More Road to Hell

Further contrarian comments on education reform by Marion Brady

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by Valerie Strauss

…and other sources

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Preface

Public schooling in America got off to a poor start. It borrowed its organizational structure from the 18th Century Prussian military, then compounded its problems by adopting the so-called "core curriculum," both narrowing and standardizing what the young are taught.

Lacking mechanisms that allow or require education to adapt to inevitable social change, America's schools have become increasingly dysfunctional. However, instead of rethinking fundamentals, authorities try to cope by tightening the procedural screws that, in large measure, are responsible for bringing the institution to crisis.

The present corporately engineered "reform" effort repeats that mistake. It assumes that the system is basically sound, just needs a good dose of tough love. "More rigor" is the supposed cure for what ails schools, this despite the fact that two decades of that medicine have failed to produce the promised benefits.

Increasingly, schools resemble medium security prisons, fenced off from communities and policed full-time by deputies or other law-enforcement professionals. Learning is natural and a source of enormous personal satisfaction, but so little of that is apparent, the institution must be held together by compulsory attendance laws, top-down mandates, and fear of authority. For many learners--maybe most--school is a bit of hell without the heat.

Experienced educators protest, but compartmentalized by fields of study, they've no collective voice and are easily ignored. Evidence of dysfunction—the fads that sweep he institution every two or three years, the assumption that learner performance can be measured by machines, the never-ending problems with classroom discipline, flat learner performance—are seen not as evidence of unaddressed system problems but of incompetent teachers and lazy kids.

This make for easy pickings for those of us who write about education. There's never a lack of material. For many years, I wrote columns distributed nationally by Knight-Ridder/Tribune. That pleasant task and the accompanying checks lasted for seven years, until (as far as I can determine) a powerful politician active in the shaping of corporate-friendly education policy let my editors know that he thought my columns were blocking education reform. Abruptly, without explanation and notwithstanding my contract, mid-2007, I lost my KRT pulpit.

In the fall of 2009, however, I was offered another outlet. Valerie Strauss, editor and host of the *Washington Post*'s "The Answer Sheet" blog, asked me to be a guest blogger. Not long after, the newsgroups Truthout.com and Alternet.com did the same. Because the two newsgroups are willing to use pre-published material, I ordinarily submit my blogs to *The Answer Sheet* and they pick it up, as do other networks, some on other continents. I regularly hear from readers in Europe and Asia.

The forces of education "deform" are well-funded and politically powerful, but there's growing evidence that, thanks to the internet, good sense has a fighting chance of prevailing. I hope my contributions help.

Note: Unless indicated otherwise, all articles are from *Washington Post'*s "The Answer Sheet" blog hosted by Valerie Strauss. The articles are in chronological sequence of their original posting. A conventional index and a thematic index are at the back of the book.

The titles of the entries aren't mine. By and large, they were written by the publishing group.

‘Race to the Top’s’ 10 false assumptions

Posted October 23, 2009

"Race to the Top? National standards for math, science and other school subjects? The high-powered push to put them in place makes it clear that the politicians, business leaders, and wealthy philanthropists who’ve run America’s education show for the last two decades are as clueless about educating as they’ve always been.

If they weren’t, they’d know that adopting national standards will be counterproductive, and that the "Race to the Top" will fail for the same reason "No Child Left Behind" failed—because it’s based on false assumptions.

False Assumption 1: America’s teachers deserve most of the blame for decades of flat school performance. Other factors affecting learning—language problems, hunger, stress, mass media exposure, transience, cultural differences, a sense of hopelessness, and so on and on—are minor and can be overcome by well-qualified teachers. To teacher protests that they’re scapegoats taking the blame for broader social ills, the proper response is, "No excuses!" While it’s true teachers can’t choose their students, textbooks, working conditions, curricula, tests, or the bureaucracies that circumscribe and limit their autonomy, they should be held fully accountable for poor student test scores.

False Assumption 2: Professional educators are responsible for bringing education to crisis, so they can’t be trusted. School systems should instead be headed by business CEOs, mayors, ex-military officers, and others accustomed to running a "tight ship." Their managerial expertise more than compensates for how little they know about educating.

False Assumption 3: "Rigor"—doing longer and harder what we’ve always done—will cure education’s ills. If the young can’t clear arbitrary statistical bars put in place by politicians, it makes good sense to raise those bars. Because learning is neither natural nor a source of joy, externally imposed discipline and "tough love" are necessary.

False Assumption 4: Teaching is just a matter of distributing information. Indeed, the process is so simple that recent college graduates, fresh from "covering" that information, should be encouraged to join "Teach For America" for a couple of years before moving on to more intellectually demanding professions. Experienced teachers may argue that, as Socrates demonstrated, nothing is more intellectually demanding than figuring out what’s going on in another person’s head, then getting that person herself or himself to examine and change it, but they’re just blowing smoke.

False Assumption 5: Notwithstanding the failure of vast experiments such as those conducted in eastern Europe under Communism, and the evidence from ordinary experience, history proves that top-down reforms such as No Child Left Behind work well. Centralized control doesn’t stifle creativity, imply teacher incompetence, limit strategy options, discourage innovation, or block the flow of information and insight to policymakers from those actually doing the work.

False Assumption 6: Standardized tests are free of cultural, social class, language, experiential, and other biases, so test-taker ability to infer, hypothesize, generalize, relate, synthesize, and engage in all other "higher order" thought processes can be precisely measured and meaningful numbers attached. It's also a fact that test-prep programs don't unfairly advantage those who can afford them, that strategies to improve the reliability of guessing correct answers can't be taught, and that test results can't be manipulated to support political or ideological agendas. For these reasons, test scores are reliable, and should be the primary drivers of education policy.

False Assumption 7: Notwithstanding the evidence from research and decades of failed efforts, forcing merit pay schemes on teachers will revitalize America's schools. This is because the desire to compete is the most powerful of all human drives (more powerful even than the satisfactions of doing work one loves). The effectiveness of, say, band directors and biology teachers, or of history teachers and math teachers, can be easily measured and dollar amounts attached to their relative skill. Merit pay also has no adverse effect on collegiality, teacher-team dynamics, morale, or school politics.

False Assumption 8: Required courses, course distribution requirements, Carnegie Units, and other bureaucratic demands and devices that standardize the curriculum and limit teacher and learner options are products of America's best thinkers about what the young need to know. Those requirements should, then, override individual learner interests, talents, abilities, and all other factors affecting freedom of choice.

False Assumption 9: Notwithstanding charter schools' present high rates of teacher turnover, their growing standardization by profit-seeking corporations, or their failure to demonstrate that they can do things all public schools couldn't do if freed from bureaucratic constraints, charters attract the most highly qualified and experienced teachers and are hotbeds of innovation.

False Assumption 10: The familiar, traditional "core curriculum" in near-universal use in America's classrooms since 1893 is the best-possible tool for preparing the young for an unknown, unpredictable, increasingly complex and dangerous future.

Our alternatives for America's future are effective education or catastrophe. If amateurs continue to control American education policy, put your money on catastrophe. It's a sure thing. **Ω**

Education reform: Wrong diagnosis, so wrong cure

Posted November 4, 2009

When "Race to the Top" fails, as it will, the main reason won't be any of those currently being advanced by the corporate interests and politicians now running the education show. It won't fail because of lack of academic rigor, poor teaching, weak administrators, too-short school year, union resistance, differing state standards, insufficient performance incentives, sorry teacher training, or lingering traces of the early-20th Century Progressive movement.

It will fail primarily for a reason not even being mentioned by leaders of today's reform effort – a curriculum adopted in 1893 that grows more dysfunctional with each passing year. Imagine a car being driven down a winding rural road with all the passengers, including the driver, peering intently out the back window.

The familiar, traditional curriculum is so at odds with the natural desire to learn that laws, threats and other extrinsic motivators are necessary to keep kids in their seats and on task. It has no built-in mechanisms forcing it to adapt to change.

Ignoring solid research about their importance in intellectual development, it treats art, music, dance, and play as "frills." It isolates educators in specialized fields, discouraging their interest in and professional dialog about the whole of which their specializations are parts.

It fails to explore questions essential to ethical and moral development, neglects important fields of study, and has no system for determining the relative importance of those fields it doesn't neglect.

Its failure to reflect the integrated nature of reality and the seamless way the brain perceives makes it difficult to apply what's being taught to real-world experience.

And that barely begins a list of the problems.

There's no easy, quick fix, but one thing is certain. Doing with greater diligence and determination what brought America's schools to their present state will simply move forward the day when failure becomes obvious to all. There are, however, some things Congress and the administration could do.

First, they could stop basing education policy on the opinions of business leaders, syndicated columnists, mayors, lawyers, and assorted other education "experts" who haven't passed the 10,000-hour test -- 10,000 hours of face-to-face dialog with real students in real classrooms, all the while thinking analytically about what they're doing, and why. "Experts" who see more rigor, more tests, more international comparisons, more "data-driven decision-making," more math and science, more school closings, more Washington-initiated, top-down reform policy as the primary cure for education's ills, are amateurs.

And policymakers who can't see the perversity of simultaneously spending billions on innovation and billions on standardization, should find other work.

Second, Congress and the administration could accept the fact that, in formal schooling, the curriculum is where the rubber meets the road. No matter school type -- public, charter, private, parochial, magnet, virtual, home, whatever; no matter the level -- elementary, secondary, college, or graduate school; no matter first-rate physical facilities, highly qualified faculty, enlightened administrators, sophisticated technology, generous funding, caring parents, supportive communities, disciplined, motivated students, no matter anything else affecting school performance, if the curriculum is lousy, the education will be lousy.

Third, Congress and the administration could stop for a moment, think, then acknowledge what they surely must know, that the key to humankind's survival is, at it has always been, human variability. Trying to standardize kids by forcing them all through the same minimum standards hoops isn't just child abuse. It's a sure-fire way to squeeze out what little life is left in America's public schools after decades of appallingly simplistic, misguided, patchwork policy. Maximum performance, not the minimum standards measured by tests, should be the institution's aim. Anything less invites societal catastrophe.

If Congress and the administration are wise, they'll use their levers of power not to tighten but to loosen the rigor screws and end the innovation-stifling role of Carnegie Units, course distribution requirements, mandated instructional programs, and other curriculum-standardizing measures. They'll do what enlightened school boards have always done and say to educators, "We want you to unleash creativity, ingenuity, resourcefulness, imagination, and enthusiasm, and send the young off with a lasting love of learning. Tell us what you need in order to make that happen, and we'll do our best to provide the necessary support."

Even the suggestion of such a policy will appall many. We say we're big on freedom, democracy, individualism, autonomy, choice, and so on, but advocating aligning our schools with our political rhetoric invites being labeled as too radical to be taken seriously. Such a policy, most are likely to believe, would trigger chaos, pandemonium, anarchy.

Not so. Two things would happen. In most schools, institutional inertia, entrenched bureaucracy, and pressure from powerful corporate interests, would maintain the status quo.

In most schools, but not all. A few would point the way to a better-than-world-class education by demonstrating what experienced teachers have always known, that the traditional curriculum barely scratches the surface of kids' intellectual potential. **Ω**

When captains of business and industry 'hijacked' education—and teachers let them

Posted November 17, 2009

MEMO: TO THE MEMBERS OF MY PROFESSION

"We have met the enemy, and he is us," said Pogo.

We educators should make the wise little opossum from Walt Kelly's comic strip our mascot.

The single, worst, shoot-yourself-in-the-foot act that contributed to our loss of control of education reform happened about 20 years ago. That's when leaders of business and industry, convinced that educators either didn't know enough or didn't care enough about educating the young to be trusted, hijacked our profession. And we let them.

The new leaders were certain they knew what was wrong with America's schools, and what had to be done to set them right: What was needed were "standards." Clear, no-nonsense standards. Tough, demanding standards. Standards that told every teacher exactly what every kid should know, in every subject, at every grade level.

Congress, no more appreciative of Alexander Pope's warning that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing than the new leaders, got in the act. Waving the "Standards and Accountability!" banner, they passed, with self-congratulatory cheers, the bi-partisan No Child Left Behind legislation. States that wrote standards for school subjects, and gave standardized tests to see how well the standards were being met, would get money. The standards started piling up.

Not much money, of course, but beggars can't be choosers. The states, routine under-funders of education, agreed to the bargain, and called on educators to produce the actual standards - page after page of lists of what kids should know about math, science, language arts, and social studies.

That's when we pulled the trigger, shooting ourselves in the feet. Instead of knuckling under, we should have explained in simple, one- and two-syllable words, why standards for school subjects were a lousy idea - a simplistic, reactionary, off target, costly, counterproductive, even irrelevant idea.

If you're looking for a surgeon to remove a cancerous growth, a plumber to fix a leaky pipe, an artist to paint a portrait, a caterer to produce a wedding dinner, you don't dictate which scalpels the surgeon picks up, which wrenches the plumber brings into the house, which brushes the painter will use, or select the caterer's kitchen utensils. Those are just tools, mere means to ends.

You want the patient to survive, the leak to be stopped, the portrait to be pleasing, the dinner to be memorable.

How the professional you've chosen accomplishes that task is beside the point. In fact, getting involved in the surgery issue at the scalpel level could mean writing off all the

surgeons who use lasers. Telling the plumber which wrenches to use would probably just expose you to some colorful language and run up your bill.

What matters, finally, is the quality of the work. What a society has a right, even a responsibility to demand of its educators is that they do their best to help the young develop the qualities and characteristics the society values. Proper standards are for kids, not for school subjects.

The thousands of subject-matter standards Washington policymakers all but forced the states to produce are a curse, perpetuating policymaker naiveté, focusing attention and effort on peripheral concerns, undermining teacher professionalism and flexibility, and making the scores on primitive, intellect-stifling, curriculum-narrowing, horrendously expensive standardized tests the gauge of school quality.

But the greatest damage being done by subject-matter standards is their role in blocking adaptation to social change and the adoption of new ideas. They're the direct enemy of the educational innovation the new administration is spending billions to promote.

Consider, for example, what the standards fad did to the two ideas with the greatest potential for moving American education to a whole new level of performance - systems theory as it had emerged from World War II, and new insights into how the brain organizes knowledge.

These ideas showed how the massive amounts of random, disorganized information schooling was dumping into learners' short-term memories, only to be forgotten, could be welded into a single, organized, self-reinforcing, dynamic body of knowledge.

Faced with a test or problem and armed with systems thinking and an understanding of how their brains sorted information, kids could rely on logic rather than memory to find or formulate answers and solutions.

Reason is a better tool than remembering.

Little by little, those two ideas were gaining acceptance. Then, twenty years ago, when we should have said, "Stop trying to tell us how to do our jobs, just tell us what kind of citizens you want and hold us accountable," we said nothing.

We gave our profession to amateurs; they gave us No Child Left Behind, and now Race to the Top – NCLB on steroids.

A poor trade. We screwed up. **Ω**

Education reform: Ignoring the obvious

Posted December 3, 2009

Any serious attempt to improve the quality of American education surely ought to take major account of the expertise of W. Edward Deming. He's the American the Japanese credit with making the quality of Japanese manufactured products the envy of the world.

Deming was best known for his "Fourteen Points" – fourteen principles for transforming organizations into performance powerhouses.

Every one of those principles is applicable to education but, ironically, leaders of business and industry who take the points seriously in their day jobs, ignore them when they switch their attention to schools.

Consider, for example, the matter of "aim." One of Deming's fourteen points argues the common sense idea that, for an organization to function well, it has to have an aim, the aim has to be clear, and it has to be understood and accepted by everybody.

For schools, "everybody" means not just boards, administrators and teachers, but the cook in the kitchen, the janitor in the hallway, the editorial board of the local newspaper, taxpayers, parents, and the ten-year-old on the playground swing – everybody.

If you don't think clarity of purpose is a problem in American education, check out your nearest school system.

Ask about aim, and note the blank looks, the long pauses before answering, the confusing of aim with activity. Query those in charge, and be prepared to make a list.

"Our aim is to introduce the core subjects," ". . . master the basics," ". . . prepare the young for democratic citizenship," ". . . meet student needs," ". . . create informed consumers," ". . . develop character," ". . . transmit societal values," ". . . promote inter-cultural understanding," ". . . prepare students for useful work," ". . . meet world-class standards," ". . . solve social problems," ". . . raise test scores," ". . . teach thinking skills," ". . . improve graduation rates," ". . . get our graduates into college," "foster a love of learning" – just to begin a much longer list.

We spend a half-trillion dollars a year educating the young, and we have no agreed-upon aim. Why? Probably because schools are so ubiquitous, the experience of attending so universal, the status quo so deeply embedded, a shared aim isn't considered necessary. Schools just do what schools do.

Look again at the list of aims above (a list by no means complete), and accept some obvious facts.

First, if American education has no clear, overarching purpose, there's no way to know if progress is being made. Without it, measuring performance presents the same level of difficulty as setting out on a journey and arriving at several different destinations simultaneously. It can't be done.

Second, when no single, overarching aim is in place, multiple aims assert themselves.

This becomes a serious problem when the question, "What should we do next?" is asked. Before the US backed out of Vietnam, official government documents listed twenty-two

different aims to explain and justify our military adventure there. The North Vietnamese had just one aim: Get the foreigners out. Everybody knows how that matter turned out.

Three, when no overarching, agreed-upon aim is in place, resources can't be organized and focused. Taken seriously, every one of the educational aims listed above would require particular instructional materials, particular instructional approaches, particular tests, none of them interchangeable. The supportive logistics would be unmanageable.

Finally, without a clear aim, "reform" invariably comes down to doing what's always been done, just doing it harder, or longer, or both.

The problem with that, of course, is that doing what's always been done is what leads organizations to crisis. Doing it harder and longer just speeds up the process, supercharging it with more rigor, more rules and regulations, more controls, more pages in policy manuals, more inspectors and inspections.

All of which, incidentally, increase fear, the elimination of which Deming also said was absolutely essential if an organization was to function well.

Deming identified a universal organizational aim: "Continuous improvement through lifelong learning." I nail that down more precisely by identifying the key to continuous improvement through lifelong learning.

The aim that enables all other legitimate aims, the aim that's philosophically most consistent with our cultural values, the aim that ought to be Number One in America's schools, colleges, and universities, is simple: Help learners make more sense of how they make sense.

Adopting that aim would engage the gears of educational innovation in revolutionary, history-making, intellectually explosive, world-saving ways. It wouldn't just raise the bar. It would put it far beyond the reach of those playing any other aim game. Ω

Education unions: I'm no fan but they get a bad rap

Posted December 18, 2009

"Good teachers are the key to good schools. A major obstacle to staffing America's schools with good teachers is union protectionism."

So goes the conventional wisdom.

I'm no fan of education unions. I fault them for not taking the lead in education reform, for misplaced priorities, and for a willingness to support bad legislation just to keep a seat at the federal education reform table. I was hammering union leadership on those issues decades before I could do it with the click of a mouse.

That said, when it comes to education reform, teachers unions get an undeserved bad rap.

No way are they the major obstacle to school improvement. Mark that problem up to institutional inertia, innovation-stifling bureaucracy, and misguided state and federal policy. Trace union bad press back to its origins and it's clear that much of it comes from ideologues and organizations less interested in improving education than in destroying union political clout and privatizing public schools.

No, the main opposition to the education reform effort set in motion about twenty years ago by corporate heads and Congress isn't coming from go-along-to-get-along unions. The sustained and blistering attacks come from professional educators like Alfie Kohn, Susan Ohanian, Stephen Krashen, Ken and Yetta Goodman, and dozens of others I could name. And me.

Retired or otherwise independent, we can say what we think without fear of retribution or being accused of being self-serving. Most importantly, unlike the architects of "No Child Left Behind" and its gestating offspring, the "Race to the Top," we've spent thousands of hours in real classrooms working directly with real students.

What do we think about Washington-dictated education reforms? We think they're sufficiently abusive, counterproductive, and downright stupid to warrant a massive class-action suit by parents and grandparents against those responsible.

What explains the radically different views of experienced teachers and the suits in corporate suites and Congress who're now running the education show?

A sign that hung in Albert Einstein's Princeton University office sums it up: "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts." Data-enamored, spreadsheet-studying, educationally clueless policymakers think Einstein was wrong.

What is it, exactly, that can't be counted?

Most people think babies are born with minds like blank paper. Parents, teachers, and others, "write" on that paper, filling it with advice, information, explanations, interpretations. Schools organize and compress the process with textbooks and teacher talk, and tests check how much kids can remember long enough to pencil in the "right" oval on a standardized test.

It's that simple.

Except it isn't. Not even close.

Kids' minds are never, ever, like blank pages. To matters they consider important, they attach explanatory theories. When a teacher or other explainer dumps information on them that doesn't match their theories, they reject it. They may play the school game—may store the explainer's theory in short-term memory until the test is over and the pressure is off—but rarely do they adopt it.

Kids don't change their theories because doing so would be too traumatic. Their beliefs—about themselves, about others, about how the world works—are their most valued possessions (just as they are for the rest of us). Their theories are "who they are."

Casually exchanging them for someone else's ideas would undermine their identities, their individuality, their confidence in their ability to make sense of experience.

I learned the hard way—from thousands of adolescents—that I couldn't teach them anything important. All I could do was try to get them to think about a particular matter, then ask them a question or give them something to do that their theories couldn't handle and let them struggle to work it out. Changing their minds had to be their doing, not mine.

Bottom line: It's impossible to count how much kids really know. Period. Standardized tests are an appalling, monumental waste of time, money, and brains. Especially brains.

To the "standards and accountability" cheerleaders—the Business Roundtable, the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Governors Association, the US Department of Education, newspaper editorial boards, syndicated columnists, and so on—the complex, counterintuitive, kid-controlled, impossible-to-measure learning process I'm describing is alien.

But that process lies at the very heart of teaching and learning. Trying to shield it from destruction is why older, experienced teachers are the most vocal, determined opponents of the present reform fiasco. They know the "blank paper," count-the-right-answers theory propelling the standards and accountability fad is an intellect-gutting, society-destroying myth.

And they know that adopting national standards and tests will lock that myth in place far, far into the future. Ω

The education reform train is off track

Posted December 23, 2009

My more than 75 years in education as student, teacher, college professor, administrator, book and article author, newspaper columnist, publisher consultant, and visitor to schools around the world, have convinced me that most Americans are over-schooled and under-educated.

Unfortunately, the federal dollars about to be channeled to the nation's schools will make the problem worse.

Instead of triggering a fundamental rethinking of education, Education Secretary Arne Duncan's billions will simply hasten the destruction of the institution I love - universal, free, public schooling.

Notwithstanding the press releases about the expected miracles from unleashed market forces, the money will be spent trying to salvage the institution rather than transform it (a strategy familiar to those who follow the banking industry).

American education, simply and emphatically, is on a wrong track.

As a vehicle for intellectual development, it began to slow down the day the young were pulled out of apprenticeships and other real-world learning experiences, put in rooms insulated from the real world, and made to sit, hands on desks, eyes front, mouths shut, being fire-hosed with facts.

The vehicle moved slower still starting in 1893, when the so-called "core curriculum" was adopted, narrowing the focus of study to math, science, language arts and social studies, and ignoring the integrated nature of knowledge.

It came to a stop and reversed when Congress mandated "No Child Left Behind." "Race To The Top" will accelerate its backward movement.

But the money will eventually run out. And when it does - when our aversion to taxes combines with our treasure-draining military adventures and forces us to live within our means - there will be genuine educational change.

"Human history," said H.G. Wells, "is a race between education and catastrophe." Catastrophe has an ever-widening lead, and when the money's gone and the catastrophe hits, "genuine educational change" is inevitable.

There will then be formal, official acceptance of a two-tier system - a privatized one for the relative few who can afford it, and a public one for the peasants.

It's this public system that most interests me, for if we're to survive, it's the system that, much altered, will take the lead. The private one will be too preoccupied with trying to improve the teaching of the core curriculum.

So, in no particular order, here are a few boundary-stretching suggestions aimed at those interested in thinking about building a system that costs a lot less money while helping kids get smarter:

> Paying for student "seat time" is where the biggest chunk of money goes. Since most adults remember very little and use even less of what they "learned" in school after fourth grade, discontinue automatic seat-time funding for learners older than 10 years of age.
>
> Take the term "neighborhood school" seriously. Where there's interest, form mixed-age steering committees to think and talk about neighborhood educational needs. Give the committees a little working money, assistance if requested, and let a thousand flowers bloom. Sure, some will die, but only totalitarians think top down social change works better than bottom up.
>
> Don't think "school building." Rent or lease centrally located space large enough to accommodate, say, 25 people, not necessarily in the same room at the same time. A house will do.
>
> Radically cut the list of required subjects. Capitalizing on the integrated nature of knowledge makes possible efficiencies that can shorten the need for coaching to two or three hours a day, allowing the same facility to accommodate more than one session.
>
> Hire two- or three-person professional instructional teams, based on interviews and team-written proposals for meeting learner needs, and identify neighborhood expertise, talent, and ability.

Stop buying textbooks. The real world surrounding every kid is a learning resource far richer and more challenging than any textbook. Help teachers learn how to use it. Add Internet access if desired.

Specialized, occupation-related instruction such as that now being offered in magnet schools will never be able to keep up with the rate of change in the world of work, so transfer responsibility for teaching specific skills and knowledge to users of those skills and knowledge - employers. They may resist, so sweeten the pot with subsidies as necessary. (A bonus: Apprenticeship and internship arrangements will go far toward smoothing the transition to responsible adulthood.)

Forget grade and age levels. Start with where learners are and help them go as far as they can go in the direction they want to go.

Spend whatever it costs to test and fix sight and hearing problems, fill empty stomachs, and provide some stability. It's a waste of money to try to educate learners who don't hear or see well, are hungry or afraid.

Get corporate hands out of the education till, starting with standardized testing and test prep materials. No way can computer-scored tests measure what kids know, much less what they can actually do with what they know. Neither can they evaluate the complex thinking skills that survival requires. (Don't worry about accountability. After a few weeks, even a lousy teacher knows far more about a kid's performance and potential than can be learned from any paper and pencil test.)

