

Request for Advice

By Marion Brady (Published January 2, 2022 on Diane Ravitch's blog.)

In 1966, the *Phi Delta Kappan* published an article of mine criticizing the traditional “core” curriculum adopted in 1893 that organizes most of the middle school and high school day. I suggested an alternative organizer.

In many more journal articles, in books published by respected presses, in chapters in others' books, in nationally distributed op-eds and newspaper columns and in countless internet blogs, I've continued to argue that the core curriculum is the major academic reason for generation after generation of basically flat academic performance, and that a simple, cost-free “fix” for the problem has revolutionary potential.

Pushing back on my contention—at least for the last 25 or 30 years—is a corporately engineered campaign to privatize public schooling without triggering the public debate such a radical change in the bedrock of democracy deserves. That campaign's wrong assumptions—that the core curriculum provides a “well-rounded” education, that competition is the main motivator of performance, that standardized tests measure what's important, that rigor must replace “low expectations,” and teachers are the key to improving the institution—lock even more rigidly in place a 19th Century curriculum.

What's wrong with the core?

There are eighteen items on my list of problems with the core and the way it's usually taught. For brevity's sake I'll address only one of them—the one noted by dozens of well-known and respected thinkers and studies conducted by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Association of American Colleges.¹

The #1 problem: *The world the core curriculum is supposed to explain is systemically integrated. The core curriculum is not.*

In his 1916 Presidential Address to the Mathematical Association of England, philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead put it in simpler words. He said the curriculum's “disconnection of subjects” was “fatal.”

He was right. Wikipedia explains our failure to react appropriately to that information:

The **boiling frog** is an [apologue](#) describing a [frog](#) being slowly [boiled alive](#). The premise is that if a frog is put suddenly into boiling water, it will jump out, but if the frog is put in tepid water which is then brought to a boil slowly, it will not perceive the danger and will be cooked to death.

To see how that works out in human affairs, follow any random day's news.

An alternative

Given institutional inertia, educating's inherent complexity, machine-scored standardized testing, multi-layered education bureaucracies and education policy made by non-educators in Congress and state legislatures, the core curriculum can't be

dislodged. It can, however, be used in non-traditional ways that circumvent the core's most serious problems.

The core organizes the study of a mix of math, science, language arts and social studies subjects. What learners need that the core doesn't provide is an "organizer of organizers" that shows not just all school subjects but all fields of knowledge fit together and interact to create a whole much greater than the sum of parts. Lacking that master organizer, a few schools use interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary studies and project learning, but those can't be standardized to create the "subjects" that education bureaucracies require.

An organizer of organizers

Fortunately, an organizer of organizers doesn't have to be invented or developed. All normal humans are born with brains that do that in the manner of the group or society within which individuals have been socialized. To solve most of the core's problems, that master organizer just needs to be lifted into consciousness and put to useful work, something all adolescents are able to do.

Our organizer of organizers is easily understood. When attention is fixed on a matter of interest, five kinds of information integrate systemically to create sense—the same five kinds of information that structure languages, stories, drama, reports, textbooks, school subjects, conversation and so on: Time. Place. Actors. Action. Cause.

Instructional activities that allow learners to discover *for themselves* the knowledge-creating process and put it to work, move them to levels of academic performance far beyond the evaluating capabilities of standardized tests, and do so with an efficiency that allows the legitimate aims of a general education to be met in a fraction of the time spent on "covering the content" of the core curriculum.

The most legitimate aim of education is saving humankind. Reality is dynamic. Inexorable environmental, demographic, technological and social change create ever-more complex problems requiring new knowledge. New knowledge is created by the discovery of relationships between and among things not previously thought to relate—a newborn's fussing and the appearance of a nipple; cigarettes and cancer; moon and tides; justice and societal stability; time and space.

New knowledge is essential, but even more crucial is an increase in depth and breadth of understanding of complex reality by the general public. This is the ultimate goal of what we're doing.

Proof

About a year after publication of the 1966 *Kappan* article, James Guiher, Vice-President of Prentice-Hall's Educational Books Division, called. Could he and P-H's Head K-12 Editor, Mike McDaniel, come to Florida to talk?

Long story, short: They came, starting a long-running conversation ending with a project to produce a middle school-level American history textbook and a world cultures textbook consistent with my thinking.

