investigations that focus on the effects of technological change on past, present and future societies. This course provides a year’s worth of puzzles and projects, helping kids understand and cope with complexity.

Right here, right now

Whatever the focus of Systems Based Learning courses—American or world history, civics, world cultures, or a general introduction to systems—the knowledge being generated is applied to the learner’s own situation in “right here, right now” investigations. Here’s one:

1: ...sketch a pencil map of your neighborhood. Show everything you think is important. You may want to make changes as the investigation proceeds—that’s OK.

² <https://www.marionbrady.com/IntroSystems/4DemogrSetting.pdf>

2: In your journal, describe how your neighborhood might be affected if, in the future, energy costs were so high that most families couldn't afford to own a powered vehicle, or even make frequent use of public transportation. Identify problems and possible solutions.

3: Redesign the neighborhood to make it more appropriate for a fuel-limited future. Explain the changes in your journal.

This is from *Civic Systems*, Part 3, page 10.³

Traditional schooling's artificial boundaries between subjects—math, social studies, science, language arts—are at odds with the systemically integrated nature of the real world, the seamless way the human brain experiences it, and how schooling should be organized.

The problem is compounded by schooling's standardized-test-reinforced emphasis on mere learner recall of existing secondhand information. We live on a planet with an accelerating rate of environmental, technological, demographic, economic, political, and social change; a planet without answers to today's problems, much less tomorrow's. Common sense says schooling's primary emphasis should be on improving the quality of thought.

Standardized tests can't evaluate the relative merit of complex thought processes and should simply be abandoned. A few weeks of freedom from them won't convince policymakers that improving learner ability to think is more important than "covering the material" in a deeply flawed 19th Century curriculum.

However, demonstrating that simple activities can introduce adolescents to powerful, permanently useful ideas may at least encourage the public to pressure education policymakers to actively involve experienced educators in making education policy and move beyond the present performance plateau.

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These courses, a free eBook, *What's Worth Learning?*, and much more are at www.marionbrady.com.

"The Answer Sheet" blog link to this article:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/04/10/standardized-tests-are-canceled-many-kids-arent-be-graded-so-whats-worth-learning-right-now/>

³ <https://www.marionbrady.com/Civics/03Setting&Demographics.pdf>