Find out who each learner really is. It's a mystery to me how a society can simultaneously sing the praises of individualism while forcing every kid down the same assembly line. For a tiny fraction of the cost of high-stakes subject-matter tests, every kid's potential can be explored using inexpensive, off-the-shelf inventories of individual interests, abilities, personalities, and learning styles.

Forget grade and age levels. Start with where learners are and help them go as far as they can go in the direction they want to go.

Eliminate school buses, staff cars, athletic departments, athletic fields, cops on campus, attendance officers, warehouse workers, support personnel, and most non-teaching administrators.

Drastically shrink central administrations. Have them coordinate the forming of teacher teams, handle payroll, and relieve teams of paper shuffling, resource acquisition, and other non-instructional tasks.

Strip away all the non-academic roles and responsibilities state legislators piled on schools during the 20th Century. Create autonomous support systems for

neighborhood-level, multi-age programs for music, art, dance, drama, sports, play, whatever.

See value in approaches to educating that contribute to self-reliance, a strong sense of neighborhood, vastly increased contact between generations, and family-based activities.

Assume that the transition from authoritarian, top-down, bureaucratic control of education to democratic, bottom-up leadership will take years and political will, but know that people will rise to the challenge.

Add in the tax savings from reduced prison populations, less need for neighborhood policing, and better physical and mental health.

Think my ideas are outrageous? Dream up your own. But start by accepting that what we're doing isn't working, it hasn't responded to a century of tinkering, it's at odds with democracy and human nature, and it costs far more than we can now afford. Ω

Wrong answers from business groups on education reform

(From FloridaThinks.com, the forum for civil debate, February 2010:)

> "Tallahassee – Backed by Gov. Charlie Crist and former Gov. Jeb Bush, powerful business groups called Thursday for major changes in Florida's education system – including tougher high school graduation standards and a revamped class-size law. The Florida Council of 100 and the Florida Chamber of Commerce released the 69-page report during a news conference in the governor's office."
>
> – From the Daytona Beach News-Journal, Jan. 15

The 69-page report, "Closing the Talent Gap: A Business Perspective," is a well-written, beautifully packaged presentation of some solid ideas, including a few that – because they cost money – are unlikely to be met with enthusiasm by legislators and other policymakers.

The importance of early childhood experience from birth to the beginning of formal schooling is recognized, and there are specific suggestions for improvement. More equitable funding for education across the state is advocated, along with statistics pointing out that the costs of failure to adequately support education can have long-term consequences. Shortsightedness is expensive.

There's much else to commend in the report, but the limitations of "a business perspective" are evident. As has long been true at both state and federal levels, legislators and other non-educators are so convinced that the conventional wisdom about educating is a sufficient basis for policy, they feel no need to consult those with long experience in the classroom. Policymakers who'd be appalled by a proposal to allow teachers to dictate hospital emergency room procedures, specifications for highway bridge design, or cockpit

checklists for airliners, don't hesitate to set policy for something inherently far more complex than any of those – educating.

If the Committee of 100 and the Florida Chamber of Commerce had sought input from educators – and by that I mean teachers in classrooms – they would have been asked to defend their assumption that education should be shaped by "workforce needs" rather than human needs, of which work is but one of a broad range. They would have been asked to explain the emphasis on math and science when the state workforce is unable to absorb them, as evidenced by their noting that "only about half of those earning degrees in the science and math fields identified with the global innovation economy choose to stay in the state." Does that not suggest a problem for which education shouldn't be held accountable?

But perhaps most importantly, educators would have asked the committee and the chamber for an explanation of their great faith and confidence in standardized testing as an adequate measure of school performance.

There's only one learner ability that machine-scored tests can measure with precision – short-term memory – and the vast limitations of short-term are surely obvious. It isn't the ability to recall secondhand information from textbooks or lectures that sets the successful apart from their peers, but imagination, creativity, perseverance, the ability to connect dots, a willingness to take chances and make mistakes, and a long list of other traits and qualities.

How, when only one fleeting ability – the ability to remember information long enough to pencil in the right oval on a standardized test – can be measured accurately, can standardized tests be seen as indicators of relative educational quality?

The Council of 100 and the Florida Chamber of Commerce have ignored the fundamental problem from which not just Florida's educational system but educational systems world-wide suffer: All use a curriculum designed in the 19th century – a simpler era pre-dating the knowledge explosion. That increasingly dysfunctional relic of a bygone era dumps so much random, irrelevant, disorganized information on kids that even the best of them can't process it in any practical, meaningful, permanently useful way.

"Closing the Talent Gap: A Business Perspective," fails to address a fundamental problem. It calls for "transformational change," then assumes that doing what's always been done, except doing it with greater rigor, diligence, and determination, will make Florida's schools competitive in international intellectual competitions.

Wrong diagnosis; wrong cure. Ω

Firing silver bullets or blanks to improve schools?

(From *FloridaThinks.com, the forum for civil debate:* Posted on February 11, 2010)

Bill Gates says that big, impersonal schools are obstacles to improved learner performance. He's right. His foundation has poured major money into a "small schools initiative," but thus far nothing much of educational consequence has resulted.

Eli Broad says that better leadership is the key to improved learner performance, and the Broad Foundation has put up significant money to train new ones. Obviously, good leaders are essential, but thus far, Broad-trained leaders haven't introduced any revolutionary new approaches to educating.

Jeb Bush, echoing the late Milton Friedman, says bringing market forces to bear shapes schools up. The market-based reforms he put in place in Florida led to teachers and schools being graded, compared, labeled, rewarded and punished. But cut through the political hype and the statistical game-playing, and it's clear that after more than a decade, nothing of academic consequence has changed. Indeed, misapplied, market forces are counterproductive.

Rigor Overrated

Policymakers in Tallahassee, like those in most other state capitals and Washington, have long argued the merits of greater rigor. They've pushed for more math, more science, more Advanced Placement courses, more International Baccalaureate programs, and more testing. But neither the evidence nor common sense suggest that "raising the rigor bar" for learners who can't clear the bars already in place will improve schools.

Bill Gates, Eli Broad, Jeb Bush and the policymakers in state capitals and Washington aren't the only ones with ideas about what's wrong with schools, and what would set them straight. Op-eds nationwide read about the same: End social promotion! Put all kids in uniform! Disband teacher unions! Close down schools of education! Get tough on parents! Expel the troublemakers! Give everybody vouchers! Put mayors in charge! Abolish tenure! Bring back corporal punishment! Convert all schools to charters! Increase spending! Adopt pay-for-performance schemes!

Check around, and it turns out that somewhere, all these "reform" strategies and many others have been tried and have made little or no difference. That's because – as most educators know but those actually running the big show refuse to admit – the main reason for poor learner performance is childhood poverty. Take away the test scores of kids on free and reduced lunch – those least likely to have had adequate health care, least likely to have had good diets, least likely to have had stable, stress-free home environments, least likely to have been exposed to books and rich, varied conversation, least likely to have traveled, least likely to have had music or other kinds of private lessons – take away their test scores and the average of those left will be right up there with the best, not just in the United States but in the world.

Of the 21 richest countries in the world, the United States ranks next to last in average measures of childhood well-being. And, according to the Anna E. Casey Foundation

(http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/acrossstates/Rankings.aspx?ind=137), on that near-bottom-of-the-barrel world list, Florida ranks about midway between New Hampshire and Minnesota at the top of the bottom, and Mississippi and Louisiana at the bottom of the bottom.

There's a problem, all right, but it isn't a problem that can be addressed by telling teachers to suck it up and get on with the job.

How to Make the Best of a Bad Situation

Neither the nation nor the state has the collective will and brains to make a dent in childhood poverty, but I have an education-specific suggestion that could help make the best of a bad situation.

Several years ago, to illustrate a point I wanted to make in a column written for the *Orlando Sentinel*, I went to my nearest middle school and asked to see copies of the eighth-grade math, science, language arts and social-studies textbooks. The school obliged.

Sitting in the school's reception area, I counted the terms in the glossaries of the four books, rightly assuming that they represented what experts thought every kid should know.

One thousand, four hundred and sixty-five! That's how many terms were in the glossaries of just those four textbooks. That's 1,465 main ideas for 14-year-olds to learn in a school year, an average of about eight new ones a day. That's not just ridiculous; it's insane. In the real, adult world, an author who's trying to get just ONE new idea across assumes it will take a whole book. (Think Malcolm Gladwell and *The Tipping Point*, or Alexis de Tocqueville and *Democracy In America*.)

19th-Century Tool Outdated for 21st

Americans, philosophically predisposed to think short-term, and more concerned with individual than with the general welfare, aren't going to do anything about childhood poverty. But that doesn't have to mean that it is impossible to make radical improvements in educating. Information overload is just one of at least 20 problems with the familiar "core curriculum," the static, 19th-century intellectual tool the young are being handed to guide them through the 21st.

Clinging to that curriculum is a recipe not just for educational but for societal disaster. If education policymakers in Tallahassee and Washington knew what they were doing, instead of demanding national standards and tests keyed to a curriculum generated in an era long past and no longer relevant, they'd be calling for an emergency national conference to rethink what's being taught, and why. Ω

Falling into the ditch

Posted March 6, 2010

t r u t h o u t | Op-Ed

Washington Post headline, February 18, 2010: "Lawmakers to launch bipartisan effort to rewrite No Child Left Behind."

Reading that headline, teachers familiar with the King James Bible are likely to recall one of Jesus' parables as quoted by Luke: "Can the blind lead the blind? Shall they not both fall into the ditch?"

With few exceptions, the education reform chatter of politicians of both political parties exhibits a level of ditch-prone educational ignorance that would be laughing-out-loud funny if its consequences weren't so dire.

That most of those in Congress who'll play major roles in shaping the future of American education know little about educating isn't surprising. All, of course, have had firsthand exposure to schooling. But distant, dimly remembered experience, filtered by selective perception and partisan ideology, is a poor foundation upon which to build education policy.

No other profession - not medicine, not finance, not engineering, not anything - is inherently more complex than teaching. The conventional wisdom has it that teachers just distribute information. In fact, to make a difference, they have to "get inside" kids' heads, figure out how what they find there is misaligned with reality, devise strategies that will cause kids to see those misalignments for themselves, then sell them on the necessity for making the necessary changes.

That's not fancy language dressing up something basically simple. It's a summary of an extremely complex, difficult process. That politicians who've never taught think they can write legislation that will reach into every classroom in America and cause something worthwhile to happen displays a level of hubris remarkable even by Washington's standards.

For proof that, in education policymaking, the blind are leading the blind, look at what the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers are doing. They've all but succeeded in signing up all 50 states to the "Common Core State Standards Initiative."

To non-educators - politicians, business leaders, newspaper editorial boards, syndicated columnists, television talking heads, radio commentators, and other opinion leaders - national standards for all school subjects sounds not just reasonable but highly desirable.

But to educators - at least those who've given the matter thought - adopting national standards for math, science, language arts and social studies is an appalling idea. The practical effect of such standards will be to lock in place a relic of a bygone era - a curriculum adopted in 1893 that was poor when it was put in place, and grows more dysfunctional with each passing year.

Consider some (but by no means all) of the problems with that 1893 curriculum: A mountain of research says play, art, music, and so on, are essential to intellectual development, but the 1893 "core curriculum" shoves them aside as expendable "frills." It dumps so much raw information on kids, almost none of it moves beyond short-term memory. It has no criteria telling educators what new knowledge is important or what old knowledge it's O.K. to discard to make room for the new. It ignores the integrated way kids learn and how their brains perceive and process information. It's so inefficient it leaves little or no time for apprenticeships, internships or co-op programs. It's keyed not to kids' aptitudes, abilities and interests, but to their ages. It doesn't move learners smoothly through ever-increasing levels of intellectual complexity. At the elementary level, it emphasizes reading to the neglect of all other ways of learning. It has no built-in mechanisms adapting it to social change. It fragments the teaching profession, discouraging interest in and dialog about the overall state of the institution. Nowhere does it raise questions essential to ethical and moral development. It lends itself to simple tests of memory to the neglect of complex thought processes. Its implementation is horrendously expensive. Its emphasis on "achieving minimum standards" rather than on exploiting the riches of human variability snubs the major sources of America's past strength and success - individual initiative, imagination, creativity.

That's the curriculum that business leaders and politicians are hell-bent on freezing in place forever with national standards. Any one of those problems is sufficiently serious to warrant Congressional hearings, and all are being ignored. So certain are Washington's movers and shakers that tough love in the form of market forces can cure all educational ills, they've neither time for nor patience with educators trying to tell them they're misdiagnosing a fundamental problem.

That problem isn't low standards; it's wrong standards. No matter how demanding the standards, the curriculum adopted in 1893 will never do the job that needs doing. Sticking with it - merely doing longer and harder what brought us to crisis - will just move forward the date when the institution collapses in an irrelevant heap. Adopt every conventional wisdom reform strategy - stiffen the standards, destroy the unions, close schools of education, outlaw social promotion, mandate advanced placement programs, eliminate tenure, tie pay to performance, close the worst five percent of schools, radically expand the charter movement, put mayors in charge - do all that, but stick with the present curriculum, and none of it will make any difference in the only place where it matters - in kids' heads.

If America's parents and grandparents really understood what educational amateurs in Washington and state capitols are doing to their kids and grandkids, they'd mount the mother of all class-action suits. The situation doesn't call for tightening the status quo screws. It calls for an emergency conference of America's best minds - including, for a change, some educators - to rethink what we're doing, and why.

The Republicans and Democrats now meeting in committee to pool their ignorance about matters educational may bathe in the warm glow of mainstream media approval of the rare show of bipartisanship. But their refusal to face the educational implications of poverty, combined with their assumption that a 19th century intellectual tool will see the young safely through the 21st century, will bring disaster. Count on it. Ω

http://archive.truthout.org/falling-into-ditch57418

Memo to lawmakers: You don't know what you're doing on school reform

From FloridaTHINKS.com**.** Posted March 16, 2010.

"Human history," said the late H.G. Wells, "is a race between education and catastrophe." Read the front page of any Florida newspaper, and it will be obvious that catastrophe has a commanding lead. Dear legislators, since you're now running the education show, and the consequences of coming in second in the education-vs.-catastrophe race are pretty grim, perhaps you'd be open to a few observations from someone who's spent a half-century in Florida's schools actually doing the work.

Before retirement, I taught in two of the state's high schools and two of its universities, was a county-level director of instruction, wrote years of columns on education for the *Orlando Sentinel* and Knight-Ridder/Tribune, did consultant work for the state and many of its counties, wrote textbooks and professional books published by major publishers, and visited schools as far west as Japan and as far east as the Greek Islands. A little book on reform I wrote many years ago for Florida's Department of Education was so popular it went through five printings.

I'll try to be brief, an effort that may come across as blunt.

1. Your education policies are shaping minds, lives and Florida's future, and it's clear that you don't really know what you're doing.

The script you're following – the one written by the Business Roundtable – is appallingly simplistic. Educating – discerning the images of reality in kids' heads and convincing them there are better ones they'd do well to accept – is inherently the most complex of all intellectual challenges, and you are treating it as if it's a simple matter of distributing information. The Business Roundtable's approach to education reform isn't a product of teaching experience, of consultation with experienced teachers, or of research. It's a reactionary product of ideology and the conventional wisdom.

2. You're misdiagnosing the causes of poor performance.

Your stump speeches, campaign brochures and legislative proposals make it clear that you think the main problem with Florida's schools is a lack of rigor. You imply that Florida's educators aren't doing their best, that they're lazy or dumb or both, and that the situation calls for tough love, raised performance bars, more demanding courses, stiffer standards and harsher penalties for failure.

Your version of rigor has kids and teachers working longer and harder doing what has brought education to crisis. Wrong diagnosis, so wrong cure.

3. You're assuming that the blame for unacceptable performance lies with people – primarily teachers and kids.

The late Edward Deming, one of the world's foremost authorities on quality, believed that poor institutional and organizational performance almost always meant there was a SYSTEM problem.

And system problems there certainly are. Lots of them. The curriculum you want to lock even more rigidly in place with national standards and tests was put in place in 1893, and accommodates the present knowledge explosion about as well as mule trains would accommodate today's freight transport needs. That 19th-century relic is at odds with kids' nature. It ignores the brain's need for order and organization. It makes no provision for new fields of knowledge. It relies almost exclusively on learner short-term memory. It treats art, music, play and other intellect-enhancing activities as expendable frills. Its overemphasis on reading to the neglect of all other ways of learning is cranking out hundreds of thousands of kids who hate to read.

That barely begins a list of Florida's unaddressed education problems, all of which No Child Left Behind exacerbated, and the Race to the Top is on course to make worse.

4. Hundreds of studies have established beyond any doubt that the single greatest cause of the so-called "achievement gap" is poverty.

Florida has more than its share, but you don't want to talk about it. If the subject comes up, it's met with an attempt to change the subject to the evils of tenure or unions or some other red herring, conveniently ignoring the fact that some of the best-scoring states aren't concerned with those matters while some of the worst use draconian measures to attack them.

5. To educational problems, you're bringing an ideologue's blind faith in Milton Friedman's opinion that privatization, charters, vouchers, merit pay and other free-market strategies can cure all educational ills.

Maybe because he was an economist, Friedman believed that what motivates stock brokers also motivates teachers, but that's simply not the case. Merit pay and other market schemes won't make a dime's worth of improvement in the only thing that counts: what goes on in kids' heads. What they do is undermine the cooperation, trust, sharing of expertise and other "family" characteristics essential to school quality. There's a reason market gimmicks are counterproductive in schools. They're based on flawed ideas about human nature.

6. You've put all of Florida's performance evaluation eggs in the FCAT basket.

It should concern you that the only thing machine-scored tests can measure with precision is a kid's short-term memory. How useful is an education if it doesn't help learners learn to think better – infer, hypothesize, generalize, relate, synthesize, value, and so on? The FCAT yields not a fraction of what a teacher who has worked with a kid for even a few weeks knows about her or his potential and problems. The test is anti-educational and a criminal waste of a great deal of time and money, robbing Florida's best and worst

students of attention as schools pour resources into attempts to nudge the test scores of the "marginal middle" kids above a politically established pass-fail line.

If you're serious about education reform, you could learn from Finland, the highest-scoring nation in the world. The Finns moved from the middle of the pack to leader of the world by following a simple reform strategy:

True believers in education, they tax. Then they hire the cream of the academic crop. Next, they train them well. And finally, they trust and respect them enough to leave them alone. Ω

Merit pay can't be defended by any measure of fairness

From FloridaThinks.com: Posted on April 11, 2010.

'Superior work deserves superior reward."

Few ideas are more deeply imbedded in American beliefs about what's reasonable and fair. It's rightly given credit for driving individual initiative, for creating and maintaining the vitality of capitalism, and for stabilizing democracy and the social institutions that support it.

Market forces – rewarding good work, encouraging competition, increasing choice – are powerful, and have given us much. Used appropriately, they can do a great deal to improve American education. But used inappropriately, they can be counterproductive. What may seem to be merely a new application of an old and trusted idea may, in a new application, be enormously destructive.

An Idea That Seems to Make Sense, But …

Merit pay for teachers – an idea that seems to make good common sense – illustrates the problem. Like most educational "innovations," pay-for-performance proposals have been around for decades. That none of them has thus far been successful enough to become a model to be copied surely says something important about their usefulness and practicality.

Fans of merit pay often blame unions, bureaucratic inertia or timid policymakers for the failure of pay-for-performance schemes. In fact, the schemes are ordinarily abandoned because they simply don't work. They're based on a simplistic belief about human nature – that the desire to compete and win is basic, and the scoreboard reads in dollars.

There are, however, roles and occupations in which the drive to compete is weak or non-existent, and teaching is one of them. That's fortunate, because Americans have never been willing to tax themselves sufficiently to pay teacher salaries high enough to allow the profession to compete for candidates on the open market. America's schools are staffed primarily not by those attracted by financial incentives, but by those willing to exchange a relatively low-status position and marginal pay for the personal fulfillment which comes from teaching. That doesn't mean teachers wouldn't like to make a lot of money, only that

desire for it isn't what keeps them in a profession that's constantly battered by amateurs in policymaking positions who think they know more about educating than educators.

But wouldn't merit pay provide a kind of "icing on the cake" for outstanding teachers?

The Issue of Fairness

The first requirement of any pay plan is that it be fair, so whatever plan policymakers come up with must take account of the fact that teachers have little or no control over the students assigned to them. They can't change their students' backgrounds and abilities, their physical and emotional health, or their levels of parental support. They can't change the level of difficulty of the subjects they teach, the amount of available resources, the design or condition of the schools they're assigned, their administrators' management skills, the curriculum, the cultural values of the populations from which their students come, the schedules and pacing of their work, the amount and quality of the books and technology provided them, the number of students assigned them.

And they have no control over the corporately produced, machine-scored standardized tests that, under legislative pressure, are now the primary measure of the quality of their performance. Standardized tests can't evaluate the complex thought processes all good teachers strive to teach, can't measure initiative, imagination, or creativity, and can't evaluate some of the most valuable outcomes of education – a love of learning, a commitment to ethical action, the ability to work productively with others.

By no measure of fairness can merit pay be defended. Allowing not just teacher pay but reputations and employment to hinge on factors over which teachers have no control suggests either a dangerous level of policymaker naiveté or a hidden policymaker agenda.

Neither is acceptable. Ω

Teacher accountability? It's about time

Posted 19 April 2010

t r u t h o u t | Op-Ed

Once upon a time teachers assigned grades, and that was pretty much that. Oh, occasionally a kid would argue that a particular grade was unfair, or complain so loudly that parents or an administrator would get involved, but that was relatively rare.

About a generation ago, acceptance of teacher judgment about the quality of student work began to disappear. Waving the "standards and accountability!" banner, leaders of business

and industry convinced politicians that this generation's teachers (unlike those they remembered from their own schooling) couldn't be trusted to evaluate learner performance. Today's teachers, they were sure, suffered from "the soft bigotry of low expectations."

What drives the campaign to discredit teacher judgment isn't clear. Some are convinced there's a long-running, behind-the-scenes attempt to undermine confidence in public schools to pave the way for privatizing them. Others think the loss of faith has been engineered by testing companies to expand the lucrative market for standardized tests and test prep materials. Still others blame it on naive policymakers who don't understand the vast limitations of machine-scored tests.

Whether for one of these or some other reason, "accountability" is now a major issue. It's widely believed that if America doesn't shape up, scientists and engineers from beyond our borders will soon be eating our technological lunch. Accompanying that belief is a second one, that the best way to keep track of how America stands in relation to the competition is to give the same test to every kid on the planet and compare the scores.

We have a problem. We've put all our quality-monitoring eggs in the standardized testing basket, but the only thing computer-scored tests can measure with absolute precision is short-term memory. Short-term memory has its uses, but a good one doesn't turn a kid into a good mathematician, good scientist, good engineer, or good anything else. Expertise and accomplishment require intention, interest, insight, imagination, creativity, and probably a brain wired in a particular manner, all combined in a way little understood, incapable of being directly taught, and impossible to measure with a standardized test.

We seem to be over a barrel. To maintain educational quality, we need to monitor and measure performance. But learner qualities and capabilities most deserving of being evaluated are far too complex for our crude tests to monitor.

Fortunately, the barrel is of our own making, and can be rolled aside. Philosopher and mathematician Alfred North Whitehead, in his 1916 Presidential Address to the Mathematical Association of England, pointed the way. "The secondhandedness of the learned world," he said, "is the secret of its mediocrity." When kids are merely trying to remember something read in a textbook or heard in teacher talk, they're in the secondhand-knowledge business. When they're figuring out how to make sense of something complicated and important that can be seen and touched, they're in the firsthand-knowledge business. Switching from secondhand to firsthand student work changes the game and therefore everything that follows, including the kinds of tests that are necessary.

A firsthand-knowledge assignment for a high school social studies class: "How are major decisions about your school's day-to-day operation made, and what general conclusions and attitudes about decision-making and governing might you carry into adulthood as a consequence?"

A firsthand-knowledge assignment for a high school science class: "What's happening to the solid waste your school generates, and if the system for dealing with it continues to function as it presently does, what will be the likely consequences for future generations?"

A firsthand-knowledge assignment for a high school humanities class: Graffiti fits dictionary definitions of literature. Reading "between the lines," what does local graffiti

have to say about the interests, concerns, and problems of its creators? Do they differ from yours? How? Why?

That's firsthand, real-world work, and what comes out of it is firsthand knowledge. It's unquestionably relevant. Its intellectual challenges are qualitative rather than quantitative. It forces secondhand knowledge to play its proper, supportive role. Its intellectual payoff is immediate and continuous. It connects directly to larger issues of life, liberty, and happiness. It erases the arbitrary, artificial, intellect-limiting boundaries between school subjects. And the shift of emphasis for learners from simple memory exercises to complex logic tends to shake up perceptions of who's smart and who's less so in surprising and healthy ways.

By any measure, firsthand work is work worth doing. But it's work that, by its very nature, can't be standardized, so evaluating it can't be standardized. No way can Educational Testing Service, McGraw-Hill, Pearson, or some other remote corporate entity write a machine-scored test to determine the quality of what's happening in the heads of kids as they wrestle with firsthand, real-world work.

How, then, can performance be monitored? In the same way performance was monitored for the decades before the campaign to discredit teachers began: by returning respect and authority to those best positioned by time and experience to make the judgment calls - returning it to classroom teachers.

Blamed by business leaders for problems over which they have no control, scapegoated by platitude-prone politicians, ignored by educationally challenged policymakers, mauled by mainstream media unwilling to look past the conventional wisdom, it's possible that classroom teachers have lost confidence in their ability to evaluate student work. But as long as those in authority think that sorting, labeling, and assigning numbers to kids has something to do with educating, classroom teachers are the only people who know the game and the players well enough to meet their demands.