“Rich” concepts (e.g. cultural assumptions, value conflict, social control, polarization, cultural interaction, system change, and so on) organized several weeks of study for each concept. Prentice-Hall’s college-level history and anthropology authors provided unique and engaging primary data for the concepts, and my brother and I wrote instructional activities using their data.

Traditional schooling emphasizes and rewards passive learner recall of information. The P-H project’s primary sources required learners to hypothesize, infer, value, extrapolate, correlate, imagine, synthesize, predict, estimate, generalize, and so on—exercise the dozens of cognitive processes that make routine human functioning possible and enable civilized life.

Every unit culminated with activities requiring learners to apply the concept to contemporary matters.

P-H’s marketing department printed and distributed the activities to middle school teachers nationwide and invited them to write reports about how the activities worked (or didn’t) and send them to inhouse P-H editors.

At the end of each semester, eight teachers whose reports seemed most perceptive were identified, P-H paid for their substitutes for a week, and flew them and us to a resort somewhere to rework, refine, and replace activities.

Thirty-nine middle school teachers participated.

The books were ready for publication in 1976, but a back-to-basics reaction to what’s now called “constructivist learning” prompted P-H’s marketing department to shelve the project, then change its mind and do a small press run in 1977 with no advertising or follow-up promotion.

End of project.

I know of no other curriculum development project that matches in thoroughness our effort to combine what are generally considered “best practices:” (1) A focus on powerful concepts. (2) Deliberate use of learners’ already-known, simple, comprehensive, natural information organizers. (3) Active use of learner firsthand, immediate, real-world experience. (4) Small-group cooperative learning to minimize threat and encourage “thinking out loud.” (5) Intellectually challenging but interesting, unfamiliar primary sources. (6) Correct modeling of the holistic, systemically integrated nature of reality. (7) Extensive writing and illustrating requirements. (8) Traditional schooling’s emphasis on two thought processes—recalling and applying—replaced by work requiring learners to use a full range of thought processes.

Salvage operation

Watching the destructive chaos created by amateur education reformers, ideologues and privatizers, prompted us to ask P-H about copyrights for the instructional materials we’d created.

They gave them to us in May 1990. We updated and reformatted the lessons to adapt them to the internet, put them online, downloadable free of cost or other obligation, and invited users to suggest improvements.

We've added instructional materials for general systems theory, world history, civics and science. That's at odds with our belief that the general knowledge component of the curriculum should be a single, comprehensive course of study systemically integrating all fields of knowledge, with specialized course offerings expanded and offered as electives. However, recognizing resistance to change and existing bureaucratic boundaries and expectations, we've used traditional subjects in non-traditional ways to encourage acceptance and use of systemic conceptions of reality.

Notwithstanding the fact that our instructional activities require thought processes too complex to be evaluated by standardized tests, files routinely download by the hundreds weekly without a dime spent on advertising. If officials would remove the artificial performance ceiling created by the limitations of standardized testing and accompany academic work with exercises to improve classroom culture, we believe the ability of the young to cope with the messes they're inheriting will be maximized.

Request for Advice

I'll be 95 years old in May. My brother, Howard, 86. We'd like to donate our work—free of cost or other obligation—to an institution, organization or other entity on condition they create a suitable website, keep the activities downloadable and free for teachers to use with their own students, and encourage their continuous improvement, including across cultural boundaries.

If you have suggestions for contacts who might be willing to talk about accepting what we're offering, we'd really appreciate hearing from you.

Marion..... mbrady2222@gmail.com

Howard..... hbrady1@cfl.rr.com

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My SUNY Press book, *What's Worth Teaching? Selecting, Organizing, and Integrating Knowledge*, was published in 1989 and co-published by Books for Educators. The link below is to a pre-publication review by Philip L. Smith, Editor of the SUNY Press series of books *Philosophy of Education*. Smith is now Professor Emeritus, Ohio State University. <https://www.marionbrady.com/articles/WWTReview.pdf>

A revised version titled *What's Worth Learning?* published by Information Age Publishing, is now free for downloading:
<https://www.marionbrady.com/documents/WWL.pdf>

Links to illustrative instructional activities:
<https://www.marionbrady.com/documents/samplecontents.pdf>

¹Think our criticisms of the core curriculum unfair?
<https://www.marionbrady.com/documents/QuotesFragmentation.pdf>