Repackaging Reality

A scandal. Chaotic. A disaster. Irrelevant. A bazaar. Artificial. Irresponsible. Narrow. Fragmented. Incoherent.

Those are the words of nationally-known educators describing the general education curriculum. They've been using those kinds of words to describe the curriculum for at least a century, yet little has changed:

- We still have a curriculum shaped by accident and political maneuvering rather than by reason and logic.
- We still have a curriculum that completely ignores some of the most important aspects of human experience.
- We still have a curriculum that denies the systemic nature of reality.
- We still have a curriculum which tells us nothing about the relative importance of various kinds of knowledge.
- We still have a curriculum that encourages teachers and students to neglect every mental process except recall.

Any one of these problems is sufficiently serious to warrant calling a halt to what we're doing. To make matters worse, the problems affect not simply what does or doesn't go on in students' heads, but also discipline, evaluation, motivation, administrative organization, public attitudes, legislative activity, building configuration, technology, the kinds of people attracted to teaching, teacher training—everything connected to educating.

Why can't we put together a better curriculum? Surely not because we haven't tried. Just about every school in the country has a committee working on the problem. We have more people claiming to be educational experts than any other nation on earth. Our professional publications--of which there are many—are always searching for fresh ideas to share. Foundations and other funding agencies offer support for all but the flimsiest proposals. At least some school leaders are willing to try just about anything.

Why, then, haven't we been able to construct a more acceptable general education curriculum?

Because we're trying to assemble it from scraps—from bits and pieces borrowed from a random assortment of academic disciplines. Given the materials, the product is inevitable.

Are there other, better materials available? Absolutely.

We're trying to help our students (and ourselves) make more sense of reality. In western culture, we begin to do that by dumping every aspect of experience--everything we think about--into one of five categories. We do this automatically, instantly, "naturally." We can't help ourselves.

- All that reality "out there"—all that we and our instruments can perceive—is ENVIRONMENT.

- The meaning-building organisms which perceive environments are HUMANS.
- What humans think about what they perceive are PERCEPTIONS OF REALITY. (Different groups of humans tend to have different perceptions of reality.)
- Humans who share perceptions of reality tend to follow the same PATTERNS OF ACTION.
- That's four categories of reality. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE FOUR make a fifth category.

Biology, political science, literature, chemistry, economics, physics—the only place where human experience is packaged so arbitrarily and so artificially is in school. Take our thought processes apart and, to the extent that such things are divisible, what will emerge will be five categories of reality. In simple terms: Stage. Actors. Plot. Action. Play.

If we will but recognize, formalize and elaborate our five natural categories of reality (and when we're working within a category constantly remind ourselves and our students of that category's relationship to he others) we'll have the best possible tool for selecting, organizing and integrating the kindergarten-through-graduate school general education curriculum.
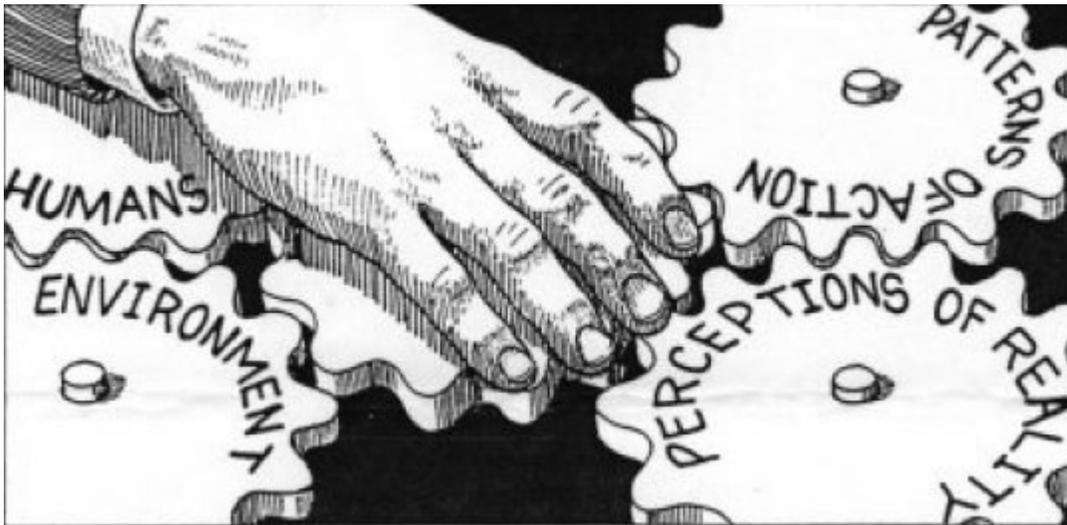
I've worked almost daily with this idea for a quarter of a century, with students from the fourth grade through the graduate level. I've worked with it with teachers and non-academics. I know a little of what it can do. If the purpose of general education is to help students make sense of the human condition, I'll put a curriculum based on the five categories of reality up against any curriculum based on the traditional disciplines (or based on anything else).

No doubt the whole idea sounds bizarre. When the book-length manuscript describing this alternative theoretical foundation for the curriculum was sent out for review by its eventual publisher, one expert wrote in large letters across the last page: "This is almost pure schlock."

A reassuring response. "Any new theory," wrote William James, "is first attacked as absurd. Then it is admitted to be true, but obvious and insignificant. Finally, it seems to be important, so important that its adversaries claim they themselves discovered it."

Given the sorry state of education, it's surely time to move the curriculum in a different, logically defensible direction. Behind the soft-focus memories of how much better it was when

we were young, behind the never-ending administrative mixing and matching of the same old stuff, behind the view that everything will be OK when everybody has a PC and it's plugged into the Ultimate Data Base, lies the assumption that the disciplines are what educating is all about.

That assumption is moving us steadily toward educational bankruptcy. If we don't dump it, and dump it soon, we're out of business.

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