Are teacher judgments subjective? Of course. So what? For comprehensiveness, reliability and usefulness, no other approach to performance evaluation comes even close. (And it's a helluva lot cheaper.)

It's years of time and many billions of dollars too late to undo the damage done to the young by the standardized testing fad, but next school year would be a good time for an aroused citizenry to demand that a salvage operation be undertaken. Ω

Coming soon to a school near you: Big Ed

Posted May11, 2010 t r u t h o u t | Op-Ed

Deeply embedded in the conventional wisdom is the idea that educating is mostly about making a living rather than making a life. Given that assumption, education reforms that promise to "make America competitive in the global marketplace" or "prepare learners for productive work" are an easy sell. There's broad agreement that what industry wants, industry should get.

The campaign to turn schools into industry boot camps began in earnest about 20 years ago. Business leaders convinced politicians that teachers and kids needed to work harder, so No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was put in place to jerk them around until they shaped up.

Promoters of NCLB are now admitting that it failed, but insist that the problem wasn't really with the legislation. NCLB failed, they argue, because the 50 states didn't follow through. The standards and tests they put in place weren't tough enough.

From the perspective of the US Department of Education (DOE) and the business and industry groups which whisper in the DOE's ear, moving the present reform effort along, failure of NCLB turns out to be a good thing. It's a perfect excuse for bypassing the states and the complications arising from their various idiosyncrasies and replacing their work with national standards and tests. The department's Race to the Top competition is giving the states something to divert their attention, while The Common Core State Standards Initiative quietly takes the wheels off their school buses and puts them on the one being assembled in Washington.

Everything is falling into place. The Common Standards Initiative has broad appeal. The fact that the Constitution gives the states responsibility for education is a bit discomfiting, but that's been gotten around by making state adoption of national standards "voluntary." Now that that little technicality has been finessed, the federal school reform effort is on a roll.

American education is going to be changed forever. Just about everybody thinks that standards are a good thing, so replacing a hodge-podge of state standards with a single national set has broad support. The playing field will be leveled. Teachers will know exactly what to teach. Kids will know what they're expected to know. Textbook publishers will know what to print. Schools of education will know what to emphasize. Testing companies will know what they can peddle. Data collectors will know what data to collect. And taxpayers will know what they're getting for their money. Sort of.

Education reform shaped by Race to the Top and The Common Core State Standards Initiative is rocking merrily along, but the enthusiasm for it is, well, curious.

Maybe because those originally pushing it were leaders of business and industry rather than educators, the effort was begun and continues, without several relevant issues being addressed.

There has been, for example, no discussion of the wisdom of standardizing knowledge in the middle of a knowledge explosion. Nor is anyone asking if the "core" school subjects - the ones being standardized - are up to the challenges the future will bring.

No provision has been made for coordinating or prioritizing the work of the various standards-writing committees.

No one has been assigned responsibility for mediating the conflicts which will arise as the supporters of various school subjects compete for learner time and public money.

No apologies have been offered to professional educators for telling them they don't know how to do their jobs.

No one is addressing the fact that the world that school subjects try to explain is an interconnected whole that can't be understood using a random handful of disconnected school subjects.

That last problem alone - the one that helped make NCLB an intellectual farce - is reason enough to dump Race to the Top and The Common Core State Standards Initiative.

But perhaps most curious of all, is the present reform effort's disregard for deep-seated American values.

With the possible exception of Australia, no other country matches America in professed admiration for the nonstandard person.

We're big on individualism, personal freedom and autonomy. We resent authority, chafe at regulation and are amused by the comedian's line, "I'm from the government and I'm here to help." We admire the Lone Ranger, the self-made man and the movie characters played by John Wayne and Clint Eastwood.

We distrust central planning and point to the history of the Soviet Union and other East Bloc countries as evidence of its dangers. We know that no two kids are alike and insist that individual differences be respected, a cultural trait we think explains why Americans have won more than their fair share of Nobels, Pulitzers, medals, patents, and other awards for scientific, artistic and athletic accomplishment.

Why, then, is there near-universal enthusiasm for national standards? Why are we destroying what little autonomy and adaptability is left in America's schools after years of battering by NCLB? Why are we ignoring educators from high-scoring but super-standardized countries who come here looking for the secret of America's intellectual productivity? Why are we putting our kids in the service of corporate interests rather than demanding that corporate interests serve our kids? When did we abandon our belief that educating wasn't about filling industry job slots, but about exploring the dimensions and potential of humanness?

Should there be national standards? Sure! But not national standards for math, science, and other school subjects. School subjects are just tools, means to an end. If we're shopping for a jacket, we don't care about the loom that wove the cloth, the scissors that cut it or the sewing machine that stitched it together. We care about the quality of the finished jacket.

The same holds true if we're in the market for a house or car. We don't care whether the carpenters drove the nails with a hammer or a nail gun, don't care whether a robot or a

human installed the grill. We leave tool choices to the judgment of professionals, in whose interest it is to constantly look for better ones. Our interest is in the quality of the completed house or car. That's when we bring standards to bear.

But not in education. The whole standards and accountability fad has been a monumental, misguided, amateurish, maybe even criminal waste of time, money, brains and educator reputations.

Should a standard for reading say, "Learners will be able to sound out unfamiliar words," or should it say, "Learners will develop a love of reading"? Should a standard for math say, "Learners will be able to solve quadratic equations," or should it say, "Learners will understand statistics that reveal the trends of the era"?

Corporate America has given us Big Banks - banks too big to fail. Corporate America has given us Big Pharma - a pharmaceutical industry too big to fight. Coming soon to a school near you, courtesy of corporate America: Big Ed - a centralized education system too big to question its self-serving, profit-driven, intellect-destroying priorities. Ω

Author's note: A shorter version of this was in the Washington Post on 4/30/10.

Education reform: An ignored problem, and a proposal

Posted June 25, 2010 *t r u t h o u t | Op-Ed*

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: http://www.marionbrady.com/ (See link to *Connections: Investigating Reality* near bottom of page.) Ω

Back to the future for a better way of life?

From *FloridaThinks.com*. Posted on July 14, 2010.

Some time ago my wife and I spent several days in the village of Windwardside on the tiny Caribbean island of Saba. Near the center of the village lived an artist, her kitchen and adjoining studio hugging the street.

We walked by one evening just about dark. She was washing dishes. When we paused to look at her paintings, she pushed the casement window open a little wider, leaned out, and asked if we'd like to come in and look at her work.

"Yes," we said. She dried her hands, walked directly from her kitchen into the attached studio, opened the door, and welcomed us.

That could rarely happen in America. Combined living and working spaces were the rule in colonial America, but the arrangement is now exceedingly rare.

The matter needs to be rethought. We're in a crisis economy. It's common knowledge that small businesses are a major engine driving the economy, but we've put in place often insurmountable obstacles to their creation.

Move that artist to most places in modern America and she'd be out of business. To profit from exposure to pedestrian traffic, there would have to be pedestrians. For them to see her work, she'd have to have a shop. But the shop couldn't be part of her house because zoning laws usually prohibit businesses in residences, and prohibit residency in businesses.

She'd have to have both a house and a shop – two entirely separate structures. Two structures to buy or rent. Two structures to maintain. Two structures to pay taxes on. Two structures to insure. Two structures to heat, cool, and light.

Then, of course, she'd need a car to get from home to shop, a car that had to be bought, licensed, fueled, maintained, and insured. Not living on site, she'd have to have someone available to fill in if she wasn't feeling well, with attendant responsibilities for their Social Security withholding and other bureaucratic requirements.

If she was a really good painter, she might eventually be able to make enough money to pay for health insurance. But on top of all her other business expenses, that seems highly unlikely.

She's out of business before she even gets into business.

Relatively speaking, there aren't many artists. But there are a great many people with skills and abilities and goods and services they might be able to turn into a living if their overhead costs were low enough – gardeners, cooks, bakers, decorators, tutors, repairers of

musical instruments, electronic equipment and small-appliance technicians, therapists, other health-related specialists, and consultants of all kinds. A teacher or teacher team could open a neighborhood school in a house, an arrangement generating its own long list of potential benefits. Who knows what other small businesses would emerge if start-up costs were minimal or non-existent?

Reviving a Colonial Village Lifestyle

There's much else that those colonial villages with their combined living and working spaces had going for them. If they were revived, the young could witness firsthand how economies work, could know there were alternatives to flipping burgers and stocking shelves in big-box stores, could see for themselves the fruits and satisfactions of creativity and inventiveness, could grow up with an appreciation of the connection between individual initiative and a satisfying lifestyle.

And from clusters of small, village-scale enterprises with live-in families could come something else the loss of which has cost America dearly – a sense of community to counter the "me and mine" self-centeredness so evident in American culture. A pharmacist or grocer living over or behind the store and responding to a neighbor's need could remind us of how dependent we often must be on each other.

As with any change, altering zoning laws would generate problems. But the potential benefits of recapturing important aspects of a way of life that once worked well should prompt city councilors, town planners, developers, and private citizens to give thought to the matter.

We've created a way of life that can't be sustained, and is going to change whether we like it or not. The merit of deliberately shaping and reshaping neighborhoods to make them more human before energy and environmental problems force change on us is surely worth considering. Ω

(Not a column on education, but worth including here, I think--MB)

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

Posted July 21, 2010.

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. Ω

Dogs: An unusual guide to school reform

Posted August 12, 2010. *(Note: This column was reprinted by* The Education Magazine of the Future*; New Zealand, September 2010, p. 25-with the title/photo above.)*

Driving the country roads of Scotland, Ireland and Wales, I have sometimes been lucky enough to be blocked by sheep being moved from one pasture to another.

I say 'lucky' because it allows me to watch an impressive performance by a dog – usually a Border Collie.

What a show! A single, mid-sized dog herding two or three hundred sheep, keeping them moving in the right direction, rounding up strays, knowing how to intimidate but not cause panic, funneling them all through a gate, and obviously enjoying the challenge.

Why a Border Collie? Why not an Akita or Xoloitzcuintli or another of about 400 breeds listed on the Internet?

Because, among the people for whom herding sheep is serious business, there is general agreement that Border Collies are better at doing what needs to be done than any other dog. They have 'the knack.'

That knack is so important that those who care most about Border Collies even oppose their being entered in dog shows. That, they say, would lead to the Border Collie being bred to look good, and looking good isn't the point. Brains, innate ability, performance – that's the point.

Other breeds are no less impressive in other ways. If you're lost in a snowstorm in the Alps, you don't need a Border Collie. You need a big, strong dog with a really good nose, lots of fur, wide feet that don't sink too deeply into snow, and an unerring sense of direction for returning with help. You need a Saint Bernard.

If varmints are sneaking into your hen house, killing your chickens, and escaping down holes in a nearby field, you don't need a Border Collie or a Saint Bernard, you need a Fox Terrier.

It isn't that many different breeds can't be taught to herd, lead high-altitude rescue efforts, or kill foxes. They can. It's just that teaching all dogs to do things which one particular breed can do better than any other doesn't make much sense.

We accept the reasonableness of that argument for dogs. We reject it for kids.

The non-educators now running the education show say American kids are lagging ever-farther behind in science and math, and that the consequences of that for America's economic well-being could be catastrophic.

So, what is this rich, advantaged country of ours doing to try to beat out the competition?

Mainly, we put in place the No Child Left Behind program, now replaced by Race to the Top (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/race-to-the-top/) and the Common Core State Standards Initiative (http://www.corestandards.org/). If that fact makes you optimistic about the future of education in America, think again about dogs.

There are all kinds of things they can do besides herd, rescue, and engage foxes. They can sniff luggage for bombs. Chase felons. Stand guard duty. Retrieve downed game birds. Guide the blind. Detect certain diseases. Locate earthquake survivors. Entertain audiences. Play nice with little kids. Go for help if Little Nell falls down a well.

So, with No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top as models, let's set performance standards for these and all other canine capabilities and train all dogs to meet them. All 400 breeds. All skills. Leave No Dog Behind!

Two-hundred-pound Mastiffs may have a little trouble with the chase-the-fox-down-the-hole standard, and Chihuahuas will probably have difficulty with the tackle-the-felon-and-pin-him-to-the-ground standard. But, hey, no excuses! Standards are standards! Leave No Dog Behind.

Think there's something wrong with a same-standards-and-tests-for-everybody approach to educating? Think a math whiz shouldn't be held back just because he can't write a good five-paragraph essay? Think a gifted writer shouldn't be refused a diploma because she can't solve a quadratic equation? Think a promising trumpet player shouldn't be kept out of the school orchestra or pushed out on the street because he can't remember the date of the Boxer Rebellion?

If you think there's something fundamentally, dangerously wrong with an educational reform effort that's actually designed to standardize, designed to ignore human variation, designed to penalize individual differences, designed to produce a generation of clones, photocopy this column.

If you think it's stupid to require every kid to read the same books, think the same thoughts, and parrot the same answers, then make several photocopies of this article. And in the margin at the top of each, write, in longhand, something like, "Please explain why the standards and accountability fad isn't a criminal waste of brains," or, "Why are you trashing America's hope for the future?" or just, "Does this make sense?"

Send the copies to your senators and representatives before they sell their vote to the publishing and testing corporations intent on getting an ever-bigger slice of that half-trillion dollars a year America spends on educating. Ω

How ed reformers push the wrong theory of learning

Posted August 24, 2010 *(Note: This was reprinted by Truthout on September 24, 2010.)*

In alphabetical order: Mike Bloomberg, mayor of New York City. Eli Broad, financier and philanthropist. Jeb Bush, ex-Florida governor and possible 2012 presidential contender. Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education. Bill Gates, business magnate and philanthropist. Joel Klein, chancellor of New York City schools.

In education issues, mainstream media sometimes call these gentlemen, "The New Progressives." They're major movers and shakers in the current reform effort.

None is, or has ever been, a teacher. Many think that's a very good, even a necessary thing. It's widely believed that American education is a mess, that teachers deserve most of the blame, and that they either can't or won't clean the mess up. What's needed, it's thought, are no-nonsense leaders – CEOs from business, lawyers, politicians, ex-military officers.

The New Progressives are on a roll. Their views are sought after and respected by congressional committees. They have money, and cash-starved school districts will do whatever it takes to get some of it. Their press conferences are well-attended. Most newspaper editorial boards share their perspective, so their op-eds get published. The Common Core State Standards Initiative (http://www.corestandards.org/) they strongly supported -- if not helped engineer -- has already been adopted by more than half the states. Leading Democrats and Republicans are on board. Those who question their top-down approach to reform have been neutralized by labeling them "obstacles to progress," "reactionaries," "union shills."

A recent press release provides an example of the New Progressives' long reach: "NBC Universal presents 'Education Nation,' an unprecedented week-long event (http://www.nbclearn.com/portal/site/learn/summit) examining and redefining education in America." The event will be held in Rockefeller Center in September, 2010. The two leaders with top billing: Bloomberg and Duncan.

The New Progressives and their fans have something else in common besides running the education reform show. They share a big idea – a theory about how humans learn.

Let's call it "Theory T." "T" stands for "Transfer."

Theory T didn't emerge from successful teaching experience, and it's not backed by research, but it has something even more useful going for it: The Conventional Wisdom. It's easily the New Progressives' most powerful asset, for much of the general public (and a disturbing percentage of teachers) already subscribe to it. Because its validity is taken for granted, Theory T doesn't even have to be explained, much less promoted.

Theory T says kids come to school with heads mostly empty. As textbooks are read, information transfers from pages to empty heads. As teachers talk, information transfers from teachers' heads to kids' heads. When homework and term papers are assigned, kids go to the library or the Internet, find information, and transfer it from reference works or Wikipedia. Bit by bit and byte by byte, the information in their heads piles up.

At an August conference in Lake Tahoe, California, Bill Gates. clinched his Theory T credentials (http://techcrunch.com/2010/08/06/bill-gates-education/) ."Five years from now," he said, "on the web for free you'll be able to find the best lectures in the world."

Let the transfer process begin!

Measuring the success of Theory T learning is easy and precise – just a matter of waiting a few days or weeks after the transfer process has been attempted and asking the kid, "How much do you remember?"

No research says how much of what's recalled at test time remains permanently in memory, nor to what practical use, if any, that information is later put, but that's of no concern to Theory T proponents. Their interest in performance ends when the scores are posted.

There's another, less familiar theory about how humans learn. Those who subscribe to it – mostly teachers who've spent many years working directly with learners – aren't backed by big money, don't get mainstream media attention, aren't asked to testify before

congressional committees, and can't organize week-long affairs in Rockefeller Plaza, all of which help explain the second theory's unfamiliarity.

Those who accept the alternative to Theory T don't think kids come to school with empty heads, believe instead that the young, on their own, develop ideas, opinions, explanations, beliefs and values about things that matter to them. As is true of adults, kids' ideas and beliefs become part of who they are, so attempts to change them may come across as attacks on their identity and be resisted.

Teaching, many long-time teachers know, isn't a simple matter of transferring information into a kid's head, but a far more complex, multi-step process. The teacher has to (a) "get inside" that head to figure out what's thought to be true, right, or important, (b) understand the kid's value system well enough to offer ideas sufficiently appealing to warrant taking them seriously and paying attention, (c) choose language or tasks that question old ideas and clarify new ones, (d) get feedback as necessary to decide how to proceed, (e) load the whole process up with enough emotion to carry it past short-term memory, and (f) do this for a roomful of kids, no two of whom are identical.

If that sounds really difficult, it's because it is. If it were easy, all kids would love school because learning is its own reward. If it were easy, young teachers would be successful and stay in the profession. If it were easy, adults wouldn't forget most of what they once supposedly learned. If it were easy, the world would be a much better place.

Most of what we know, remember, and use, we didn't learn by way of Theory T. We learned it on our own as we discovered real-world patterns and relationships – new knowledge that caused us to constantly rethink, reorganize, reconstruct, and replace earlier knowledge.

Let's call this relating process "Theory R."

Theory R is why little kids learn so much so rapidly, before traditional schooling overwhelms them with Theory T. Theory R is why Socrates was famous, why project learning, internships and apprenticeships work so well, why the Progressives of a hundred years ago were so adamant about "hands on" work and "learning by doing," why real dialogue in school is essential, why knowledge of a subject doesn't necessarily make a teacher effective, why asking good questions is far more important than knowing right answers, why tying national standards to a 19th Century curriculum is stupid, why standardized tests are a cruel, anti-learning, Theory T joke.

The educationally naïve New Progressives have engineered an education train wreck that, if allowed to continue, will haunt America for generations. The young, beaten with the "rigor" stick, are being trained to remember old information when our very survival as a nation hinges on their ability to create new information.

Theory T and Theory R have implications for every major issue in education – building design, budgets, classroom furniture arrangements, textbooks, schedules, class size, the role of corporations, the kinds of people attracted to teaching, how kids feel about themselves – everything. Add to that list the newest Big Thing for the New Progressives – "value-added assessment"(http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/accountability). Theory R tests look nothing like today's machine-scored Theory T tests.

Theory R people, appalled by the current thrust of reform, have been trying for at least six presidential administrations to get Theory T people in Washington to discuss how humans really learn. No luck. So sure are the New Progressives that those who disagree with them are self-serving defenders of the educational status quo, they're unable to see themselves as the true reactionaries.

Sooner or later it will become obvious even to Theory T true believers that their theory only works in a world in which tomorrows are exactly like yesterdays. Unfortunately, when that realization comes, it's unlikely that any teachers who understand Theory R will still be around. Ω

Are charter schools really innovative?

Posted September 22, 2010

Peter Ruddy Wallace was the speaker of Florida's House of Representatives years ago when charter-school legislation was adopted. He saw charters (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/charter-schools/) as incubators of innovation and experimentation.

So did I. Indeed, not long thereafter, I accepted an invitation to serve on the board of governors of a new charter school serving a built-from-scratch new town in a neighboring county. And, partly to enhance my board member-related knowledge and skills, and partly to gather material for Knight-Ridder/Tribune columns on the subject of charters, I visited those within reasonable driving distance.

I believe America's broad-based system of public schools is a bedrock of the Republic, and that the country has gotten a better return on its investment than it deserves. But I also believe that major changes are long overdue, that fresh thinking is essential, and that serious problems are being made worse by simplistic reforms (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/guest-bloggers/primer-for-ed-reformers-or-its.html) being pushed by self-serving corporate interests working through politicians.

One of those reforms is driven by an assumption that charter schools are wellsprings of new ideas. Unfortunately, with rare exceptions, that's not the case. I've yet to actually see something happening in a charter that couldn't be happening in a traditional public school. If there are exceptions, give credit to a local or state bureaucracy "loose" enough to permit it.

Official policy, not lack of educator imagination, not laziness, not union obstinacy, not anything else, is the main reason schools function very much as they did a century ago. Put the blame where it belongs.

There are several reasons why most charters differ little or not at all from traditional public schools. Here are four:

1) Innovation and experimentation aren't what motivate most of the people seeking charter approval.

For several years I subscribed to an Internet "listserv" that gave charter enthusiasts across the United States an opportunity to chat. It didn't take long to discover where most of them were coming from. They didn't want to do anything really different; they just wanted to be in charge.

This doesn't mean that most charter schools don't offer something attractive. They do. That's what gets their applications approved. But "attractive" isn't the same as "innovative and experimental." If what a charter applicant wants to do is a good idea but it's already being done somewhere else (as is almost always the case), it's not an innovation.

What's needed, then, isn't another charter, but a procedure for finding out what interesting or promising idea is being explored somewhere, checking to see if it's actually working as advertised, and if it is, providing the support necessary to put it in place locally.

2) Charter schools aren't ordinarily a source of great new ideas (at least in Florida) because most of them have been created not to experiment and innovate, but to sell houses or eventually peddle them to the regular school system (at, of course, a profit).

As I learned firsthand, developers usually know little and care even less about educational innovation. They just know that most people who buy upscale like the sound of "charter school."

Charter legislation often stipulates that only local, non-profit groups are eligible. So what do developers do? They create a non-profit organization to get the charter, then the organization hires a for-profit company to run the school.

During the years of my peak interest in and enthusiasm for charters, three out of four newly approved ones in Florida were being run by companies (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/charter-schools/charter-schools-is-this-the-wa.html) with practices so standardized they were using the same glossy promotional brochures in other states. They were "McCharters," and they were in the school business not to experiment and innovate but to make money. I don't see any evidence that such isn't still the case.

It's ironic: Legislation originally intended to strengthen public schools is now being used as a sneaky way to privatize them.

3) In very few states are the entities that grant charters really knowledgeable about education's deep-seated problems.

Neither are they sufficiently open to unorthodox approaches to approve applications that don't meet fairly traditional public and bureaucratic expectations.

I've been involved in education as teacher, college professor, administrator, writer of textbooks and professional books, consultant to publishers, states, and foundations, and visitor to schools as far west as Japan and as far east as the Greek islands.

For what I'm convinced are sound reasons, I've come to favor shorter school days, the elimination of textbooks, standardized tests, grade cards, grades, traditional school buildings, single-teacher classes, the required "core" curriculum, and other policies and procedures. Would I be able to get a charter? Hah! Not a chance!

4) Charter schools aren't usually sources of great new ideas, and aren't likely to become such, because of subject-matter standards and high-stakes, standardized tests.

Imagine a close-knit group of experienced educators, unhappy with the status quo, thinking about opening their own school.

They make a list of the kind of people they want their students to be and become. Yes, they want them to be knowledgeable. But they also want them to be curious, creative, self-aware, empathetic, confident, courageous, resourceful, in love with learning, and possessing what Albert Schweitzer called "reverence for life."

They devise a curriculum, apply for and are granted a charter. A year or two down the road, there's a collision of aims and priorities.

The state says to the educators, "We're giving you tax money. In return, we're holding you accountable. Your students have to take the state's annual standardized test."

And the educators say, "WHAT!? What's your definition of accountable? Didn't you give us a charter to help students become critical thinkers, curious, creative, self-aware, empathetic, confident, courageous, resourceful, in love with learning, and capable of wonder?"

"Yes."

"And now you're telling us that a standardized, one-shot, paper-and-pencil, multiple choice, bubble-in-the-oval, machine-scored test of short-term memory of the contents of a few school subjects - you're telling us that a computer is going to spit out a number that tells us whether or not we're succeeding!? You've gotta be kidding!"

The charter school movement has been billed and sold as a strategy for strengthening public education via experimentation and innovation. What it's done instead is remind us of the ubiquity of the Law of Unintended Consequences.

But that shouldn't surprise anyone. That's because, generally speaking, those most determined and successful in promoting charters rarely know much about educating. They've just bought the view of the late conservative economist Milton Friedman that privatizing public schools and forcing them to adopt market forces will shape them up.

It doesn't hurt, of course, that a side benefit would be the weakening of unions, and the broadening of corporate access to the half-trillion dollars a year America spends on education. Ω

Are we still capable of educating for 'us-ness?'

Posted October 15, 2010 *(Note: This piece was reprinted by Truthout on October 17, 2010.)*

Ronald Reagan delivered some one-liner doozies (http://politicalhumor.about.com/cs/quotethis/a/reaganquotes.htm), one of which is still a favorite of several members of Congress and talking heads on cable news:

"The most terrifying words in the English language are: 'I'm from the government and I'm here to help.'"

It's an interesting perspective, particularly when placed alongside another quote, one from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Those who had died on that battlefield, Lincoln said, contributed to a great cause-preserving "*government of the people, by the people, for the people.*"

A rational alien would assume, wrongly, that these two views of government came from two very different countries.

For a democracy to function, its citizens need to feel some sense of "us-ness," togetherness, community. They need to be willing, especially when the chips are down, to put the common good ahead of excessive individual interest. A difficult, ever-changing balance has to be maintained between individual rights and collective responsibility. Too much of either invites disaster.

Listening to one of my several Libertarian neighbors a few days ago, and reading how many new billionaires and new food stamp recipients 2010 has produced, has me wondering if we have enough left of a shared concern for "the general welfare" to hang on to government of, by, and for the people.

Evidence seems to be piling up that, more so than in many other societies, we're long on looking out for Number One and short on caring about others; long on privacy fences and gated communities, and short on concern for those beyond and outside them; long on individual liberty, and short on a sense of social responsibility and interest in community building.

In short, we're short on what it takes to maintain a democracy.

I'm wondering why.

Is it in our genes? If you think about it, that doesn't seem entirely unreasonable. Most of those who chose to come to America during its early years must have differed a little from those they left behind. Unlike their brothers and sisters, they were willing to trade familiarity, family, and friends for an unknown future. That suggests differences having implications for community building and democracy. It's conceivable that many of us haven't fallen very far from our ancestral tree.

Or was it geography? Our immigrant ancestors found a vast, sparsely populated frontier. The idea of "living beyond the sound of another man's axe" obviously had appeal, an attitude not conducive to community building and democracy.

Or timing? Many of our ancestors came to America during the Industrial Revolution, a revolution made possible by easily accessed water power, timber, oil, coal, and other resources, and two oceans to protect us while we developed them. During that era, high-profile, self-made men, rags-to-riches stories, and the popularity of the theory of survival of the fittest, reinforced the idea that it was every man for himself.

Or was it what some historians and sociologists call the "Protestant Work Ethic" (http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/479867/Protestant-ethic) --an assumption that hard work, salvation, wealth and success, were all parts of a package deal especially assembled by God for Americans? That particular interpretation of ancient scripture downplayed the story of the Good Samaritan and the need for caring for "the least" among us, so those who bought (and continue to buy) the "Ethic" aren't saddled with any serious community-building obligations.

Or maybe it's our economic system, the functioning of which depends heavily on our willingness to accept its demands, load up the van, and move somewhere else to work, retire, or just start over.

Maintaining a viable democracy requires an educated citizenry willing, able, even eager, to talk about matters like these, matters having to do with who we are as a people, why we do the things we do, and where we're headed. Those conversations require at least some understanding of the past, national character, economics, politics, government, science, religion, and so on-intellectual tools that allow us to trace the trends of our era, the curves of history, the causes and consequences of change.

Those were the kinds of conversations thoughtful educators used to try to encourage, the kinds of intellectual tools they once tried to help the young develop.

Now, not so much.

If you want to mark a date on the calendar when that happened, a good one would be September 27-28, 1989. That's when state governors met in Charlottesville, Virginia, at a big "Education Summit" (no educators invited), and lent their considerable influence to the process of transferring control of education from local school boards and the communities they served to corporations, pausing in Congress just long enough to translate simplistic educational theory and a narrow concern for American industry into the law of the land.

That transfer of control may (or may not) have been a good-faith effort to deal with problems the locals were being slow to address. But if down the road there are still people able to write history, the transfer will be remembered as a major factor in the transition of America from a democracy to a plutocracy, and the nation's consequent decline as a force for good as the military-industrial complex unapologetically clinched its control.

Democracy that doesn't start with education and a sense of community, doesn't start. Period. With Congress as America's school board, and members of the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce cutting the checks that help elect and keep the members of that board in office, democracy is dead.

Full disclosure: I have a dog in the education reform fight. Back in the 1960s I wrote a journal article about a way to address a problem every kid in America has with school: information overload. Over the years, student seat-time hours have increased, textbooks have gotten much fatter, drills and tests have multiplied, and homework has become more onerous.

As a consequence, the amount of abstract, disconnected information dumped on kids has increased far beyond even the best student's ability to cope. Many billions of dollars and hours are invested in stuffing kids' heads with information, and as soon as exams are over they flush almost all of it.

My article dealt with the educational potential of General Systems Theory (http://www.marionbrady.com/2009/06/part-8-identifying-systemic.html) as it had developed during World War II. It could, I argued, make it possible for kids to organize, connect, and make useful sense of what seemed to them to be thousands of odds and ends of random, disconnected information.

The article caught the interest of a couple of big wheels at a major publisher. To make a very long story very short, three or four books and many years later I put together a little course of study designed to help adolescents see that what seemed to them to be separate, isolated school subjects were really several working parts of a logically integrated, mutually supportive, extremely useful knowledge-organizing system.

I mentioned the (free) course of study in a couple of journal articles, and some middle and high school principals around the country contacted me about piloting it. Then along came the assault on America's teachers, the No Child Left Behind (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/no-child-left-behind/) legislation, and an organized corporate campaign to mandate the use of market forces on a social institution for which their destructive potential far exceeded their usefulness.

I was left with letters and phone calls of apology from principals saying they were sorry, but they couldn't pilot my program. If they hoped to keep their jobs, they had to concentrate on proving that their teachers had standards and were accountable.

Am I appalled by the anti-democratic centralization of educational decision making, the radical narrowing of the curriculum, the scapegoating of teachers, the misapplication of market forces, the casual destruction of already-weak communities in the name of school "turnarounds"? You betcha!

But adding greatly to my frustration is the willingness of people who see themselves as "enlightened progressives" (including many educators), to buy into the radically regressive education reform program being promoted by corporate interests with massive help from Washington.

I resent being written off as an obsolete educator-nostalgic, unwilling to let go of the past, unable to appreciate the wisdom and policies of Michelle Rhee, Joel Klein, Arne Duncan, and other education-reform heroes of naïve, educationally challenged mainstream media.

Yes, you've heard this from me before. But the failure of those now setting policy to respond to my arguments says they're not listening, or not understanding, or are so sure they know what they're doing they don't need to pay attention to someone who was

wrestling with issues about which they consider themselves expert before many of them were born.

So I'll keep it short, simple, unambiguous:

(1) We educate in order to survive.

(2) We assign most of the responsibility for educating to public schools.

(3) The public-school curriculum drives instruction.

(4) That curriculum is seriously flawed. (It's necessary but not sufficient.)

(5) Its flaws have been powerfully reinforced by the standards and accountability fad.

(6) The new Common Core Standards that the feds are pressuring the states to adopt will lock the flawed curriculum in rigid, permanent place.

(7) A standardized, permanent curriculum is closed to innovation.

(8) A curriculum closed to innovation can't adapt to change.

(9) Failure to adapt to change elevates stupidity.

(10) Stupidity guarantees our demise. Period. Ω

Standardized snake oil

Posted December 15, 2010
(Republished by *Truthout*, December 19, 2010)

Union School, Mason County, WV (recent photo by Brady) – abandoned but still standing.

I was, generally speaking, a fairly well-behaved kid. I've no reasonable explanation, then, for burning a hole in the wall of the one-room school I attended in the late 1930s.

It wasn't an original idea. A precedent had been set by somebody who'd come and gone before I arrived at Union School the previous year as a third grader. He (I can't imagine it was a "she") had heated the steel rod used to stoke the fire in the stove until it was red hot, pressed the end of it against the white-painted interior wood wall near the entrance door, and pushed until it burned all the way through. The result was a very neat black hole about the size of a marble.

The blackened area around the hole looked a little like fetching eyelashes.

One cold winter morning, arriving at the tiny school after the nearest neighbor had added fresh coal to the fire and gone, but before anyone else had arrived, it occurred to me that a similar hole three or four inches to the left of the existing hole offered an interesting possibility. Using a black crayon, I could add eyebrows to good effect.

I got the hole done, but not the eyebrows. Sixth grader Naomi arrived, saw the still-smoldering new "eye," and waited at the door to tattle to the teacher.

Confronted by high authority, my eyes-with-eyebrows project seemed less than wise, much less funny. I vaguely recall responding to Miss Woods' observation that I could have burned the school down by mumbling something about the big community tin drinking cup hanging on a nail beside the nearby water cooler. I think I suggested that it provided the necessary insurance against disaster.

She didn't buy it. I was sent home and told to come back with my mother or father, or both.

In the years since I burned that hole, I've stayed connected to schools and schooling as a student, teacher, administrator, college professor, writer of texts and professional books, contributor to academic journals, education columnist for newspapers, blogger, visitor to schools around the world, and consultant to publishers, states and foundations.

And for the last 20 years, I've done my best to burn holes in the myth that standardized tests are a means to the end of improving America's schools. I haven't the slightest doubt that if the testing tail continues to wag the education dog, it will kill the dog and with it the ability of future generations to cope with their fates.

It's not that America's schools don't have really serious problems. They certainly do. And I'm not talking just about big, inner city institutions surrounded by blight, encircled by barbed wire, entered through metal detectors, patrolled by cops, and churning out dropouts, future prison inmates, and other social problems.

There are many of those, but I'm not singling them out. As a mountain of research makes clear, what ails them is primarily long-term poverty and the myriad problems poverty spawns. That's a matter I'm not qualified to write about, but for those who think test scores actually mean something important, I'll note in passing that Finland always ranks near the top, and their child poverty rate is less than 3%, while America's rate is over 20% and climbing rapidly. Those who believe skilled teachers can level the education playing field enough to erase that difference in the quality of the material they're given to work with aren't just not in the game, they're not even in the ball park.

Yes, include those blighted urban schools as a target of my criticism, but include also America's many well-ordered schools in quiet, leafy suburbs. Include schools in top-scale ZIP codes that have been adopted by venture capitalists who see to it that every hint of a

need is instantly met. Include schools where, before opening bells, Benz, Bentley, and BMW doors swing open and kids slide out to be greeted by name by headmasters and faculties. And include schools where chauffeur-driven limousines deliver their body-guarded charges because school policy forbids noisy arrivals by helicopter. (Yes, there are such schools.)

Consider as failing every school – public, charter, private, whatever – that assumes that corporately produced, standardized tests say something important about something important. Using test scores to guide education policy makes about as much sense as using the horoscope of whoever happens to be Secretary of State to guide US foreign policy.

That standardized tests are a useful tool for guiding education reform is a myth, pure and simple – a myth constructed from ignorance and perpetuated by misinformation, or conjured from hope and reinforced by cherry-picked data.

I grew up in Appalachia where the old adage, "You can't make a silk purse out of sow's ear" was familiar speech. Standardized tests are a "sow's ear." The only things they can measure accurately are random bits of information stored in short-term memory.

But even if every kid remembered everything taught, it's hard to imagine a more wasteful use of teacher and learner time and taxpayer money than preparing for and taking standardized tests.

When the world changed little or not at all from generation to generation and nearly everyone was illiterate, unaided memory was essential. What needed to be known existed in the memories of the elders, and the young, living in that static world, either learned it from them or suffered the consequences.

That era is long gone. It's over. Finished. It began to end when writing was developed, and its demise proceeded with the invention of the printing press, cheap books, photography, moving pictures, television, the Internet, search engines, and other means of information gathering and archiving. In today's world, tests of unaided memory are about as useful as (insert another Appalachian slang expression having to do with the anatomy of boar hogs).

Standardized, subject-matter tests are worse than a waste. We're spending billions of dollars and instructional hours on a tool that measures one thought process to the neglect of all others, wreaks havoc on the minds and emotions of teachers and learners, and diverts attention from a fundamental, ignored problem.

That problem? Longshoreman and college professor Eric Hoffer (http://www.erichoffer.net/) summed it up a lifetime ago: "Because the world is dynamic, the future belongs not to the learned but to learners."

Read that sentence again. Then read it again. Even if standardized tests didn't cost billions, even if they yielded something that teachers didn't already know, even if they hadn't narrowed the curriculum down to joke level, even if they weren't the main generators of

educational drivel, even if they weren't driving the best teachers out of the profession, they should be abandoned because they measure the wrong thing.

The future belongs not to the learned but to learners. American education isn't designed to produce learners, and the proof of that contention is the standardized test.

America's system of education is designed to clone the learned. And motivated either by ignorance or greed, the wealthy and powerful, using educationally naïve celebrities as fronts, are spending obscene amounts of money to convince politicians, pundits, policymakers, and the public that this is a good and necessary thing.

Thus far, they've been wildly successful. If they're not stopped, those now sitting in our classrooms won't just witness America's descent into Third World status, they'll accelerate it.

On a somewhat lighter note, and in the spirit of the season, below is a link to a free gift – a complete, down-loadable book. It's not my new What's Worth Learning? (http://www.infoagepub.com/products/Whats-Worth-Learning) , but it's perhaps more appropriate for days made busy by holiday preparation: http://www.marionbrady.com/documents/TheRoadtoHell.pdf. Ω

Has American education peaked?

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American education has peaked. Accept it. It has serious SYSTEM problems, and the present crop of reformers is making those problems worse. We're not going to get the schools we need by doing longer and harder what we've been doing for the last 150 years.

The notion that we're on the wrong education road is a really tough sell. President Obama doesn't think so. Neither does Education Secretary Arne Duncan, Congress, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, the National Governors Association, the think tanks, the mainstream media, most of the general public. Neither, sad to say, do many educators.

Maybe selling the need for another road isn't even possible. The conventional wisdom about how to educate is limited by our imaginations, and our imaginations are limited by our past experience. "Just try harder" is in our blood. "Quit and try something different," isn't.

But let me suggest an alternative to doing what we're doing in education, not claiming it's the best one, but pushing the walls of possibilities farther out.

Begin by simplifying the task and focusing it more sharply. Over the last century and a half, public schools have taken on responsibilities only marginally related to academics---

fielding sports teams, teaching kids how to drive, sponsoring myriad clubs, staging artistic productions, developing technical and occupational skills.

Those programs meet important needs, and deserve better leadership than they often get from public school systems. Hand responsibility for them over to organizations designed to maximize their benefit, and give them the school building to share as they think appropriate.

Next, make communities the basic centers of learning. Rent or lease locations within easy walking or short-commute distance. Keep them open 24/7. Create various-sized places for dialogue, and for older learners to teach younger ones. Equip them with adequate technology. Staff them with four or five people who used to teach in the given-away school building who, together, have expertise in the basic skills and major fields of study. (Make sure they know enough about educating to wait until asked before sharing what they know.) Invite everyone from great-grandparents to pre-schoolers to come often, stay late, and do everything possible to encourage them to talk to each other. Put no one person or group in authority.

Then, give them all an assignment---to know their community as a community: particular people, together in a particular place, acting and interacting in particular ways, with particular problems, needs, fears, aspirations, dreams, and hopes, all fitting together to form more than the sum of the parts. Encourage them to be creative---to organize their thinking, and tell their community's story in words, statistics, diagrams, even artistic productions.

The assignment will develop the skills and knowledge necessary for understanding not just themselves and immediate experience, but the wider community of which theirs is a part.

Allow no outside or higher level of authority to check attendance, require that particular subjects be taught, administer tests, keep scores, attach labels, demand accountability, or otherwise interfere with the operation of the centers.

That's it.

Giving that kind of responsibility to ordinary citizens is unacceptable to most of today's reformers, many of whom are hell-bent on super-standardizing schooling and nationalizing it. Notwithstanding the fact that the most influential of them think government should keep its hands off whatever they're personally involved in, when it comes to education, they're control freaks.

(The reasons for this ideological inconsistency bear investigation.)

There was a time when I'd have been on their side, in favor of just getting on with the job, and administratively imposing on schools what I thought were good ideas. Looking back, I think it was conversations with a neighbor that undermined that tendency of mine.

The neighbor was Rufo Lopez-Fresquet, Fidel Castro's first Minister of the Treasury, whose younger son was in my high school American history class. Rufo had left Cuba in a hurry when it became clear that Castro wasn't going to listen to him.

After we got acquainted, I suggested that maybe Cuban life under the American-supported dictator Fulgencio Batista (http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/COLDbatista.htm) wasn't the best preparation for the sort of flat-out democracy he favored. Maybe, I said, there needed to be some sort of transitional government to move the people gradually toward democracy.

He couldn't have disagreed more. If you want people to learn how to act responsibly, he insisted, you have to give them responsibility. Sure, they'll screw up. And then they'll screw up again. And again. But in the long run that's necessary if they're to grow in wisdom.

He caused me to pay better attention. Now, when I see a 10- or 12-year old kid in some poor, isolated part of the world taking responsibility for rearing younger brothers and sisters because the parents have died or been killed, it tells me Rufo was right.

When I witness a teacher (a rare one who hasn't yet drunk the test-prep Kool-Aid) challenge adolescents with a dilemma, an anomaly, an incongruity, a question with no clear answer, and listen as the kids become so involved they groan when the bell rings, it tells me Rufo was right.

When it comes to education, we're not putting our money where our mouths are. We give lip-service to democracy, but devote so little thought to what it takes to maintain one that we see nothing wrong with an educational system that's hierarchically organized, centrally controlled, and unabashedly authoritarian.

Worse, that authority is merely "legitimized" by our governing bodies. It's actually shaped by the bigger-than-governments corporate interests that have confiscated American democracy and hollowed it out.

That's not a promising foundation for a system of education. It's hard to see how it could turn out kids smart enough to save themselves and America.

Forget calls for a "rigorous curriculum," for national standards for school subjects, for non-stop testing, for developing "21st Century workplace skills," for elevating in importance science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), for "enhanced, data-driven decision making," for blah, blah, blah.

Wrong road. The first order of educational business is to understand our individual and collective selves. If we'll design an education that does that, the rest will take care of itself. Ω

The Bartleby Project

Posted February 2, 2011

(Note: This version differs very slightly from the version published on "The Answer Sheet.")

"Juggernaut."

Picture a huge, ancient chariot being pulled through narrow city streets, carrying a crude idol of a god. So massive is the chariot, citizens are crushed under its wooden wheels.

The education reform effort begun in the 1980s at the urging of corporate America is a juggernaut. The god it carries is The Standardized Test.

On board the chariot, surrounding the god and enthusiastically waving the standards and accountability banner, are the President of the United States, the Secretary of Education, nearly all the state governors, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, the Gates, Broad, and Walton foundations, hedge fund managers, publishers of test and test prep materials, a few big-city mayors, and celebrities such as Michelle Rhee, Oprah Winfrey, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeb Bush.

The chariot riders, true believers, take it for granted that learning isn't a natural act, that it happens only under threat, and that high-stakes, standardized tests provide that necessary threat. Their money, name recognition, political power, public relations skills, and easy access to the mainstream media, are used to steadily increase the number of worshipers of the Standardized Test God.

But the chariot has stalled, so hard questions must be asked.

And of those questions, easily the most important one is this: Can standardized tests measure complex, "higher order" thinking skills? Can they not merely gather the contents of every learners' memory, but arrange and rearrange those memories in ways that enable them to infer, hypothesize, generalize, relate, synthesize, judge relative value, create new knowledge?

Experienced educators say "No."

But those now shaping education policy say "Yes," and have handed near-absolute power to the Standardized Test God. It's reasonable, then, to ask them to explain and defend their actions to the educators whose agreement and cooperation they must have if the juggernaut is to move on.

Congressional action looms, and time is short. Establishing a schedule for deciding who's right-educators or politicians-is appropriate and necessary.

Here's how that can be made to happen:

For four days, between July 28 -31, a march and a call to action called "Save Our Schools" will take place in Washington, D.C.

At least two weeks before the protesters arrive, the US Department of Education should post ten illustrative or model questions on its website, two each for five different complex, "higher order" thought processes. The ten questions, when answered, should produce

scores that compare and rank the test-taker's skill with that of all others answering the same question.

On the website, following each question, provision should be made for dialogue—for a conversation between experienced educators and policymakers in Washington.

To set wise policy, out of that dialog must come a clear answer. Can machine-scored standardized tests measure human thought processes precisely enough to allow standardized tests to shape America's future? Yes, or no?

The ten model questions posted by the USDOE should meet two criteria.

First, they must be 100 % machine scoreable and reliable. This is essential, for sooner or later, taxpayers will want to know why they're paying billions of dollars to corporations to score single examples of school work (work taxpayers will rarely or never see), when those same taxpayers have already paid teachers to score a far richer and more visible stream of work?

Second, each USDOE sample questions must yield a useful, meaningful score. It must say, for example, that in a practical, real-world situation—a situation familiar to the test taker-the test-taker-taker's inference, hypothesis, generalization, value judgment or other complex thought process deserves an "8" rather than a "7," a "9," or some other score.

And then, to the satisfaction of the citizenry, the reason for the assigned rank must be explained.

At a meeting I attended on August 2, 2008 in Titusville, Florida, prior to his election, President Obama recognized me, asked about my teaching experience, and accepted my question about his future administration's openness to the input of educators on matters of education policy.

To his credit, he didn't promise me that such would be the case; his answer came later when, to the great disappointment of many educators, he chose the cliché-prone Arne Duncan rather than an educator to head the Department of Education.

After the election, in a small, classroom meeting with Secretary Arne Duncan near Orlando, Florida, my raised hand went unacknowledged, but the Secretary said that, although present standardized tests were flawed and in need of major improvement, much greater use was going to be made of them.

Any trace of logic in that policy escapes me. Why are billions of dollars being spent to buy and administer tests the Secretary admits are flawed? What purpose is served by numbers and rankings that yield no reliable, useful information?

Do we now accept without question that political agendas and stockholder gains trump common sense?

I agree with the late, highly respected paleontologist, biologist and historian Stephen Jay Gould who near the end of his book *The Mismeasure of Man*, (http://www.amazon.com/Mismeasure-Man-Revised-Expanded/dp/039331425) summed up what everyone who's given more than a moment's serious thought to the matter knows: "Human uniqueness lies in the flexibility of what our brains can do. What is intelligence, if not the ability to face problems in an unprogrammed manner?"

The situation calls for action. Now. Students, strongly supported by their teachers, parents, grandparents, and all others who care about the future of education and America, should join the Bartleby Project initiated in 2008 by John Taylor Gatto.

In an Afterward to his book *Weapons of Mass Instruction*, (http://www.amazon.com/Weapons-Mass-Instruction-Schoolteachers-Compulsory/dp/0865716315) Gatto calls the young to participate in what he calls "an open conspiracy" to destroy the standardized testing industry.

If destroying the standardized testing industry sounds like an extreme action, you don't understand the problem.

Gatto's argument can be accessed at:
http://www.newsociety.com/titleimages/TI004012_OI001098_23.pdf Ω

A salvage operation for public education

Posted February 19, 2011

Many years ago an elderly widowed aunt brought into our family a replacement uncle. Dan, she said, had once been deputy state superintendent of schools. Before that, he'd been a high school principal and a county superintendent.

The little I know about Uncle Dan comes mostly from pins, plaques, and other contents of a cardboard box left with a cousin after he and my aunt died. That he did well financially, including serving on bank boards, might suggest to those familiar with southern-style politics that he at least knew his way around the hallways of the state capitol.

In the cache of memorabilia was a sort of diary written and given to Dan by a friend who signed it "JH." Recalling a situation in which JH had found himself in 1913—a high school principal at odds with his boss—he'd written:

"The board and superintendent had developed in the school what I for lack of a better term call a mechanistic tendency. The general idea was that if tests were given every day, and long examinations once a month, if grades were then marked to the third of one percent, if the principal would keep all papers and send in to the superintendent all the individual grades, somehow education of a very rare sort would result."

Ninety-eight years have passed since 1913, and the two very different views of educating of JH and his superintendent continue to frame the debate.

Today, aligned with the superintendent, are high-profile corporate managers who shape much of the conventional wisdom about educating. All share the view that educating is a simple matter of opening up heads, pouring information in, and checking gauges to see how things are going.

Lou Gerstner (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122809533452168067.html), an early, important figure on the corporate-manager side of the faceoff, says educating is just a matter of "delivering information." Bill Gates (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/teachers/bill-gates-troubling-involveme.html) bubbles with enthusiasm about making available on the Internet the lectures of the world's great authorities on various subjects.

Facing off against the managers are many of America's most experienced educators, all arguing that this level of ignorance about educating will do America in.

Sadly, there seem to be no words or concepts shared by the two groups that make meaningful communication possible. The term JH used—mechanistic—comes at least as close as other words to capturing the corporate-manager view of teaching and learning. Gerstner and Gates are mechanists. They see in the tell-them-and-test-them process a beautifully simple, easily executable design for educating. And, because that design fits with and is reinforced by pop culture myths about the ability of free-market forces to cure all social ills, it's an easy sell to the mainstream media and the public.

But "mechanistic" fails to bridge the gap in understanding between corporate managers and educators. Indeed, bridging that gap may be impossible. An apocryphal Chinese story has it that 2,000 years ago, a young teacher, attempting to defend himself to village elders angry about his departure from traditional instruction, explains: "If I tell them, they forget. If I show them, they remember. If I let them do it for themselves, they understand."

Two thousand years says the communication problem between the managers who think mere telling teaches, and educators who know from hard experience that it doesn't, isn't likely to disappear anytime soon.

But the stakes are too high not to try to find a way around the faceoff, so I've a proposal.

No one—not even the most enthusiastic fan of traditional education—argues that humans don't learn from experience. The main objection is (and has always been) that learning by doing is just too inefficient. There's only so much time in the school day, say the managers, and there's so much to "cover." Compacting it for quick delivery by lecture, text, or technology just makes the most sense.

After all, why should every kid reinvent the wheel?

Here's my proposal: Set aside an hour or so a day for out-of-seat, out-of classroom, "real world" experience. (Think of it as a cheap, easily reversed experiment.)

There are practical considerations, of course. Kids accustomed to years of rigidly imposed "seat time" can't just suddenly be turned loose to wander around. And in an hour or so they wouldn't be able to wander very far anyway.

Add to that the fact that there's no longer money for field trips, and if there were, field trips generate lots of complicated logistical, insurance, and supervision problems.

Then, add yet another fact, that enhancing the kind of self-direction that makes wandering around productive isn't something American education has ever been encouraged to do. Adult guidance will be necessary.

This means that whatever "real world" experience kids get will have to take place within the existing physical boundaries of the school.

Which, it turns out, have a surprising lot to offer. Useful math is about quantifying reality, and there's enough reality on school property to keep kids quantifying forever.

For their part, the physical sciences are all about making sense of the material universe, and school boundaries offer a big enough sample of that universe to pursue a doctoral degree in whatever physical science one chooses.

Finally, anyone who's ever gotten as far as first grade has come into firsthand contact with enough social complexity for a lifetime of study.

That covers the content of the traditional core curriculum. It's all there—tangible, instantly accessible, waiting to be measured, analyzed, and described, using skills already familiar to educators.

This isn't Mickey Mouse work. Its inherent complexity, its immediate potential for making an important social institution work better, and its relatability to the larger world which it models so thoroughly and conveniently, sees to that.

There's so much wrong with traditional schooling it's tempting to say it's beyond salvaging. Its very system of organization—based as it is on 19th Century Prussian military theory—is upside down. Those who know the most about the system—kids and teachers—have the least power to change it. Its continued use of a rigid, standardized curriculum designed to produce compliant workers for a system of industrial production that America will never see again, assures irrelevance. Its failure to put in place multi-year, manageable-sized groups of learners guided by small instructional teams, builds in instability and lack of continuity.

The list of problems with today's schools could extend for pages, but no system of education on Earth is better suited to maintaining democracy, or has more potential for developing individual and collective potential, than free, universal public education.

That makes a salvage operation essential. The first step is to reject centralized, top-down corporate control. Bill Gates may mean well, but he's not qualified to be America's education czar.

The second step is accepting that kids walking around with tape measures, meters, trowels, sketchpads and the like are going to learn more in an hour or so than kids glued to their seats for six hours as they're bombarded with secondhand information about which most could care less.

Give teachers and kids some moving-around room, some real autonomy, and in 10 years' time American education will be the envy of the world. Ω

A not-so-modest proposal

Posted April 11, 2011

I have a proposal. Like my earlier ones to the U.S. Department of Education and members of the appropriate congressional committees, it will almost certainly be ignored. But when the "Save Our Schools: March and National Call to Action" (http://www.saveourschoolsmarch.org/) brings thousands of people to Washington for three days at the end of July, the proposal may at least contribute to the dialogue.

FACT: We're told that governments at all levels—federal, state, and local—are worse than broke, and that the services they provide, including education, must be cut.

FACT: There's one multi-billion dollar cost of educating that's not scheduled to be cut—high-stakes, standardized testing. In fact, Arne Duncan, Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, says that the number of such tests is going to significantly increase.

FACT: According to an article (http://www.saveourschoolsmarch.org/) in the April 27, 2000, Dallas (TX) Observer, the present orgy of testing got a major initial push from Democratic lawyer Sandy Kress and Republican George Bush. Their shared dream was operationalized by No Child Left Behind (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/no-child-left-behind/) . It's based on the naïve assumption that educating is primarily a matter of transferring information from those who know to those who don't know.

FACT: No Child Left Behind has failed. In a December 1, 2008, op-ed (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122809533452168067.html) in the Wall Street Journal, Lou Gerstner, retired CEO of IBM, RJR Nabisco, and The Carlyle Group, and early enthusiastic supporter of NCLB, said, "We must start with the recognition that, despite decade after decade of reform efforts, our public K-12 schools have not improved."

FACT: No Child Left Behind hasn't just failed; it has been extremely destructive. Constant hammering of the view that teachers can't be trusted to evaluate student performance hasn't just cost taxpayers money; it has seriously undermined confidence in public schooling and made the teaching profession even less appealing than it has traditionally been.

QUESTION: Why, given these facts, is Race to the Top ("No Child Left Behind on steroids") (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/race-to-the-top/), being supported by Washington politicians and policymakers?

PROPOSAL: Given present unwillingness to fully fund education, all 50 states should immediately cancel their contracts with testing companies. What teachers did for at least a century and a half before corporate interests and politicians took over education policy they can do again, at least for the duration of the present economic emergency.

NOTE: Test manufacturers (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/why-faith-in-standardized-testing-industry-is-misplaced/2011/04/10/AFXIkSHD_blog.html) will, of course, protest loudly. But follow the money. They're already raking in billions from testing math and reading skills. If business leaders and politicians get their way and every kid in America is tested in every subject, the flow will turn into a flood. .

There are problems with machine-scored standardized tests that are more serious than their cost. Right now, however, money issues are front and center. Policymakers in state capitols and Washington are, right now, choosing between tests and teachers, so there's no time for debate.

If they opt for tests, we're talking not about a few billion to test manufacturers, but really serious money. Check out this excerpt from a March 31, 2011 Harvard Business Review blog:

"The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. Previously, these markets operated on a state-by-state basis, and often on a district-by-district basis. But the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets . . ."
(http://blogs.hbr.org/innovations-in-education/2011/03/the-innovation)

No more of those piddling, controversial state-level high-stakes tests like the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/standardized-tests/floridas-fcat-scandal----the-n.html), the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP), or the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). No more tedious fooling around trying to come up with fifty different tests for fifty different states. If kids are to be standardized, why not go whole hog and replace fifty different assembly lines with just one?

As is clear from the Harvard Business Review blog, that's what Joanne Weiss (http://www2.ed.gov/news/staff/bios/jweiss.html) has in mind. Ms. Weiss isn't just another blogger. She's U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan's chief of staff. Ω

Unanswered questions about standardized tests

Posted April 26, 2011.

Standardized tests (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/resistance-to-test-based-school-reform-is-growing/2011/04/18/AFkb0n0D_blog.html) are enhancing and destroying reputations, opening and closing doors of opportunity, raising and lowering property values, starting and ending professional careers, determining the life chances of the young, and shaping the intellectual resources upon which America's future largely hinges.

You might think that with so much riding on the tests, every civic-minded person in the country would be demanding transparency, proof of validity, assurance that every item on every test had been examined from every possible perspective.

If you think that, you think wrong. The corporately engineered education "reform" campaign has been so slick that standardized testing is now taken for granted. The issue isn't to test or not to test, but how to squeeze them all in.

America has bought an education pig in a poke peddled by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and its allies, and packaged by Congress. The animal is a freak, shaped by naiveté, political ideology, unexamined assumptions, ignorance of history, and myths (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/the-myths-of-standardized-testing/2011/04/14/AFNxTggD_blog.html).

This vast experiment with kids' minds and America's future was put in place without broad national debate, without in-depth research, without trial pilot programs, and without answering questions posed again and again by those who know something about teaching—know about it because, unlike those making policy, they've actually taught.

Questions, it goes without saying, are important. All human-made disasters have at least one thing in common—those responsible acted without first asking good questions.

Here are some of the questions educators ask that have yet to be answered. Decide for yourself if ignoring them doesn't guarantee educational and cultural disaster:

1. Given the near-instant accessibility of information made possible by the Internet, the traditional emphasis on learners storing information in their heads no longer makes much sense. The young need to learn to process and apply information, tasks that require them to infer, hypothesize, synthesize, relate, generalize, value, and so on.

Questions: Have standardized tests made the switch from measuring how much information test-takers can remember, to measuring their ability to process and apply information? If so, are the computers that process the tests able to tell the difference

between, say, good hypotheses, generalizations, and value judgments, and fair or poor ones?

2. As small children and illiterates prove, and everyone's daily experience demonstrates, there are myriad ways of learning that don't involve reading words or playing with numbers. Indeed, most of what most people know hasn't been learned that way.

Questions: Are test items that require mere manipulation of symbols robbing America of broad and deep pools of talent and experience more complex than paper-and-pencil tests can measure? Are those who learn in ways that aren't tested being stamped "Not Very Smart" and shoved aside or out?

3. In times of rapid and accelerating social change such as the present era, the ability to abandon attachment to the status quo and adapt to complicated, unexpected realities is essential to survival. Adaptation requires imagination, creativity, originality, ingenuity, vision.

Questions: Can standardized tests measure and attach useful numbers to gradations of these qualities? If they can, why are they not already doing so?

4. It's assumed that standardized tests (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/myths) measure test-taker knowledge. What they actually measure is something else—test-taker ability to guess what the writer of a particular test item was thinking.

Standardized tests are created by and for the dominant culture. They will, then, reflect that culture. Even the sequence in which words appear in a sentence can make a difference in the ability of a test-taker reared in a subculture to guess what the dominant-culture writer of the test item was thinking. To be fair and useful, writer and reader must be culturally aligned.

Questions: How likely is it that in a society as culturally diverse as is ours, anything even close to an acceptable level of writer-reader alignment can be achieved? Is lack of alignment a major reason for the so-called "achievement gap," or is it merely illustrating what Albert Einstein was talking about when he said that if we judged a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it would spend its whole life believing it was stupid?

Those barely begin a list of unanswered questions about standardized test items. Who decides what's important enough to test? Using what criteria? How wise is it to hand schools over to corporations or other organizations with their own agendas? Since "hands-on" learning doesn't lend itself to standardized testing, are the tests shoving education even farther away from how humans learn best? Is the drive to standardize kids stifling the human diversity essential to societal functioning?

Does limiting teacher autonomy by simplistic "remote" testing make the profession unappealing to those with the most to offer the young? Is ever-greater centralization of decision-making at odds with democratic values? Are standardized tests diverting attention

from a whole range of valuable skills, such as the ability to play a musical instrument, draw a picture, tell a story, swim a stream, repair an air conditioner, nurture a plant, care for others? Where's the research proving there's a relationship between standardized test scores and making a living and a life?

These and similar questions about standardized testing are central to educating. For at least two decades, the questions have been directed to the U.S. Department of Education, Congress, a succession of Administrations, liberal and conservative think tanks, and officials in several states. I know this for a fact because I've asked the questions myself, beginning pre-Internet, when doing so required hard copy letters and U.S. postage.

The questions remain not just unanswered, but unacknowledged.

Choose your explanation for the refusal of those in authority to answer the questions. I've chosen mine: Policymaker ignorance and arrogance. It may also be that certain corporate types think standardized tests help shape an amiable, compliant workforce.

Do educators need to be held accountable? Absolutely. But using standardized tests for that purpose parallels the Vietnam-era logic of destroying a village in order to save it. Ω

Wrong question, wrong answer

Posted May 23, 2011

A hundred and fifty years ago, the rich and the royal came from as far away as Europe and South America to Carthage, North Carolina.

Then, as now, Carthage was a small town in an out-of-the-way area in the south central part of the state.

But it had something going for it.

That "something" was the Tyson & Jones Company, one of the best-known enterprises in America. The company had won "the race to the top" in its field, and visitors were traveling thousands of miles to buy what they were selling.

Exceedingly high production standards led to the company's fame, business success, and a gold medal in the 1895 Cotton States Exhibition in Atlanta. Those standards grew out of a question: "How can we build the best buggies in the world?"

Wrong question. The Tyson & Jones Company was in the people-moving business. Karl Benz, Gottlieb Daimler, the Duryea brothers, and Henry Ford, were in the same business, but they were asking a different question: "Is there a better way to move people than by horse-drawn buggy?"

Everybody knows how that ended.

Today's education policymakers — corporate CEOs, hedge fund managers, members of Congress, state governors and legislators, big-city mayors, (non-educators all) — are asking, "How can math, science, and other school subjects be taught better?"

And then, certain they know more about educating than educators, they turn up the volume on the media megaphones they've monopolized and answer their own question: "Standards! Rigorous standards!"

Wrong question, so wrong answer.

Standards, certainly. But not standards for school subjects, not standards that fall into the Tyson & Jones trap. Standards shouldn't say what to teach, they should say what teaching should produce — the qualities of mind, emotion, and spirit most likely to see the young through whatever lies ahead for them.

For example, "curious" probably belongs on the list of such qualities. It's no exaggeration to say that curiosity creates humanness, underlies all sciences and arts, drives civilization.

Open-minded, empathic, imaginative, tenacious, and honest are also qualities that probably belong on a list of standards —standards that challenge learners to become the best they can be, and push teachers to try to think of ever-better ways to help them meet that challenge.

Don't dismiss this as hopelessly idealistic. Traditional schooling somehow manages to drain curiosity out of most kids by about the fourth grade. Surely, if we know how to destroy it, we can, if we try, figure out how to nurture it.

The same is true for open-mindedness, empathy, imagination, tenacity, honesty, and other qualities the value of which are obvious.

I'm dead serious. If the current "standards and accountability" campaign is successful, we'll be stuck forever, trying merely to do better, via rigor, what we've always done.

Falling into the Tyson & Jones trap happens so routinely in human affairs that social science has a word for it: institutionalization. Armies prepare to fight the last war, not the next. Religions lose themselves in rituals the origins of which no one remembers. Teaching math and science becomes more important than solving the problems that gave rise to math and science.

Those so-called "Common Core Standards" (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/national-standards) that the Business Roundtable and its allies are foisting on public education, and the standardized tests they spawn, are classic examples of institutionalization. Standardization is the parent of stagnation, and standing still in the face of change will do us in. If parents and grandparents really understood what the current reform effort is doing to their kids and grandkids, it'd be pitchforks and torches time. They'd converge on state capitols and Washington in such force that contracts with test manufacturers would be cancelled, with penalties gladly paid.

The amateurs now running the education show will ignore the call to attach standards to human qualities rather than to school subjects. But if public pressure made that impossible, they'd mount a ferocious campaign to protect the status quo. Billions of dollars have been invested in promoting subject-matter standards and standardized testing. Billions more are being made as politicians stack test requirement on top of test requirement. That big

pipeline to the public purse isn't going to be shut down if there's any way that corporate money can bribe politicians to keep it open.

The sales pitch can be predicted. When you're being hammered with the word "accountability," when you read that "decision-making must be data-driven," when you hear blather about the necessity for "measurability" in the form of test scores, know that you're being snookered. Quality can't be quantified. Ω

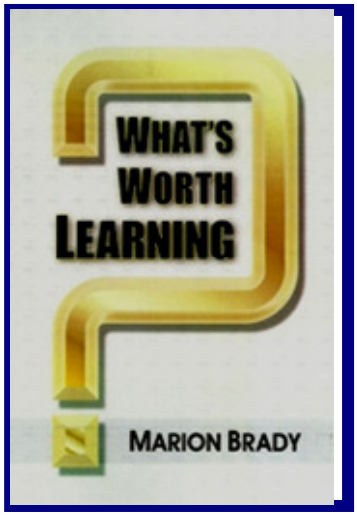
School "reform" ignores glaring problem: Outdated curriculum

Posted July 3, 2011
by: Marion Brady, Information Age Publishing | Book Excerpt

From "What's Worth Learning?"
Information Age Publishing,
Charlotte, North Carolina, 2011

American education isn't up to the challenge.

The evidence is inescapable. Millions of kids walk away from school long before they're scheduled to graduate. Millions more stay but disengage. Half of those entering the teaching profession soon abandon it. Administrators play musical chairs. Barbed wire surrounds many schools, and police patrol hallways. School bond levies usually fail. Superficial fads - old ideas resurrected with new names - come and go with depressing regularity. Think tanks crank out millions of words of ignored advice, and foundations spend billions to promote seemingly sound ideas that make little or no difference. About half a trillion dollars a year are invested in education, but most adults remember little and make practical use of even less of what they once learned in thousands of hours of instruction.



Congress and state legislatures bring market forces to bear, certain that the rewards and penalties of competition will work the wonders in education they sometimes work in business, and nothing of consequence happens. Charter schools are formed to promote innovations, but if the merit of those innovations is judged by scores on corporately produced standardized tests, the innovations are inconsequential. Municipal governments take over failing schools or hand them off to corporations, producing results so poor that statistical games must usually be played to justify contract renewals. Stringent standards are put in place, and tests keyed to them are so high-stakes that failure may shut down whole schools, end teaching careers, and permanently affect the life chances of the young. But performance stays flat.

Cut through the hype and the ideology-driven political rhetoric and it's clear that, decade after decade, institutional performance nationwide changes little. Even schools considered models and pointed to with pride - upscale, beautiful, well-staffed, shipping high percentages of their graduates off to the Ivy League - send most students on their ways with talents and abilities unidentified or undeveloped. Few graduate with their natural love of learning enhanced or even intact.

Perhaps most damning of all is the fact that the human need to understand, to know, to make sense of the world, is one of the most powerful of all human drives, but the institutions we've created to meet that deep human need would close their doors if it weren't for mandatory attendance laws, social expectations, and institutional inertia.

The static state of America's schools stems in large part from a failure to understand a process sometimes called "institutionalization" and its implication for what's taught. In educating, the curriculum is where the rubber meets the road. If it's poor, the education will be poor - no matter state or national standards, no matter the level of rigor, no matter the toughness of tests, teacher skill, school size, market forces imposed, length of school day or year, parental support, design or condition of buildings, generosity of budget, sophistication of technology, administrator wisdom, or enthusiasm of students. A school can be no better than its curriculum allows it to be, and the process of institutionalization, neither understood nor addressed, assures that year after year the traditional math-science-social studies-language arts curriculum will become more dysfunctional.

The process of institutionalization occurs in stages, beautifully explored and elaborated by the late Carroll Quigley in his 1961 book, *The Evolution of Civilizations* (Macmillan).

Stage One: A society has challenges - protecting itself from enemies, caring for the sick, obtaining food, maintaining public order. To address the challenges, organizations are formed - armies, hospitals, police forces, schools, and so on - and effective problem-solving policies and procedures are adopted.

Stage Two: Social change gradually alters the nature of the problems the organizations were created to solve - a different kind of enemy threatens, a plague of unknown cause strikes, once-productive soil wears out. As the problems change, the policies and procedures that worked well in Stage One gradually become less appropriate and efficient.

Stage Three: Eventually, the inadequacy of the original problem-solving approaches becomes too obvious to ignore. Fingers of blame are then pointed at those in the problem-solving organization. More rigorous standards are imposed. Supervisory staffs are enlarged. Policy and procedures manuals grow fatter. Penalties for poor performance grow harsher.

Stage Four: Because the basic problem - failure to monitor change and adapt to it - remains unaddressed, the situation becomes more dire. Reacting, authorities tighten procedural screws, then tighten them again. A kind of Catch-22 dynamic takes over, a variation of, "The beatings will continue until morale improves."

Stage Five: The organization disintegrates or becomes irrelevant. The once-effective problem-solving policies and procedures either disappear or become meaningless rituals.

Education in America illustrates the first four stages of the five-stage pattern. In the colonial era, the basic educational challenge and the curriculum aligned beautifully. The task was to maintain the way of life of a society made up mostly of farmers and craftspeople, a challenge met primarily by modeling. The young grew up immersed in the real world, watching and working with family and neighbors, learning when to plant and harvest, what to do for a sick horse, how to milk a cow, make clothes, build structures. Apprenticeships passed along more specialized knowledge and skills.

After the Civil War, the factory system, urbanization, concentrated wealth, and floods of immigrants changed the task of educating. Building and maintaining railroads, banks, factories, and other giant enterprises called for a few thinkers and many doers. To meet the new challenge, a system of mass education was put in place. It didn't serve the small leadership class very well, but the "sit down, shut up, listen to the teacher, remember the answers, stand up and line up when the bell rings" regimen was appropriate for the millions headed for repetitive manual labor.

Again, the educational problem and the solution aligned well enough to keep the process of institutionalization in check. In the 1890s, very few students attended college, but those who did presented a problem. They came from secondary schools where, in total, about 40 different subjects were taught, and college admissions officers didn't know how to compare their academic records. The situation, prominent educators felt, called for standardizing high school instructional programs, and a ten-man committee of school administrators was appointed by the National Education Association to undertake the task.

They submitted their report in 1892, and the following year their recommendations began to be adopted across America, locking in the pattern in near-universal use today.

Big mistake. Change is in the nature of things, and in order to survive, societies must adapt. As the 20th century unfolded, America changed. Work became more specialized and complex; international industrial competition increased; corporations grew larger, more impersonal, and less attached to nation states. Jobs requiring physical labor steadily declined in number, consumerism took off, an ever-rising standard of living came to be considered a right, and the Cold War generated a vague, pervasive sense of uneasiness.

America changed, but education in general, and the curriculum in particular, didn't. It needed to explain a radically different world and help the young develop the intellectual equipment to make sense of it, and it failed to do so.

Enter Stage Three, then Four, where we now are. Boredom, passive resistance, truancy, classroom disorder, dropouts, teacher turnover, an explosion of home schooling, an electorate ill-equipped to maintain a democracy, and all the other problems with public education cited in the professional literature and in mainstream media are obvious

indicators of institutional failure, of old problem-solving procedures failing to adequately address new realities.

So screws are tightened. Trust in teacher competence and professionalism disappears - their experience, judgment, and firsthand knowledge replaced by ham-handed, top-down, bureaucratic attempts to monitor and control. "Rigor" is in vogue, with a vengeance. Politicians get campaign mileage from slogans - "Standards!" "Accountability!" "No excuses!" School days and years are lengthened, social promotion outlawed, recess and nap times eliminated, Advanced Placement courses installed, then moved to lower grade levels. Educational administrators thought to be tolerant of "the soft bigotry of low expectations," are replaced by mayors, corporate CEOs, lawyers, and retired military officers. Pay-for-performance schemes are put in place. The message: Screws will continue to be tightened until test scores improve.

The fingers of blame point in the wrong direction. American education isn't suffering from a "people problem" but from a system problem - the "core curriculum" put in place in 1893 and still in near-universal use. America's schools and colleges, preoccupied with covering the material in school subjects and courses, have lost sight of the bottom-line reason for educating: helping learners make more sense of experience. Ω

Here ("Educational administrators thought to be tolerant of 'the soft bigotry of low expectations,' ... "), Brady refers to George W. Bush's 2004 comments defending the No Child Left Behind Act. – AB

(A similar introduction excerpt was published by **Alternet** *on January 10, 2013.)*

How important is class size after all?

Posted July 12, 2011.

At a dinner honoring Mark Hopkins, president of Williams College from 1836 to 1872, President James A. Garfield said, “The ideal college is Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other.”

One teacher: One student.

Three or four years ago, one of my granddaughters was enrolled in a biology course at a state university. Her class met in an auditorium.

One teacher: One thousand, four hundred and fifty students.

Class size (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/class-size/7-class-size-myths) is one of a long list of education-related issues about which arguments rage. Generally speaking, educators want small classes because they allow more individual attention. Those averse to taxes want large classes because they’re cheaper. Many think class size

makes no important difference. Bill Gates (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/anthony-cody/why-bill-gates-is-wrong-on-cla.html) speaks approvingly of one master teacher, alone in a television studio, lecturing millions of kids.

What you think is the best teacher-learner ratio depends primarily on your values and your theory of learning. I'm not qualified to delve into what prompts people to value the life of the mind and money differently, but I do know a little about theories of learning.

The theory that drives nearly all of American education — indeed, the theory that shapes most schooling around the world — is simple: Those who know tell those who don't know. The tell-ees then try to remember what the tellers have told them.

This is the theory that underlies lectures, textbooks, chalkboards, whiteboards, Cliff Notes, quizzes, tests, grades, classrooms, classroom furniture arrangement, school building design, most "distance learning," and thousands of bureaucratic policies and procedures.

At the other end of the theoretical spectrum from the "tell 'em and test 'em" theory lies "unschooling" http://www.unschooling.com/." It dumps the whole idea of class size and everything that goes with it. Anne Sullivan, (http://www.afb.org/annesullivan/) best known as Helen Keller's teacher, was an advocate of unschooling.

She wrote, *"…if a child is left to himself, he will think more and better, if less showily. Let him go and come freely, let him touch real things and combine his impressions for himself, instead of sitting indoors at a little round table, while a sweet-voiced teacher suggests that he build a stone wall with his wooden blocks…*"

I come down somewhere between those two theories, but considerably closer to the Anne Sullivan end. I land there because too much talking and too little doing kills learning. Teaching, real teaching, makes a difference in what happens in kids' heads. That requires both knowing what's going on in those heads to find a foundation upon which to build, and then designing an actual mind-changing experience.

Rarely is bending kids' ears a mind-changing experience.

Engineering learning experiences is challenging, complicated by the fact that no two minds in a class are exactly alike. But class size is only one of many complex variables involved in educating. It gets talked about because it's easy to quantify and understand, but a whole range of other matters are of equal or greater importance.

For example, there's the matter of the best place to educate. In a design competition, the typical school classroom would surely win the "sterile" prize. Hundreds of thousands of them across America differ only in minor detail. They're isolated from the real world. They run on schedules appropriate for medium security prisons. Kids associate them with passivity and authority. It's a rare classroom that has more to offer an inquiring mind than does a vacant lot, a job site, a mall, a street corner, the city dump, or even a school's mechanical equipment room, janitor closet, and cafeteria.

There's the matter of staffing. For just about forever, the rule has been one teacher and one class. My vote for instructional leadership goes to three- or four-person teams assigned blocks of students for at least two or three years. For many of the young in today's world, that's as close to stability and a sense of family and community as they're likely to get.

There's the matter of time. Sitting in a classroom for hours a day, years on end, is sufficiently at odds with human nature to be classed as cruel and unusual punishment. Most of what we know comes from the discovery of relationships between aspects of reality we once didn't think were related. That discovery process happens most frequently in the real world, not in schools that treat subjects as if they had little or nothing to do with each other, learner eyes and ears tuned to pale shadows of reality called "textbooks" and "teacher talk."

There's the matter of what's taught — the curriculum. The traditional math, science, social studies, and language arts regimen is a bloated, random, unorganized, disconnected, intellectually unmanageable mess. It needs a radical slimming down, a clear, concrete purpose, a far simpler system for organizing knowledge, and a focus on the present, the future, and the past as prologue.

There's the matter of measuring performance. Multiple choice, machine-scored tests are an expensive joke being successfully sold to the naïve, the trusting, and the statistically challenged as a science. The tests relate to educating as memorizing a flight manual relates to flying, as marching in a parade relates to an army's fighting ability, as exchanging marriage vows relates to a successful marriage.

There are hundreds of ways to mix and vary class size, learning environments, staffing, schedules, curricula, and other factors affecting the quality of education, but forget all those potential options. Only if parents, grandparents, and caring citizens revolt will the mayors, CEOs, lawyers, venture capitalists, rich philanthropists, and politicians now pulling the education "deform" strings and levers let go of the "just work harder" mantra.

Questions: What best explains the last quarter century of attacks on public schooling — the convening of education reform conferences with no educators invited, the constant denigrating of teachers, the destruction of due process protections, the rejection of poverty (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/missing-the-point-on-poverty-and-reform--again/2011/05/11/AFvTOU7G_blog.html) as a major factor in school performance? What best explains the refusal to respect research, legislation cleverly designed to hang the "Failing" label on more schools every year, orchestrated campaigns pushing vouchers, tuition tax credits, alternative licensing for teachers, counterproductive merit pay schemes, and weakened local control?

These aren't efforts to improve public schools; they're sneaky approaches to privatizing them. But so artful has been the campaign, millions of people opposed to privatization have acted, and continue to act, in ways that promote it.

Should class sizes be reasonably small? Of course. But that's only one small cog in the gears driving American education. The powerful interests intent on destroying public schooling don't mind talking about that particular cog, for it diverts attention from what they're doing—systematically dismantling the rest of the machine and selling the parts to corporate interests. Ω

How to do the right thing in a system that is wrong?

Posted July 22, 2011

A summer evening. 1990. Perfect weather. My wife and I are with Hungarian friends, eating at a sidewalk café on a tree-lined street in Budapest.

They're troubled. He's a college professor, teaching math at two universities in the city. She's a pediatrician. But life is hard. Professionals don't necessarily fare well in Communist countries. His two paychecks don't equal one good one, her salary is the same as that of a street cleaner, and they have three young daughters, one of whom is disabled.

But they're not complaining about being poor. What they want to talk about is an ethical dilemma. The deep pockmarks stitched diagonally up the wall of a three-story building across the street from where we're sitting — the signature of heavy machine gun fire during the failed 1956 revolt against Soviet occupation—relate to their problem.

The dilemma: They can't get by without making use of the black market. Do they teach their daughters to be honest and maybe end up on the street, or do they condone dishonesty in order for the girls to have some semblance of a life?

Deciding what's right in a system that's wrong can be difficult.

The current thrust of education "reform" in the United States and much of the rest of the world presents educators with this dilemma.

The reform is wrong in so many ways it's difficult to focus narrowly enough to mount a campaign in opposition. Federal legislation supporting the reform says, "Do as Congress says or you're in big trouble. You'll be labeled a failure, your school may be closed, and you may find yourself fired."

Here's Albert Einstein, drawing on personal experience to point out one of the many problems with test obsession: "One had to cram all this stuff into one's mind for the examinations, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect on me that, after I had passed the final examination, I found the consideration of any scientific problem distasteful to me for an entire year."
(http://rescomp.stanford.edu/~cheshire/EinsteinQuotes.html)

And here's a 12-year-old California blogger (http://www.k12newsnetwork.com/2011/07/zombiex-kelly-gallagher-says-stop-readicide-now-part-1-of-an-interview/): "Since the creation of the 'No Child Left Behind Act' in 2002, the education system has been producing young, mindless zombies."

That's only one of many problems with the test-centered reforms initiated by the Business Roundtable and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and translated into policy by Congress. Professional organizations and individual teachers have long lists of those problems, but up against the media-enhanced power of corporate interests and federal officials, their concerns haven't broken through public ignorance and apathy.

The length of the lists may be counterproductive. By calling attention to many problems, no one of them gets enough attention for the general public to decide whether or not it rises to the level of unacceptability.

I propose narrowing the focus. Here's the problem I think deserves billboard-level attention: Kids can't be taught to think better using tests that can't measure how well they think.

The logic should be obvious. What gets tested gets taught. Complex thinking skills — skills essential to survival—can't be tested, so they don't get taught. That failure doesn't simply rise to the level of a problem. It's unethical.

We told our Hungarian friends that if we were in their position, we'd probably do what we had to do to survive, while teaching our kids why "the system" was so corrupt that it made cheating necessary.

But this is now, this is America, and the parallel problem is an education reform approach that's corrupting generations of minds.

What's to be done? Working teachers living paycheck to paycheck are in a poor position to resist. Others, safer from retaliation, organize citizen groups, sign petitions, make protest speeches, write books, articles, op-eds, and letters to editors and to the president, the secretary of education, and members of Congress.

But nothing happens. If those inside the Beltway are to hear the message that the present reforms are simplistic and reactionary, that they've all been tried before, that they're at odds with research and practical experience, that excellent programs have been pushed aside to accommodate endless reading and math drills, then the message will have to come from parents who love their kids enough to refuse to allow them to be short-changed by mind-limiting standardized tests.

Those parents will need support. They should get it from grandparents, neighbors, friends, school boards, civic and religious organizations, independent-minded liberal and conservative politicians — all who care about kids and our collective future.

Do the right thing, America. Protest. Stand up and stand against your state's annual orgy of standardized testing. Ω

Warring learning theories: Choose yours

Posted August 29, 2011.

The rich philanthropists, hedge fund managers, state governors, big-city mayors, and syndicated columnists now shaping national education policy have reached a firm conclusion. The Number One factor in student performance is teacher performance.

Poverty, broken homes, lead and mercury poisoning, bad teeth, poor eyesight, language difficulties, hunger, low self-esteem, run-down schools, frequent moving, cultural differences, class size—well, yes, those are problems—BUT A TEACHER WHO IS REALLY ON THE BALL CAN LIFT THOSE SCORES!

So fire the worst, and put the rest on notice. Tell them to either get with it or get out. Bring out the market force carrots and sticks—merit pay, school grades, public humiliation, endless checklists, non-stop testing—and goodbye if they don't work. Competition made America great, so pit kid against kid, teacher against teacher, school against school, state against state, nation against nation!

Keep that great teacher in mind as you read this post I got a few days ago from Dr. William Webb, Director of The Center for Educational Options. Bill and his staff operate an alternative school in rural Henry County, Kentucky. bill.webb@henry.kyschools.us

"…the students decided to acquaint themselves in a more mindful way with a small commons area located between our building and the high school. Working in teams of 4, the students were first asked simply to describe the area linguistically. They were mildly surprised to realize that a simple verbal description was not simple at all. The boundary of the area was established beforehand, and yet descriptions varied considerably from group to group. Landmarks that seemed important to one group were virtually ignored by another. Estimates of distance were wildly inaccurate. Words chosen to describe some aspect of the environment were imprecise and vague ("There's a small hill a little bit behind our trailer that's pretty steep."). Listening to each group's verbal descriptions, no one needed a curriculum or assessment expert to define the "lesson targets." The important questions were obvious. How do we account for the differences in descriptions? How do we reconcile these differences to come to a shared "perception" of our environment? Why is it important to be precise in describing our surroundings? How do differing perceptions of our immediate surroundings influence the way we interact with each other? A host of other questions were asked and answered in the follow-up discussion to this "simple" exercise…

Moreover, student involvement during this discussion was profoundly different from the typical high school classroom interactions. Freed from the cognitive task of memorizing facts, our students argued and conceded and elaborated and prioritized and paraphrased and deduced and just about every other verb that the Bloom taxonomists say are important

illustrators of learning. And they were doing it in the context of an authentic task with real-life implications.

Once the students had settled on a verbal description of the commons area, they were asked to draw a diagram of the area to scale. Not one student had any experience with that exercise. Most were math phobic, having been spectacularly unsuccessful in the math courses taught in the traditional classroom. But having spent the past few days thinking about their environment in a more mindful way, they were motivated to tackle this assignment. Armed with 50' tape measures, they had little trouble measuring the lines that defined the area's boundary. But connecting those lines in a scaled representation of the area presented some challenges. One challenge was the way one adjacent building jutted into the space the students were detailing. In order for the scaled drawing to come out right, the angle that the building "interrupted" the space had to be accurately defined—and it wasn't an obvious right angle. With no way to use a protractor, the students were stymied. Attempts to use their limited knowledge of geometry to find a mathematical solution were futile. Solutions on the Internet were too technical in their language to be helpful. And then, in a flash of insight, one student (whose math skills had been assessed by standardized testing measures as being in the lowest "novice" range) ran into the classroom and returned with a block of modeling clay which he proceeded to shape around the building's corner. Once he had "modeled" the angle in this way, it was a simple matter of transferring the angle to a piece of paper which could now be measured with the protractor. Voila!! The satisfaction this student felt at finding that solution and the affirmation he received from his classmates was a brand new experience. He felt smart. He was smart…

One other example:

As previously mentioned, the students were asked to draw a scaled diagram of the commons area they had chosen to investigate. This, of course, was a ratio and proportions exercise most likely introduced to students in elementary school. But our math-challenged students approached this assignment as if they had been asked to prove the Pythagorean Theorem. A freshman girl (let's call her Kayla) with a neurotic aversion to all things mathematic, watched quietly while the other three (somewhat mathematically challenged) members of her group struggled to work through the steps for converting their measurements to the scaled drawing. After looking at their measurements and the size of the graph paper they were required to use, they decided that 8 feet of measured distance should be 1 inch on the drawing. There were dozens of measurements—2'9'', 47'3'', 9'4'', etc. The teachers were no help. The students were on their own to figure this out. Normally, Kayla tuned out when presented with an assignment from a math book, engaging in all manner of avoidance (and class distracting) behaviors. But this was different…a problem, for sure, but not just a math problem. So, Kayla listened differently and she watched as different strategies were tried, and then—she got it! ***"We gotta make everything inches, and then we have to divide by 96!''*** *She showed her group mates. It was a special moment and nearly impossible to describe. Normally a bit histrionic in her actions, Kayla seemed more centered, more authentic, in her excitement and enthusiasm at discovering this hidden skill. She was clearly enjoying feelings of competence that she rarely experienced in the school setting, let alone while doing math. She liked how it felt.*

She insisted on doing all the conversions herself, working without a break through part of her lunch period to finish…"

If that's not a dazzling description of real learning taking place, I've never read one.

Several years ago, my brother and I wrote an instructional program titled *Connections: Investigating Reality*. It's a how-to manual for middle and high school kids and teachers that uses firsthand, "right here, right now," real-world experience to teach useful, complex ideas, ideas that deal with, but also go beyond, the usual school subjects.

We put *Connections* on the Internet, allowed it to be downloaded free of charge (no strings attached), and invited users to help us improve it.
http://www.marionbrady.com/Connections-InvestigatingReality-ACourseofStudy.asp

Dr. Webb was the first person to take us up on our offer. I asked him to comment about *Connections*, hoping his account would help explain the radical difference a theory of learning can make. I've quoted most of his response. The whole of it is at
http://www.marionbrady.com/documents/DrWilliamWebb-Testimonial.pdf

In his account, where are the teachers? "The students decided…" "Once the students had settled on…" "The teachers were no help." "The students were on their own…"

The learning theory that has kids worldwide sitting for hours a day "covering the material" says that what's taught should be broken apart into easy-to-remember fragments. The fragments should then be sorted by subject, then sorted again, and again, and again, down to a level of specificity that allows each fragment to be an item on a multiple choice test.

This is the learning theory that explains the "standards and accountability" fad. It's the theory that explains why nearly every state has now adopted the Common Core State Standards. It's the theory that explains why learner memory looms so large in testing, to the neglect of insight, imagination, and ingenuity. It's the theory that explains why billions of taxpayer dollars are being spent on standardized tests.

Here's a very different learning theory: The brain LIKES what it finds when the infant it inhabits is born. It LIKES complexity, likes the challenge of exploring raw experience in search of meaningful patterns, regularities, and relationships. In short, the brain likes the process of sense-making.

The first theory can't explain why little kids learn so much in the first months and years of life, can't explain Kayla's sudden interest in learning, can't explain the other student behavior Bill describes.

The second theory says it's natural.

The second theory is why people who actually know something about educating believe in old-fashioned free play and old fashioned kindergarten. It's why they believe in cutting teachers enough slack to let them do what needs doing, and why they cringe or roll their eyes when the new "reformers" preach about the need for "rigor" and for "raising the bar." It's why they opposed No Child Left Behind, now oppose Race to the Top, and oppose just about everything else related to education that the Business Roundtable and the U.S.

Chamber of Commerce have been selling Congress and state legislators for the past twenty years.

The two theories aren't compatible. There's a choice to be made. If H.G. Wells was right, and human history is a race between education and catastrophe, that choice could be the most important one this generation can make. Ω

Improving schools with 'The Project'

Posted September 9, 2011.

A few days ago I got an email from Phil Cullen. Before he retired, Phil was director of Primary Education for the state of Queensland, Australia. He now lives in New South Wales.

Responding to something I'd posted on my website, http://www.marionbrady.com/, he wrote:

"I was visiting an Outback, one-teacher school of 21 pupils in Windorah. At the morning tea break, they were climbing and swinging on the windmill tower, a simple construction of iron…four long legs, some cross beams and triangles for strength. When they returned to the room, I asked them to draw the tower. Not one child did. They played all over it every day, but no one had seen it…"

They'd seen it, of course, but the too-familiar tends to slip below ordinary levels of awareness. After awhile we stop seeing pictures on walls, patterns in carpets, views from windows, even family members and friends.

What's true of our eyes is true of our ears. We stop hearing the ticking of a clock, the hum of a fluorescent light, the wind and road noise when we're driving.

And it's true of our noses and mouths. Those who live downwind from a dump can't smell the odors, and after a few days of drinking chemically treated water the taste disappears.

Interesting. "Experience is the best teacher," we say, and it's true. We learn to pound nails by pounding nails while thinking about pounding nails, learn to drive a car by driving a car while thinking about driving, learn to think about experience by experiencing and thinking about what we're experiencing.

Everything we know about what's happening to us comes to us through our senses, but as soon as the senses do their job, they turn themselves off. Why isn't this obstacle to learning — our blindness to the too- familiar — a matter of major interest to educators? As far as I can determine, the problem illustrated by Phil's little unmet assignment isn't even talked about, much less addressed.

I was reminded of this a day or two ago as I read the transcript of a speech (http://usny.nysed.gov/rttt/resources/bringing-the-common-core-to-life.html) by David Coleman, an author of and cheerleader for the Common Core State Standards (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/national-standards) being promoted by "reformers." It was loaded with advice to teachers, but it wasn't advice about how to help kids make more sense of experience. It was about helping them make more sense of "text" — words that grew out of somebody else's experience.

Students, he said, have to be made to pay closer attention to text. They need to read "complex text," be exposed to "academic text," be challenged by "difficult text," and climb "staircases of text complexity."

It goes without saying that kids need to know how to read. But something is surely wrong with an education that puts reading about experience ahead of experiencing experience.

I have a proposal. We think of schools as places where the young are prepared for life. I say we discard that idea and instead think of them as full-blown, rich, fascinatingly complex, real-world slices of life.

Let's treat schools themselves as powerful learning resources, as things to poke, prod, measure, examine, investigate, analyze, describe, take apart, and put back together differently to see if they work better.

Simple questions focusing on immediate school experience can result in hours of deep, effective learning. For example, "What's the per-day cost of getting everyone in this class to school and back?" or "What ethnicities are represented in this school's population, how many are in each group, what's their history, and how are the groups evolving?"

It makes no difference if schools are old or new, large or small, rural or urban, public or private, magnet or charter, ordered or chaotic, thoroughly wired or technologically primitive, loved or hated. The actual buildings and grounds, the people who spend their days there, the routines they follow, the beliefs and values that explain their actions, and the systemic relationships between these various "moving parts," model in miniature the world that schooling is supposed to help the young understand.

Let's use the schools we have to operationalize the schools we need, call it "The Project," and make it the only universally required course.

No other project will stretch learner intellect farther. No other project will make more direct, effective, memorable use of reading, writing, math, history, physics, economics, and every other school subject. No other project will be more relevant, do a better job of making abstract ideas concrete, adjust more readily to individual needs and abilities, offer ranges of difficulty more appropriate for every kid, or even come close to it in return on educational investment.

Equally important, no other project will more thoroughly engage emotion. Challenging kids and their teachers to put The Project to real-world use by continuously improving their own school shows a respect for firsthand experience and those who have it that's presently non-existent.

It maximizes autonomy—the engine of imagination, creativity, ingenuity, and successful adaptation to social change. It puts our actions where our mouths are when we talk about liberty, democracy, and individual worth. It replaces top-down mandates (which have never, ever improved classroom instruction), with the only kind of innovation that works and sticks—bottom up.

And it breaks through the too-familiar-to-see barrier to learning.

What's not to like?

If you're concerned about all that material you studied in school that you don't think The Project would "cover," accept the fact that "covering the material" isn't educating. It's ritual. Covering the material is what has brought education to crisis. It's what drives mile-wide-inch-deep "learning" that evaporates as soon as tested. It's why adults retain so little of what they were once "taught." It's what underlies the institution's fad-prone but static nature.

The Project won't take more than a couple of hours a day, will link logically to all traditional content, and leave the rest of the time for capitalizing on America's greatest asset and hope for the future— individual differences.

Freed from "seat time" laws and an onerous list of required subjects, schools can get serious about individualizing instruction, developing specialized courses, meeting local needs, making extra-curricular activities curricular, and breaking free of innovation that merely gives old ideas new names.

If America is to have an educational system as good as Finland's (http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/research/will-firing-5-10-percent-of-te.html), we'll have to get serious about educating, follow Finland's lead, attract the cream of the crop to the teaching profession, and let them alone so they can do their job.

If America is to have an educational system better than Finland's, we have to get past the assumption that rigorous math, science, language arts, and social studies instruction add up to a quality education; past the notion that educating is mostly a matter of transferring information; past the denigrating idea that the point of it all is just to prepare the young for college or work.

Humanness has far more to offer than that, and America is better positioned than Finland and every other country to explore its potential because we're ethnically diverse. If we treat that as a wonderful educational asset to exploit rather than a liability to be minimized by standardization and social pressure, we'll go back to the head of the class.

One more thing: Accountability. Those hostile to public schooling have blown it far out of proportion, so the public demands that the matter be addressed. Because The Project will trigger thought processes far too complex and idiosyncratic to be evaluated by standardized tests, contracts will have to be cancelled. Period. There's no way that test items written in cubicles at McGraw-Hill, Pearson, Educational Testing Service, or at any other remote site, can cope.

But that's no problem. The job can be returned to those who had it before corporate heads, rich philanthropists, and politicians undermined respect for and confidence in them — classroom teachers. They're on top of the problem. They talk to their students every day, read their papers, watch their body language, listen to their dialogue, laugh at their jokes, cry at their misfortunes, look over their shoulders as they work. No one else is more qualified than teachers to say how well students are doing.

And using the already employed will save taxpayers billions of dollars. Ω

The complete list of problems with high-stakes standardized tests

Posted November 1, 2011

In 1949, I was a self-employed trucker, buying and hauling timber for shoring up the roofs of coal mines in West Virginia and Pennsylvania.

A very long United Mine Workers strike put me out of the trucking business. Not having exhausted all the GI Bill benefits due me from a stint in the U.S. Navy, I went back to college, jumped through the necessary certification hoops, and started teaching in 1952 at the high school level.

A few days ago, I went to a reunion of the surviving members of a class from that high school that picked up their diplomas 50 years ago, in 1961. They were a smart bunch of kids. The work of a couple of them would be familiar to millions of Americans.

Not surprisingly, a few became teachers. Without exception, those who talked to me at the reunion had no regrets. But also without exception, none of them would now encourage anyone to enter the field. Reason Number One: Standardized, machine-scored, high-stakes tests.

If that comes as a surprise, credit corporate America's successful promotion of the idea that test scores say something important. Opposition to the present orgy of testing is now wrongly interpreted as unwillingness to be held accountable.

For those who buy that fiction, a list of some of the real reasons for educator opposition may be helpful.

Teachers (at least the ones the public should hope their taxes are supporting) oppose the tests because they focus so narrowly on reading and math that the young are learning to hate reading, math, and school; because they measure only "low level" thinking processes; because they put the wrong people — test manufacturers — in charge of American education; because they allow pass-fail rates to be manipulated by officials for political purposes; because test items simplify and trivialize learning.

Teachers oppose the tests because they provide minimal to no useful feedback; are keyed to a deeply flawed curriculum adopted in 1893; lead to neglect of physical conditioning, music, art, and other, non-verbal ways of learning; unfairly advantage those who can afford test prep; hide problems created by margin-of-error computations in scoring; penalize test-takers who think in non-standard ways.

Teachers oppose the tests because they radically limit their ability to adapt to learner differences; encourage use of threats, bribes, and other extrinsic motivators; wrongly assume that what the young will need to know in the future is already known; emphasize minimum achievement to the neglect of maximum performance; create unreasonable pressures to cheat.

Teachers oppose the tests because they reduce teacher creativity and the appeal of teaching as a profession; are culturally biased; have no "success in life" predictive power; lead to the neglect of the best and worst students as resources are channeled to lift marginal kids above pass-fail "cut lines;" are open to massive scoring errors with life-changing consequences.

Teachers oppose the tests because they're at odds with deep-seated American values about individual differences and worth; undermine a fundamental democratic principle that those closest to and therefore most knowledgeable about problems are best positioned to deal with them; dump major public money into corporate coffers instead of classrooms.

I, a retired teacher beyond the reach of today's "reformers," oppose the tests for those reasons, and for the psychological damage they do to kids not yet able to cope. But my particular, personal beef is that the tests (and the Common Core State Standardson which they're based) are blocking policymaker consideration of what I believe to be the most promising educational innovation in the last century — the use of general systems theory as it developed during World War II as a tool for reshaping and radically simplifying the "core curriculum."

If you think that even a couple of those 25 reasons why educators oppose standardized tests are valid, consider getting behind what ought to be an option for every child's parent or guardian — the right to say, without being pressured or penalized by state or local authority, "Do not subject my child to any test that doesn't provide useful, same-day or next-day information about performance." Ω

How Bill Gates can be an education hero

Posted November 17, 2011.

A couple of days ago I watched and read the transcript of Fareed Zakaria's CNN primetime special, "Restoring the American Dream: Fixing Education." (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/how-bill-gates-can-be-an-education-hero/2011/11/16/gIQAVWGrSN_blog.html#pagebreak)

Zakaria talks to Bill Gates, (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/how-bill-gates-throws-his-money) whose five-billion-plus investment in schools has bought him a seat at the head table of education reformers.

If I'd gotten any response from my previous attempts to correspond with Mr. Gates, I'd write him again. Here's a draft of what I might say:

Writer Malcolm Gladwell says (http://www.gladwell.com/outliers/outliers_excerpt1.html) it takes 10,000 hours to become really competent in a job. The day you were born — Oct. 28, 1955 — I was 28 years old. It was a school day, so I'd have spent it teaching in a high school in Ohio. My total time on the job probably now comes to about 80,000 hours. That, of course, doesn't necessarily mean anything. I could be a slower learner than you are.

But I continue to try. I visit schools here and abroad, talk to kids and teachers, write books, op-eds, newspaper columns, and journal articles, and correspond about education with people on every continent.

You've even picked up the tab for some of that. Twice, some years ago, an organization you helped finance flew me to their headquarters and asked for advice. I'm sorry to say I wasted your money. In matters educational, I'm what Gladwell calls an "outlier." They thought my ideas were too unorthodox to take seriously.

It's obvious that much of corporate America's interest in education is self-serving, best explained by the adage, "Follow the money." That's understandable and acceptable until it becomes the tail wagging the education dog.

However, I don't think that's where you're coming from. And, since I don't accept fees for consulting, and the teaching and learning materials I produce can be downloaded from the Internet at zero cost, it's clearly not where I'm coming from either. My hand isn't out with the palm up.

With that out of the way, may I share a few thoughts?

I think it's fair to say that Lou Gerstner— along with you, an early leader of the standards and accountability education reform effort (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/a-primer-on-corporate-school-reform/2011/10/26/gIQAyWrUKM_blog.html) —was right when he wrote in a Wall Street

Journal op-ed (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122809533452168067.html) that the reform effort has been a bust. I'd go farther and argue that it's done, and continues to do, enormous damage to the young, but I won't go into that here. I just want to offer a possible explanation for that failure, and do it from a business management rather than an educational perspective.

I'm sure you're familiar with the work of the late Douglas McGregor, but a reminder may help. His 1960 book, *The Human Side of Management*, is considered one of the most influential books on management principles ever written. In it, he describes two very different assumptions about human nature, labels them "Theory X," and "Theory Y," and discusses their implications and ramifications for productivity.

Theory X managers, he said, assume that most people dislike work, avoid it if possible, tend to be irresponsible, and need tight controls in the form of penalties and rewards to keep them from deviating from organizational goals.

Theory Y managers assume that work is natural, satisfying, and rewarding, and that if organizational goals are clear and acceptable, most people, given sufficient autonomy, will take the initiative, seek responsibility, and bring imagination, creativity, and ingenuity to their work.

Read those two paragraphs again, please, substituting the word "learning" for the word "work."

McGregor said that people who are managed in accordance with either theory tend to develop behavior that matches the theory. You know a lot about feedback loops. Give some serious thought to that one, and its implications for, say, performance gaps and school discipline problems.

The educators I think you want and surely need on your side are those who know from years of firsthand classroom experience the costs and limitations of Theory X and the productive potential of Theory Y. But instead of enlisting them, the reform efforts you've been promoting, and the promotional strategies you've used, drive them up a wall.

Corporate interests, Congress, and state legislatures push Theory X with a vengeance — No Child Left Behind; Race to the Top; standardized, high-stakes tests; teacher pay tied to test scores; school closings; the Common Core Standards; school systems headed by mayors, CEOs, and retired military officers; teachers accused of "the soft bigotry of low expectations;" states prostituting themselves to compete for federal dollars; letter grades assigned to schools; public naming and shaming; constant yammering about "raising the bar" and "rigor!"

Every single one of those is straight, undiluted Theory X.

Theory X has brought public schooling to crisis. Theory X will eventually destroy it.

If you want to make a real and permanent difference in what goes on in kids' heads, accept the fact that you've been backing the wrong horse. Use your enormous influence and resources to get policymakers in Washington and state capitols to back off X — dump seat-time rules, required-subject rules, fill-out-a-form-for-everything rules, everybody-on-the-same-page rules, my-way-or-the-highway rules, and begin moving toward Theory Y.

Unleash what America's schools always had too little of, but the little they once had made our schools the envy of the world — enough Theory Y going on behind closed classroom doors to capitalize on kid and teacher imagination, creativity, and ingenuity.

If you want to see that theory in action, check out the new "studio school" (http://www.ted.com/talks/geoff_mulgan_a_short_intro_to_the_studio_school.html?utm_source=newsletter_weekly_2011-09-27&utm_campaign=newsletter_weekly&utm_medium=email) movement in the United Kingdom. Or "project learning" here in America. Just a few days ago, George Wood, superintendent of the Federal Hocking Local School District in Stewart, Ohio, painted a word picture (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/what-college-and-career-ready-really-means/2011/11/07/gIQAazyaxM_blog.html#pagebreak) of the possibilities of that idea.

What I'm asking you to do will be really, really hard. Just about everybody — including, probably, most educators—will try to "yes, but" it to death. Of those yes-buts, the one that will seem the most intractable will be insistence that the familiar "core curriculum" — the one adopted in 1893, the one now being locked in permanent place with the Common Core Standards (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/why-common-core-standards) — has to be taught, and doing so takes most of the school day, leaving little time for anything else.

Taking issue with that contention is the main reason I've been labeled an "outlier." For almost fifty years I've been repeating what respected scholars have been saying for centuries: Adequate sense can't be made of the world by chopping it into little pieces and studying the pieces without regard for how they fit together and interact.

And I've said that problem can be easily solved, that systems theory as it developed during World War II can weave together, logically, all present and future academic subjects and fill in the gaps between them to form a much simpler, more efficient and effective, less time-consuming (and less expensive) general education. Here's one example: (http://www.marionbrady.com/Connections). If you're willing to give the example more than a cursory glance, do so not looking for math, science, language arts and social studies instruction. Instead, think of school subjects simply as tools for making better sense of the world and how we experience it — as means rather than ends.

"Human history," said H.G. Wells, is "a race between education and catastrophe." The more than five billion bucks you've spent thus far trying to improve American education suggests you think as I do, that catastrophe has a big lead.

Be a *real* game changer. Be a hero. Promote Theory Y with the same enthusiasm you've brought to Theory X. Given institutional inertia, you won't live long enough to see all or even most schools change very much. But from even limited success will come the kids best equipped intellectually and emotionally to save us from ourselves. Ω

When an adult took standardized tests forced on kids

Posted December 5, 2011.

(Note: This post went "viral" to a degree never previously seen in Valerie Strauss's "The Answer Sheet" blog.)

A longtime friend on the school board of one of the largest school systems in America did something that few public servants are willing to do. He took versions of his state's high-stakes standardized math and reading tests for 10th graders, and said he'd make his scores public.

By any reasonable measure, my friend is a success. His now-grown kids are well-educated. He has a big house in a good part of town. Paid-for condo in the Caribbean. Influential friends. Lots of frequent flyer miles. Enough time of his own to give serious attention to his school board responsibilities. The margins of his electoral wins and his good relationships with administrators and teachers testify to his openness to dialogue and willingness to listen.

He called me the morning he took the test to say he was sure he hadn't done well, but had to wait for the results. A couple of days ago, realizing that local school board members don't seem to be playing much of a role in the current "reform" brouhaha, I asked him what he now thought about the tests he'd taken.

"I won't beat around the bush," he wrote in an email. "The math section had 60 questions. I knew the answers to none of them, but managed to guess ten out of the 60 correctly. On the reading test, I got 62% . In our system, that's a "D", and would get me a mandatory assignment to a double block of reading instruction.

He continued, "It seems to me something is seriously wrong. I have a bachelor of science degree, two masters degrees, and 15 credit hours toward a doctorate.

"I help oversee an organization with 22,000 employees and a $3 billion operations and capital budget, and am able to make sense of complex data related to those responsibilities.

"I have a wide circle of friends in various professions. Since taking the test, I've detailed its contents as best I can to many of them, particularly the math section, which does more

than its share of shoving students in our system out of school and on to the street. Not a single one of them said that the math I described was necessary in their profession.

"It might be argued that I've been out of school too long, that if I'd actually been in the 10th grade prior to taking the test, the material would have been fresh. But doesn't that miss the point? A test that can determine a student's future life chances should surely relate in some practical way to the requirements of life. I can't see how that could possibly be true of the test I took."

Here's the clincher in what he wrote:

"If I'd been required to take those two tests when I was a 10th grader, my life would almost certainly have been very different. I'd have been told I wasn't 'college material,' would probably have believed it, and looked for work appropriate for the level of ability that the test said I had.

"It makes no sense to me that a test with the potential for shaping a student's entire future has so little apparent relevance to adult, real-world functioning. Who decided the kind of questions and their level of difficulty? Using what criteria? To whom did they have to defend their decisions? As subject-matter specialists, how qualified were they to make general judgments about the needs of this state's children in a future they can't possibly predict? Who set the pass-fail "cut score"? How?"

"I can't escape the conclusion that decisions about the [state test] in particular and standardized tests in general are being made by individuals who lack perspective and aren't really accountable."

There you have it. A concise summary of what's wrong with present corporately driven education change: Decisions are being made by individuals who lack perspective and aren't really accountable.

Those decisions are shaped not by knowledge or understanding of educating, but by ideology, politics, hubris, greed, ignorance, the conventional wisdom, and various combinations thereof. And then they're sold to the public by the rich and powerful.

All that without so much as a pilot program to see if their simplistic, worn-out ideas work, and without a single procedure in place that imposes on them what they demand of teachers: accountability.

But maybe there's hope. As I write, a New York Times story by Michael Winerip (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/28/education/principals-protest-increased-use-of-test-scores-to-evaluate-educators.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all) makes my day. The stupidity of the current test-based thrust of reform has triggered the first revolt of school principals.

Winerip writes: “As of last night, 658 principals around the state (New York) had signed a letter — 488 of them from Long Island, where the insurrection began — protesting the use of students’ test scores to evaluate teachers’ and principals’ performance.”

One of those school principals, Winerip says, is Bernard Kaplan. Kaplan runs one of the highest-achieving schools in the state, but is required to attend 10 training sessions.

“It’s education by humiliation,” Kaplan said. “I’ve never seen teachers and principals so degraded.”

Carol Burris, named the 2010 Educator of the Year by the School Administrators Association of New York State, has to attend those 10 training sessions.

Katie Zahedi, another principal, said the session she attended was “two days of total nonsense. I have a Ph.D., I’m in a school every day, and some consultant is supposed to be teaching me to do evaluations.”

A fourth principal, Mario Fernandez, called the evaluation process a product of “ludicrous, shallow thinking. They’re expecting a tornado to go through a junkyard and have a brand new Mercedes pop up.”

My school board member-friend concluded his email with this: “I can’t escape the conclusion that those of us who are expected to follow through on decisions that have been made for us are doing something ethically questionable.”

He’s wrong. What they’re being made to do isn’t ethically questionable. It’s ethically unacceptable. Ethically reprehensible. Ethically indefensible.

How many of the approximately 100,000 school principals in the U.S. would join the revolt if their ethical principles trumped their fears of retribution? Why haven’t they been asked? Ω

‘What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate’

Posted December 19, 2011.

“What we’ve got here,” as Cool Hand Luke once said, “is a failure to communicate.” (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0061512/)

Skimming the reactions to my 12/5/11 “The Answer Sheet” guest blog (above), Cool Hand Luke’s observation often comes to mind.

For many readers, the question raised by my account of Orange County school board member Rick Roach's less than stellar performance on a version of a standardized test given in Florida (see above post) was, "What's wrong with Rick?"

Wrong question. Here's the right one: What's wrong with standardized testing? Here's another: What's wrong with a whole country when it isn't in open revolt against the assumption that schools should only teach what machines can measure?

How demeaning is that assumption? How much is it costing America in lost human potential?

In a separate *Answer Sheet* guest blog published last month (p. 78), I said that standardized tests had no "success in life" predictive power. Rick's story was just one example of that fact, and my mail says there are hundreds of similar stories. Albert Einstein had one. If you're reading this, you're reading something written by someone with yet another example.

But "no predictive power" doesn't even scratch the surface of problems with standardized tests. In that November 1 blog (p. 78) listed twenty-four MORE problems, any one of which I could write (and probably have already written) an op-ed or newspaper column exploring it, or have treated it at greater length in one of my books.

And the 25 problems didn't exhaust my list. I didn't, for example, point out that lots of kids are smarter than the people who write standardized test items, and tie themselves in knots at test time trying to second guess what was in the head of the writer of a particular test item. I didn't say that the fans of testing and the scientific research on the benefits of standardized testing are in opposite corners.

What I was trying to do in my Dec. 15 blog (p. 83) was call attention to serious problems with the tail now wagging the education dog — standardized testing.

Rick Roach, the school board member who's now taking a lot of flak for detailing his experience — shares that concern.

As does an army of others. The "Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind" http://www.fairtest.org/node/30 has a list of 153 education, civil rights, religious, disability, parent and civic organizations that think America's addiction to standardized tests is dragging us in a wrong direction.

See *"The High Stakes of Standardized Testing* ," (http://www.waldorflibrary.org/Journal_Articles/RB4206.pdf) by Edward Miller, for a summary of scientific studies on the subject conducted by the National Research Council (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/report-test-based-incentives-dont-produce-real-student-achievement/2011/05/28/AG39wXDH_blog.html)..

Then read Banesh Hoffman, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banesh_Hoffmann) a graduate of Oxford and Princeton universities, a world famous mathematician and theoretical physicist who worked with Albert Einstein on studies related to the theory of relativity. If you think that someone with his credentials might have something important to say on the subject, go here (http://www.amazon.com/Tyranny-Testing-Banesh-Hoffman/dp/048643091X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1323951446&sr=8-1#reader_048643091X) and click on the cover of Hoffman's easily read, jargon-free book, *"The Tyranny of Testing."* Read the forward by another intellectual giant, Jacques Barzun, (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Barzun) and be surprised by the fact that he was writing in 1962, then skim a few random pages from the book.

To those helpful math whizzes who either suggested that Rick resign from the school board or take them up on offers to tutor him in math, I suggest reading "*A Mathematician's Lament*" by Paul Lockhart, here (http://www.maa.org/devlin/LockhartsLament.pdf) . And there's this, "*Leading mathematician debunks 'value-added.'* (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/leading-mathematician-debunks-value-added/2011/05/08/AFb999UG_blog.html)

Finally, those wondering why standardized testing has become the be-all and end-all of education reform, will find food for thought by Googling "Berliner and Biddle, The Manufactured Crisis" (http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=Berliner%20and%20Biddle%2C%20The%20Manufactured%20Crisis) and "Emery and Ohanian, Why Is Corporate America Bashing America's Schools?". (http://www.amazon.com/Corporate-America-Bashing-Public-Schools/dp/0325006377)

In the opinion of these respected researchers, today's test-based "reforms" don't have much at all to do with quality education, or with beating the test scores of Finland (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/transporting-finlands-education-success-to-us/2011/10/20/gIQAb21z3L_blog.html) and Singapore, or with the claim that test-based reforms are "preparing the young for college and careers."

As usual: Follow the money. Ω

Education reform: An order-of-magnitude improvement

Posted January 26, 2012 Truthout | Op-Ed

Imagine the present corporately promoted education reform effort as a truck, its tires nearly flat from the weight of the many unexamined assumptions it carries.

On board: An assumption that punishment and rewards effectively motivate; that machines can measure the quality of human thought; that learning is hard, unpleasant work; that

what the young need to know is some agreed-upon, standard body of knowledge; that doing more rigorously what we've always done will raise test scores; that teacher talk and textbook text can teach complex ideas; that ... well, you get the idea.

Misdiagnosing the Main Problem

Right now, the biggest, heaviest assumption on the reform truck has it that, when the Common Core State Standards Initiative is complete - when somebody has decided exactly what every kid in every state is supposed to know in every school subject at every grade level - the education reform truck will take off like gangbusters.

It won't. If all the reformers' flawed assumptions are corrected, but the traditional math-science-language-arts-social-studies "core curriculum" remains the main organizer of knowledge, the truck may creep forward a few inches, but it won't take the young where they need to go if we care about societal survival. The mess from this generation's political paralysis and refusal to address looming problems can't be cleaned up using the same education that helped create it.

What's wrong with "the core"? For its content to be processed, stored in memory, retrieved and combined in novel ways to create new knowledge, it would have to be well organized and integrated. It isn't. It's a confusing, random, overwhelming, intellectually unmanageable assortment of facts, specialized vocabularies, disconnected conceptual frameworks, and abstractions - the whole too far removed from life as the young live it for them to care about it.

So, they don't. They're being blasted with information at fire-hose velocity. The diligent and the fearful store as much as they can in short-term memory, and when testing is over, their brains delete what's considered clutter because it's not immediately useful. The non-diligent and the cynical guess and/or cheat the answer sheets. The rest (and their numbers, understandably, are steadily increasing) opt out of the trivia game, or are opted out by thoughtful, caring parents.

A Different Organizer

There's an alternative to the core as an organizer of information and knowledge. We use it from birth to death, and we didn't learn it in school. It's the key to an order-of-magnitude improvement in learner performance.

For firsthand evidence of that system's potential, consider how much we learn and how fast we learn it long before we walk through school doors. Starting from scratch, we figure out how to meet personal needs; learn what's acceptable and unacceptable behavior; construct explanatory theories; master one or more complex languages; adapt appropriately to many different personality types; absorb the foundational patterns of action and premises of one or more cultures; and much, much else.

Our "natural" knowledge-organizing and integrating system's main components are those we use to create the most complete and sophisticated models of reality known - stories. To make sense of any and all reality, we seek answers to just five questions - Who? What? When? Where? Why? All knowledge is an elaboration of one or more of those five distinct kinds of information.

"We did something," communicates. "Because we were bored, Tanya and I went to the mall yesterday," elaborates. "Because Tanya Jones and I, Mary Smith, were bored, we went to Bath and Body Works in Eastland Mall in Columbus, Ohio, arriving in the parking lot a few minutes after three o'clock on the 13th of January," elaborates further. The exercise could continue, adding layers of increasing precision.

The more we know about a particular subject, situation or science, the more elaborations we have from which to choose. When Hippocrates wrote about cancer in 400 BC, he almost certainly didn't see it as a group of diseases, each sufficiently different from the others to warrant the range of labels that help today's researchers and doctors think and talk about cancer more productively. As cancer research advances, the elaborating process will continue.

We make sense by choosing from elaborating options for who, what, when, where and why, and weaving our choices together systemically. As options increase and potential systemic relationships multiply, ever-better sense is made, creativity is stimulated and knowledge expands.

An Unknown Known

Our sense-making system - like the concept of gravity before Sir Isaac Newton - is so familiar we don't think of it as a system. And, when it's pointed out, we tend to dismiss it as too simple and obvious to be important, much less the key to educational transformation. But made explicit and put to work, our implicitly known knowledge organizer moves learner performance to levels far beyond the reach of the measurement capabilities of standardized tests, including the ones on which international comparisons are based.

Skillful use of the system can't be taught in the usual sense of the word - can't, that is, be transferred in useable form from mind to mind by words on a page, images on a screen or lectures from a stage. **Learners have to construct understanding for themselves.**

To appreciate the teaching-learning challenge, imagine trying to explain water to a fish. Success requires that the utterly familiar be made "strange enough to see." A five-hour lecture to a fish on the subject of water wouldn't match the memorable experience of being lifted out of the water for a five-second exposure to air.

Experience is the best teacher, but attention must be paid. Adolescents, encouraged to look long and hard at particular, ordinary experiences - and to think and talk about what they're doing - eventually discover their basic, five-element approach to sense-making. They've

lived long enough to have experiences they can analyze, are mature enough to examine those experiences introspectively and haven't yet been programmed by schooling to sort what they know into disconnected boxes with subject-matter labels.

Reasoning their way to those five distinct kinds of information, they "own" the foundation of their knowledge-categorizing and -manipulating system. No reading from a textbook, no listening to a lecture, no viewing of a video production, will ever match the level of understanding of ideas that emerge from firsthand experience refined by dialogue.

The Challenge of Change

Making deliberate use of our usual system for organizing knowledge doesn't discard academic disciplines or the school subjects based on them. It elevates and enhances them; puts them in context; and makes them mutually supportive, systemically integrated parts of each learner's seamless "model of reality" - the mental template laid down on particular experience to generate questions leading to the making of sense.

Ironically, it's probable that use of the system would perpetuate the curse of standardized testing. When kids know how their mental "filing systems" work, and make use of them to retrieve trivia from memory, scores will go up. But the long-term positives of using familiar school subjects and procedures to smooth the change process cancel the negatives, primarily by allowing the process to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary.

Eventually, as making more sense of experience replaces the ubiquitous "preparing for college and career" as the working aim of schooling, broader change will follow. Coming (as it should) "bottom up," from teachers and learners focused on improving sense-making rather than on raising test scores, the direction of change will always be appropriate.

There will be surprises, but they'll be pleasant. A major one will be the discovery that kids are far smarter than they're given credit for being. Another will be that adequately feeding the left, order-seeking side of the brain takes much less time than is currently being devoted to it. A third related surprise will be that the time thus released will make possible a world of useful educational activities - projects, apprenticeships, advanced studies, and so on. A fourth will be that a much better education can be had for considerably less money.

To begin to make use of our natural system for making sense, a little handholding should help. A rough, first-generation tool for that purpose titled *Connections: Investigating Reality* (think of it as a beta version) can be downloaded from the Internet: (http://www.marionbrady.com/Connections-InvestigatingReality-ACourseofStudy.asp.) In the spirit of "open source," and acknowledging a deep-seated American aversion to spending public money on educating, it's free to individual educators for use with students.

Connections requires no special training, no additional materials and no new technology. It does, however, require teachers or mentors who are willing to play a non-traditional role. Present textbooks and teacher talk offer learners secondhand, supposedly expert

knowledge about reality. *Connections* directs attention to reality itself in all its inherent complexity, and poses questions or problems. Particular realities may be as mundane as the arrangement of furniture in a classroom, a familiar television commercial, a popular children's book, an obscure folk song. The young - less programmed by life experience - may see in them what the teacher does not. Sufficient humility to accept that fact and encourage its demonstration is appropriate.

Connections makes provision for user dialogue. If advantage is taken of the tool, the differing perspectives and collective wisdom of teachers and learners will allow the general education curriculum to continuously adapt to the needs and trends of the era.

On the Other Hand

When the CEOs and the politicians they've bought finish the simplistic "reform" they've started, when the claim that an order-of-magnitude improvement in learner intellectual performance has been dismissed as hyperbole, when all 50 states have been pressured to adopt the regressive Common Core Standards locking the knowledge-fragmenting 1893 curriculum in permanent place, when standardized subject-matter tests that can't measure the qualities and quality of thought have been nationalized, when the Standards and Testing Police are fully deployed and looking over every teacher's shoulder, it'll all be over. America and the nations that follow its lead in education will face a dynamic world equipped with a static curriculum.

Catastrophe will be inevitable. Ω

http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/6264:education-reform-an-orderofmagnitude-improvement

Why are strong readers being labeled remedial?

Posted February 25, 2012.

I began teaching history at the high school level in the fall of 1952. It wasn't by choice. I hadn't majored in the subject in college. It had always been just another required hoop to jump through.

But the school was small, and all the teachers had multiple preparations. I was assigned two sections of 11th grade American history.

Some historian (Charles Beard? Arnold Toynbee? Winston Churchill?) is supposed to have said, "History is just one damn thing after another." That's how it had always seemed to me, so I came to my two classes determined not to do the usual — assign a few pages in the textbook as homework and spend the next day telling kids my version of what they'd already read.

I wanted us to think and talk together about big, important ideas such as Einstein's view that technological change was like an ax in the hands of a sociopath. I thought that exploring the blood left on the floor by change — technological, demographic, and environmental — put history to work in a relevant, important, interesting, useful way.

But dealing thoroughly with complicated issues takes lots of time, and I couldn't bring myself not to cover the standard textbook story.

So I worked out a simple solution. I assigned four or five pages from the book as homework, and the next day, as soon as the kids were seated, I'd give them a written, five-question, short-answer quiz. The questions were easy, since the point was just to keep them "covering the material." The whole procedure took about three minutes, leaving the rest of the period free for work more challenging than stuffing facts into kids' short-term memories.

I woke up three or four days ago remembering that procedure and asking myself a question probably triggered by conversations I'm having with Rick Roach, an Orange County, Florida, school board member. You may remember Rick. I wrote about him in my December 5 Answer Sheet blog post (p. 83)— how he took a version of the state's 10th grade high-stakes standardized reading test and got 62, a score that would have landed him in a remedial reading class. It would also have kept him from taking a class that led to his joining the swim team, becoming its captain, and being named the team's Most Valuable Player.

What I remembered as I was waking up was that every student I taught in four different high schools apparently knew how to read because they all passed those five-question quizzes. None of the four high schools in which I taught had even one reading teacher.

There are three high schools in the part of Orange County that Rick represents. In those three schools, 30 remedial reading teachers are teaching about 3,000 students!

What's going on here? What's changed? Why, a few years ago, was there no apparent need for remedial reading programs for high school students, and now about one out of three are enrolled in them? Have ability levels dropped that far that fast?

Rick wants answers to those questions, and he's doing what legislators and policymakers should be doing but are not — talking to teachers and students.

From teachers of remedial reading he hears that relatively few of their students really have reading problems. Those that do are from families in which English isn't spoken, or they

have a genuine learning disability. The rest are average or above-average students. Many are enrolled in honors and advanced placement classes, some even in extremely text-heavy International Baccalaureate programs.

Students in advanced studies spending five to ten hours a week in remedial reading classes? What's going on here?

From kids, Rick hears that the standardized high-stakes tests they failed were of no interest to them, or had trick questions, or some questions had more than one right answer, or they're just tired of nonstop reading drills, or they slacked off because the tests were so long, or they weren't given enough time, or they froze up because they knew their score could hang an embarrassing label on them. (See p. 78)

Rick, quizzing kids in a middle school remedial reading program, asked a boy with a Kindle what he was reading at that moment. "*Othello*," the kid said. For an assignment? No, the kid replied. He just liked Shakespeare.

A 7th grade kid who owns a Kindle and reads Shakespeare for pleasure is in a remedial reading program! What's going on here?

Full disclosure: I know next to nothing about teaching reading, I've never taught anyone to read, and I've done no research in the field. That said, it seems to me there's an obvious explanation for why so many kids are labeled poor readers.

Here's my theory: Congress, by way of the No Child Left Behind (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/ravitch-no-child-left-behind-and-the-damage-done/2012/01/10/gIQAR4gxoP_blog.html) legislation, targeted reading (and math) for improvement. This handed publishers of textbooks, tests, and test-prep materials a marketing opportunity. Not surprisingly, publishers want to maximize sales. To maximize sales, there has to be a perception of a serious reading problem, and the easiest way to create the perception of a reading problem is to give tests that kids fail.

So that's what they do.

It's easy. Make the passages to be read boring. Ask questions that have more than one right answer but count only one answer as correct. Throw in a few unfamiliar words or references. Increase the length of sentences. Make the test so long that fatigue or impatience set in. Add a few trick questions. Increase stress levels by setting a too-short completion time. Or, easiest of all, just arbitrarily raise the passing score.

Tests can be designed to yield any failure rate from zero to a hundred percent. Publishers just have to be careful not to make the failure rate so high that test buyers get suspicious.

Add up the amounts taxpayers are on the hook for reading teachers, reading tests, and test prep materials and you're talking billions of dollars. The market potential when every kid in every state is tested not just for reading and math but for every subject every year

boggles the mind. And this at the same time legislators are making draconian cuts in school funding!

Back before the big corporate push to privatize public education, back before corporate heads and politicians began blaming teachers for America's poor economic performance, back when teacher judgment was trusted and they wrote their own tests, the cost of testing was close to zero. Evaluating learner performance was just part of the job. When I was still in the classroom, I evaluated learner performance all day every day.

I may, of course, be wrong. But is there a better explanation for why so many kids are being labeled lousy readers? That strategy, after all, is just a variation of the one being put to work since adoption of No Child Left Behind — arbitrarily inching the performance bar up a little every year, leading more and more public schools to fail, thereby destroying confidence in public schooling and opening the door wider for privatization.

The cost of what's happening in Orange County, Florida, and other school systems across America isn't, of course, just the money being channeled away from instruction and into corporate coffers. They deprive the young of diplomas they've earned by completing all their courses with passing grades. They keep talent and potential out of courses and extracurricular activities that enrich education. They make kids hate every subject that has a high-stakes test attached.

And there's not one shred of evidence that standardized tests are a more accurate and useful measure of learner performance than teacher judgment. Indeed, I'd argue that they're far less accurate and useful, and therefore a harmful, expensive distraction.

I asked a bunch of nationally known reading experts to explain why standardized tests are timed. Here's one's response: "It has to do with the absurd notion of standardizing the testing situation in an attempt to get 'valid' results. If everyone takes the test under the exact same conditions, the results are valid information....Yeah, right. And so what we actually do is assess how well a population performs under testing conditions rather than testing what they actually know."

Rick isn't letting it go. He's pulled together an 11-county coalition of school board members and educators to try to find out why kids who can read are wasting time in remedial reading programs. I'm invited to their meetings. Ω

What standardized tests should assess

Posted March 22, 2012

If you fly, thank Myron Tribus for helping make your flight safer. He played a major role in the development of the equipment that keeps airliner wings free of ice.

Myron was a captain in the Army Air Force during World War II. Later, he was a gas turbine design engineer for General Electric, dean of Dartmouth College's Thayer School of Engineering, senior vice president for research & engineering for Xerox, an author of scientific papers and books, director of the Center for Advanced Engineering Study at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and co-founder of Exergy, Inc.

What brought Myron from California to my house in Florida for three days many years ago was our shared concern about what kids were and weren't being taught. We both believed that the traditional curriculum (see p. 33) hadn't adapted to the 20th Century — much less the 21st — and that the reforms being promoted by business interests and politicians weren't just making the situation worse but blocking real reform.

Myron agreed with me that deciding what knowledge is most important and using systems theory to simplify the organization of that knowledge, were logical first steps in real education reform, and that's what we talked about.

I've stopped thinking I'll live to see those ideas being taken seriously. Today's reformers take it for granted that what was taught in the past is fine for the future, and their ideas about the organization of knowledge begin and end with the simplistic, knowledge-fragmenting "Common Core State Standards" (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/common-core-wont-likely-boost-student-achievement-analysis-says/2012/02/16/gIQAOfZuJR_blog.html). The latest evidence is the just-released report from a committee chaired by Condoleezza Rice and Joel Klein titled, "U.S. Education Reform and National Security."

That said, I can't bring myself to simply walk away from the educational catastrophe that's been unfolding since the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, the American Legislative Exchange Council, and other rightwing groups took control of education policy in the 1980s and pulled the rest of the political spectrum with them. Concern for the educations of my nine great-grandchildren, for their children, and for their children's children, won't let me desert the field.

I've got a modest proposal. No Child Left Behind, and now Race to the Top, have made standardized tests (p. 78)) the sole measure of educational quality. What makes those kinds of tests acceptable is the ridiculous notion that machines can measure brains, but the campaign to discredit teacher judgment of student performance has been so successful there's no going back. Standardized tests are here to stay. Attacks on them are dismissed as lame efforts by teachers to avoid being held accountable.

Manufactured tests, then, must be accepted, but must be made to do good rather than harm. The practice of testing what's taught is out the window. Now, what gets tested is what gets taught, so the simplest, most direct way to improve what's taught is to improve the tests.

Arne Duncan, U.S. secretary of education, says kids need to be taught "higher order" thinking skills. If teachers teach to tests, and standardized test items require the use of higher order thinking skills, those skills will be taught.

I propose that all standardized tests test higher order thinking skills.

What, exactly, are "thinking skills?" Asked, most professional educators will make lists something like the one below. They'll also generally agree that every skill on the list except the first one—*recalling*—is a higher order thought process.

Recalling
Classifying
Applying
Inferring
Hypothesizing
Generalizing
Relating
Synthesizing
Valuing

Science test question: *"You've studied some of the ways that plants and animals have evolved to protect themselves from harm. Which of the following five ways is NOT a self-protection strategy?"*

To answer, the test taker just has to remember something read or heard. That's *recalling*, and it's not a higher order thinking skill.

Science test question: "*You've studied some of the ways that plants and animals have evolved to protect themselves from harm. Choose one of those self-protection strategies and explain how it could be adapted to protect convenience store clerks from harm."*

To answer, the test taker has to put an idea that's been learned to practical use. That's *applying*, and it's a higher order thinking skill.

History test question: *We've been studying big ideas called 'shared assumptions' that help hold human societies together. In the spaces provided, list four of those assumptions."*

To answer, the test taker just has to remember something read or heard. That's *recalling,* and it's not a higher order thinking skill.

History test question: *"We've been studying big ideas called 'shared assumptions' that help hold human societies together. Below is a copy of a page from the 1777 New England*

Primer that uses two-line verses based on the Bible to teach the letters of the alphabet. Based on the verses, what assumption about basic human nature seems to have been shared by 18th Century Puritans?"

To answer, the test taker has to draw inferences from the verses. *Inferring* is a higher order thinking skill.

If higher order thinking skills are tested, teachers will teach them. Those who don't know how will quickly learn.

Of course, Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Educational Testing Service, and other test manufacturers aren't going to volunteer to test student-initiated higher order thinking skills. Neither are the politicians they help elect and re-elect going to make them even try to do so unless they think voters give them no alternative.

So voters should give them no alternative. Unless politicians and test manufacturers can make a convincing case for not teaching the young to think, they should be told what they've been telling teachers who say standardized tests are a waste of time and money: "No excuses!"

It's likely that nothing short of binding agreements between states and test manufacturers will yield the new tests. To that end, in appropriate legal language, contracts should make clear that (a) every test question in every subject will evaluate a particular, named thinking skill, (b) every test will evaluate a balanced mix of all known thinking skills, and (c) a panel of experts not connected to test manufacturers or politicians will preview all test items to assure contract compliance. No excuses.

Fairtest, Parents Across America, United Opt Out National, and other state and local organizations have strategies in place to try to persuade. Petitions and referendums (invite signers. Parents, grandparents — indeed, all who care about kids and country — should get on board.

No more multimillion dollar checks for tests that no one but manufacturers are allowed to see. No more tests the pass-fail cut scores of which can be raised and lowered to make political points. No more kids labeled and discarded, every one with a brain wired to do all sorts of amazing things. If storing trivia in short-term memory doesn't happen to be one of those things, that shouldn't put them out of school and on the street.

Postscript: Myron hasn't been well for a long time, so we haven't talked in years. I last saw him at his 80th birthday party. A documentary film crew from Russia was there. When I asked why, they said that in Russian scientific circles, Myron was a hero.

He's also one of my heroes—a genuine genius who understood the absolutely critical role that school curricula play in promoting and maintaining societal well-being, and dedicated his pre-illness retirement years to trying to improve it. Ω

A ‘simple fix’ for school curriculum (and it’s not Common Core)

Posted April 26, 2012

For more than 20 years, in language as strong as the editors of mainstream media will allow, I’ve been slamming the stupidities of the education “reforms” dreamed up by amateur educators in Congress, state legislatures, and corporate offices.

For more than 40 years, in equally strong language in journal articles, op-eds, newspaper columns, letters to editors, and books, I’ve been telling professional educators that the lack of genuine education reform was creating the vacuum that sucked in those stupidities.

Neither group is happy with me.

I’ve been specific about what I see as a fundamental problem—the inadequacies of the so-called “core curriculum” put in place in the 19th Century. It wasn’t very good when it was adopted, and it works less well with each passing year.

In the 1980s, I wrote about problems with that curriculum, suggested a simple fix, and sent the manuscript off to the State University of New York Press. Philip L. Smith, editor of that publisher’s Philosophy of Education Series, reviewed the manuscript, and in a letter to Acquisitions Editor Lois Patton, said:

“Let me begin by saying that I liked this manuscript very much. Before I studied it I did not expect that I would. It appeared to be rather pedestrian, even simpleminded. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is actually a well-thought out, beautifully presented defense of humanistic general education. It is an important manuscript both for what it aspires to and how it accomplishes its goals.”

A couple of pages later he concluded:

“If you were to publish this manuscript, as I hope that you do, it would be important to advertise it as more than a technical proposal for increasing teaching effectiveness. It should be promoted as a manifesto that incorporates a working strategy for making education more than the development of instrumental reason. Serious-minded educators who begin to read this manuscript are very likely to finish it and to be influenced by it for the better. Those who are not serious-minded, if there is any hope for them at all, might start to be serious-minded if somehow you can get this manuscript into their hands.”

SUNY Press published the book, but the education establishment wasn’t interested in a curriculum fix.

A few years later, suspecting educators were unable to imagine how that fix would look in the classroom, I wrote an illustrative course of study — a series of ready-to-use activities

for adolescents and teachers. “Published by Books for Educators,” it asked users to look closely at everyday, taken-for-granted experience until that experience became “strange enough to see” and analyze with a degree of objectivity. Gradually, their sense-making process would become apparent to them.

The education establishment wasn’t interested.

Before there was email, I wrote letters to policymakers at the U.S. Department of Education, to members of Congress, heads of foundations, state governors, chief state school officers, union officials, mayors and other politicians, politely pointing out that nothing they were doing was making much of a difference, suggesting their efforts were enormously handicapped by the curriculum they were taking for granted, and asking if they’d be willing at least to talk about a fix for its problems.

They weren’t.

So, what is this “simple fix” for the familiar, traditional curriculum.

It should go without saying that an organized mind is more productive than an unorganized or a disorganized mind. Humans — even infants — have an amazing, built-in system for sorting, organizing, and making sense of the apparent chaos of ordinary experience. The process is called “learning.” Watch little kids. They use the system effortlessly, and find great satisfaction, even joy, in it.

Joy and satisfaction in learning — in following where curiosity leads, in answering one’s own questions rather than merely trying to remember answers to someone else’s questions — is an idea that doesn’t seem to compute for today’s reformers, the politicians whose attention they’ve bought, or those educators who’ve climbed on board the standards and accountability fad with them.

Maybe that’s not surprising. If you start a country with people imbued with the Puritan Ethic with its demand for toughness, self denial, and no-nonsense hard work (as we did), then import a Prussian, top-down, authoritarian scheme for organizing schooling (as we did), then hand control to business types with patron saints like Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, and Ayn Rand, true believers in the idea that free-market competition and privatization can cure all social ills (as we’ve done), the present situation isn’t surprising.

Our cultural heritage asserts itself. When rigor, order, competition, and privatization don’t work, we just conclude that what’s needed is more rigor, more order, more competition, more privatization.

Wrong. Kids learn. Period. School or not. It’s natural. They do it using an extremely efficient system for organizing knowledge to construct understanding. If they’re helped to move from constructing understanding, to understanding how they construct understanding, they move to new levels of learning and creativity.

The traditional curriculum doesn't take kids to this second, understanding-how-they-construct-understanding stage. It just hands them a done deal — the invented core curriculum — and orders them to swallow it or be labeled failures. The first "reform" dose was No Child Left Behind; the second, Race to the Top. The new Common Core State Standards, and the national tests that will soon surely follow, deliver the dosage.

Be clear. I don't want to do away with school subjects. I want to put them in context and show how they fit together to form a mutually supportive, interconnected whole. Kids do that for themselves (and more) until about third or fourth grade. That's when the core curriculum starts to really kick in. From then on, schooling is more and more about remembering canned answers to questions which traditionally schooled specialists think they should ask.

I'm addressing a long-recognized problem:

The Association of American Colleges: "*We do not believe that the road to a coherent education can be constructed from a set of required subjects or academic disciplines*." Project On Redefining the Meaning and Purpose of Baccalaureate Degrees, 1985)

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching: "*The disciplines have fragmented themselves into smaller and smaller pieces, and undergraduates find it difficult to see patterns in their courses and relate what they learn to life*." Prologue to "College: The Undergraduate Experience In America," November 1986

Do I think a curricular fix is The Answer to America's education problems? No. It won't feed kids breakfast, repair their teeth, fit them with glasses, counter the effects of lead poisoning, stabilize their families, give them a place to sleep, counter the stresses to which they're subjected, or address the many other problems stemming from poverty, bureaucratic excess, legislative irresponsibility, corporate control, anti-intellectualism, and all else that gets in the way of learning.

But it's AN answer to a fundamental problem to which scholars have been calling attention for centuries, a problem that, until it's dealt with, will continue to doom every education reform effort. It's simply not possible to build a viable knowledge-based institution on a flawed understanding of the nature of knowledge and how it's acquired.

Do I want authorities to mandate school use of what I'm talking about? Absolutely not. I want Congress, the Obama administration, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the U.S. Department of Education, the Gates, Broad, and Walton Foundations, the mayors who've taken over big-city schools, the publishers of tests and other educational materials, and so on — I just want them to get out of the way.

Get out of the way of real reform. What they're offering (accompanied by threats and bribes) is more of the same old same old 19th Century thinking, now "legitimized" by rich philanthropists, big-business CEOs, politicians, lawyers, and hedge fund managers, all

supported by mainstream media that think Arne Duncan, Joel Klein, Jeb Bush, Michelle Rhee, and other high-profile pontificators really know how to fix schools. They don't.

In a recent book (http://www.infoagepub.com/products/Whats-Worth-Learning), (priced as low as I can get the publisher to go) I argue, in simple, jargon-free language, the merits of our ancient, built-in organizer of knowledge. In a free course of study (http://www.marionbrady.com/Connections), I show how to use that organizer to help kids think better, and do so without it costing taxpayers a dime. Working together, teachers and kids across America (and beyond our boundaries, if my mail means anything) could hammer my crude "beta version" instruction guide into a curriculum that would be better than anything commercial publishers or centralized authorities will ever be able to produce, at any price.

What's standing in the way of that right now is an institution paralyzed by fear. I can't even get a low-profile pilot program in place because teachers are afraid of administrators, administrators are afraid of state politicians, state politicians are afraid of Washington, Washington is afraid of losing corporate support, and corporatists are afraid of damaging their bottom lines. The whole dysfunctional operation is driven by scores on standardized tests incapable of measuring the truly consequential.

It's hard to imagine a poorer system for preparing the young for coping with the mess that system has helped create. Ω

A radical idea to transform what kids learn in school

Posted May 15, 2012.

Exxon-Mobil is airing education-reform television ads. In the one I've seen most often, implicit and explicit messages are simple and clear: (a) We live in a dangerous, technologically complex world. (b) Our lives, liberties, and happiness hinge on our ability to cope with that world. (c) Coping requires mastery of math (d) On standardized math tests, America ranks 25th in the world. (e) Be ashamed and afraid. (f) Get behind corporate education reform efforts.

I've no confidence in the standardized tests that produced that ranking or the ranking itself. Scores on tests that can't measure the qualities of mind and spirit upon which survival depend are useless. And oversimplifying statistics to support an ideology-driven agenda is inexcusable.

I agree, however, that America needs good mathematicians.

How many? The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics says, "Employment of mathematicians is expected to increase by 16 percent from 2010 to 2020…There will be competition for jobs because of the small number of openings in this occupation."

Take math teachers out of the mix, and the number of mathematicians America needs is tiny. If one kid in each high school in the country became a professional mathematician, it would glut the market.

So, what's now different in math education as a consequence of corporate pressures? Math requirements have been boosted for every kid. School days and years have been lengthened to expand math instruction time. Recess, art, music — even other academic subjects — have been dropped or scaled back to allow more time for math drill. Math courses have been moved down a grade level to make them tougher. Reading instruction has been refocused to emphasize "informational text" of the sort mathematicians might use. Constant testing monitors math performance, and failing a single high-stakes math test can keep even an honors student from getting a high school diploma.

Stupid. Running every kid in America through the math gauntlet to get a handful of mathematicians is like buying a bakery to get a loaf of bread. But even if thousands were needed, it makes no sense to force everybody to line up and run that gauntlet. Putting a kid with superior math ability and potential in a class with thirty-plus other kids will either hold her or him back or drag the thirty-plus forward at a rate beyond their ability to cope. How smart is that?

What the reformers have done in math they want to do across the board — push every kid through the same narrow standardizing hole in every subject. It can't be done, and it shouldn't be done, but it's being tried on a monumental, nationwide scale.

And when it doesn't work, instead of blaming THE SYSTEM, teachers and kids are punished.

Shaping THE SYSTEM, of course, is the belief that studying a mix of pre-selected, required subjects provides a comprehensive, well-rounded education. That's an admirable aim, but it's never even come close to being met. When, long ago, big guns in education policymaking sat down around a conference table to decide what courses students had to pass to get a high school diploma, they didn't start from scratch and look at all possible options. They chose from an existing, much shorter list set by custom, reinforced by familiarity, unsupported by research or an articulated philosophy.

Over time, that list of school subjects has acquired an extremely powerful label. It's called "the core curriculum," and the assumption that it does indeed provide a comprehensive, well-rounded education is simply taken for granted. So firm is the place "the core" holds in the public mind, there wasn't a peep from the mainstream media when the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers rammed through something they called "The Common Core State Standards Initiative."

Disregard the word "State" in that title. For all practical purposes, the core is now America's national curriculum. The governors and school officers who pushed the Initiative think that standardizing the curriculum provides "a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn…" Corporate interests also think it's a good thing, but for a different reason: It standardizes the education market, thereby significantly upping profit potential.

The secretive, long-running, organized, well-financed campaign to centralize, standardize, and privatize American education is on track. To follow the campaign, follow the money.

Standardized or not, there are at least two dozen reasons why faith in the core curriculum is misplaced (see p. 78, "The Complete List…"). Here are three:

(1) Humankind's hope for the future lies, as it always has, in the richness of human variability. We differ in experience, situation, aspirations, attitudes, abilities, interests, motivations, emotions, life chances, prospects, potential, and luck. To survive and prosper, these differences need to be exploited to the maximum. The core curriculum minimizes them.

(2) Knowledge is exploding at an ever-accelerating rate. Whole new fields of study unimagined even a few years ago are emerging. The explosion isn't just going to continue, it's going to accelerate. Thinking we know enough to lock ANY curriculum in place — much less one that's more than a hundred years old — is either naïve or malicious.

(3) The future is unknowable. Period. Even if it were possible to standardize and program kids, we don't know — NOBODY knows — what they'll need to know next week, much less for the rest of their lives. They may need technical skills no one now has, or the ability to survive on edible weeds and a quart of water a day. Neither the Common Core nor the tests that manufacturers are able to write can take adequate account of an unknown future.

What's an alternative to today's mandated, standardized curriculum? An elective curriculum.

By "elective," I don't mean offering kids a couple of options if they pass all their math, science, language arts and social studies courses, or are willing to stick around after hours. I mean that, starting no later than middle school, kids set their own schedules, going in whatever directions their interests, abilities, and respect for parental and teacher opinion lead.

Of course, that's not going to happen. Bureaucrats, pointing to statutes, would quickly shut down any school that gave kids real freedom of choice. Politicians would resurrect the accusation they once used to sell No Child Left Behind, that teachers were guilty of "the soft bigotry of low expectations." Policymakers would argue that workforce needs trump individual needs. Corporations making billions selling "solutions" to the educational problems they're helping create would threaten to cut off political campaign contributions.

Many (maybe most) educators, comfortable in their niches, would defend those niches by pointing to personal successes.

And all will dismiss my proposal by arguing that kids don't know what's best for them.

There's some truth in that. Kids have needs they aren't able to articulate (a particular interest of mine). But given freedom to choose, their choices will be far wiser than those spilling out of the Trojan horse the American Legislative Exchange Council and its allies slipped through public education's gate — the Common Core State Standards Initiative.

That Initiative solves no significant problem. It is itself the problem. Its quick, unquestioning acceptance by most of the education establishment and the general public is yet another manifestation of the widening authoritarian streak in American character.

Boycott the tests, and hammer the clueless politicians who support them. Do that, and they'll suddenly discover an interest in talking to people who actually know something about educating.

When that dialog begins, you can do future generations and the world an enormous favor: Insist on a post-elementary-level curriculum that's at least 90% elective. Let human nature do its thing. Ω

The biggest problem with traditional schooling

Posted June 13, 2012.

Fairtest, Parents Across America, Save Our Schools, United Opt-Out National, and regional groups such as Fund Education Now, are fighting to stop the corporate takeover of public education. It's a David-Goliath match.

They're up against the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Business Roundtable, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the biggest philanthropic foundations in the world, most of the mainstream media, and the highest-ranking officials in both political parties.

Goliath has money and power, and has been using it for years in a campaign to privatize public schools. Those who oppose Goliath are labeled "defenders of the status quo." David, coming late to the fight, has neither money nor power, just a warning message and social media for getting that message out.

Believing that public schools are essential to democracy and our way of life, and concerned about how poorly the young are being equipped to deal with a complex, dangerous, unknowable future, I couldn't be happier about David's growing clout.

But I want to do more than just stop the destruction. "You never change things by fighting existing reality," said Buckminster Fuller. "To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

I want to help build that new model.

Decades of teaching adolescents tell me that the single biggest problem kids face with traditional schooling is information overload. So much random, disorganized, disconnected information is dumped on them they can't come even close to coping with it.

That some seem to do so — collect "A"s and ace standardized tests — can be misleading. They've learned to play the simple "Remember" game. But if the game is made more challenging, if, for example, it's changed to "Infer" or "Hypothesize" or "Synthesize" or "Value," scores and grades shift, sometimes even reversing the "A"s and the "F"s, the "B"s and the "D"s.

…the single biggest problem kids face in traditional schooling is information overload. So much random, disorganized, disconnected information is dumped on them they can't come even close to coping with it.

Back in the 1960s, while teaching at Florida State University, I concluded that mental organization is the key to productive, creative thought. The more I studied the matter, the more convinced I became that although the so-called "core curriculum" is an adequate organizer of school subjects, it's a lousy organizer of general knowledge, and general knowledge is what holds daily life together.

I needed a general organizer for work I was doing with kids attending Florida State University's on-campus K-12 school. I found it in General Systems Theory as it had developed during World War II. Adding to my confidence in the potential of systems theory for radically improving learner performance is the fact that the very young, long before words like "chemistry," "economics," and "geometry" mean anything to them, know how to make sense, and use systems thinking to do it.

That has to mean that they're using a systemic mental organizer. How quickly they learn to use that organizer to navigate an incredibly complicated world says that the organizer is first rate, and should be put to use. It shouldn't replace school subjects, but integrate and enhance them. The core subjects sometimes run parallel, overlap, or support each other (e.g. science and math, language arts and social studies) but they can't be patched together in any coherent way to create an intellectually manageable, sense-making tool. Systems theory solves that problem. It makes all subjects part of a single, coherent, easily understood, mutually supportive sense making tool.

To me, the core's inherent problems explain why most schooling doesn't "take," why kids are usually bored and disengaged, why adults remember and use so little of what they once "learned" in school at great expense, why K-12 fads and reforms come and go, eventually fading away in a sort of embarrassed silence.

The current multi-billion dollar push to put the Common Core State Standards in place, and write tests for every school subject under the sun, will follow the same path and suffer the same fate. It's as futile as pounding sand down a rat hole. The whole Common Core circus is designed to improve the specialized studies that make up the core curriculum (and it may or rmay not do that), but what K-12 kids really need is a system for organizing GENERAL knowledge.

They HAVE such a system. But they don't know they have it, so for educational purposes, it isn't doing them any good. It has to be lifted into consciousness, elaborated, and put to intentional use to help them make better sense of themselves, each other, and the world. (And, of course, school subjects.)

Let me try to explain the basics of that system. It's simple, so if it doesn't seem so, it will be because it's taken for granted, and we're not used to looking closely at things we take for granted.

Making sense of something, we do the following:

(a) Locate it in space (in the next block; South Africa; on the top shelf; about six miles north of Hastings).

(b) Locate it in time (after lunch; next week; every ten minutes; October 14, 1066).

(c) Identify the actors (Tom and Huck; union members; Holocaust survivors; Norman and Saxon armies).

(d) Describe the action (took blood samples; built a raft; walked all the way home; fought a battle).

(e) Attribute cause (the road was icy; she lost her temper; too much sugar; to gain control of England).

That done, we relate the five (On October 14, 1066, Norman and Saxon armies met about six miles north of Hastings and fought a battle for control of England).

That's it. Those five kinds of information, (a) through (e), take in and organize all knowledge—school, street, everything. Kids helped to lift them into consciousness, elaborate them in ever-greater detail, relate and make intentional use of them, get smarter quick. They have a powerful tool that helps them cope far more easily with information overload and unlock their creative potential. Once lifted into consciousness, they'll use it for the rest of their lives.

You're skeptical? Of course. That's to be expected. The only people who aren't, are those who've helped kids understand the system, and in so doing come to understand it for themselves.

I give away a course of study designed to help teachers of adolescents and older students do that. It's called *Connections* http://www.marionbrady.com/Connections-InvestigatingReality-ACourseofStudy.asp. And you can see comments from a user here: http://www.marionbrady.com/documents/BillWebb.pdf .

Connections isn't a finished product, and never should be. It needs continuous input from teachers who work with kids every day and talk to each other about what worked, what didn't work, and how it could be improved. It needs to be piloted.

But right now, Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, Arne Duncan, Bill Gates, Mike Bloomberg, Eli Broad (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/challenging-eli-broads-school-memories/2012/06/10/gJQArn7ZTV_blog.html), Andrew Cuomo, Michelle Rhee, Jeb Bush (http://stateimpact.npr.org/florida/2012/05/31/how-jeb-bush-stood-up-to-alec-for-national-education-standards), and others block the way. They've bought the corporate line, and any innovation that doesn't fit with the Common Core Standards in some obvious way, or doesn't lend itself to mass testing, is off limits.

So go, Fairtest (http://www.fairtest.org/), Parents Across America (http://parentsacrossamerica.org), Save Our Schools (http://www.saveourschoolsmarch.org/), United Opt-Out National (http://unitedoptout.com/), Fund Education Now (http://www.fundeducationnow.org/). If classroom teachers, school principals, and local school boards know you've got their backs, if the National Resolution on High Stakes Testing gets enough signers, I might be able to get a few pilot programs in place.

I'd love to see *Connections* or some other free, open source, general education teaching tool — a tool owned and operated by working classroom teachers — go head to head with Harcourt Educational Measurement, CTB McGraw-Hill, Riverside Publishing, and NCS Pearson. Ω

Is Khan Academy a real 'education solution'?

Posted July 12, 2012; *(Introduction by Valerie Strauss).*

The Khan Academy has been in the education news lately but it's not the kind of publicity that its founder, Salman Khan, would have chosen if given a choice.

The academy is a nonprofit organization started by Khan, a former hedge-fund manager, that offers free lessons in math and other subjects via videos posted on the Khan Academy Web site.

Last month, two associate professors from Grand Valley State University in Michigan critiqued one of the Khan videos — on negative and positive integers — in a satirical

video:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hC0MV843_Ng&list=UUso_yTT2OOb7nRhFIcL7xfw&index=2&feature=plcp

…that pointed out problems in the specific lesson and, more broadly, made fun of the entire Khan enterprise, Education Week reported. The academy pulled the suspect video and replaced it.

And now, educator Dan Meyer and Ed Week opinion blogger Justin Reich, noting that there are errors in some of the Khan Academy videos, have started a contest inviting readers to critique the academy lessons. You can see how to participate here: http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/edtechresearcher/2012/06/the_mtt2k_prize_and_kudos_for_khan.html.

This is the background for the following post on the kind of teaching that the Khan Academy offers. It was written by Marion Brady, veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.

By Marion Brady

People who are good at what they do should be admired. Salman Khan is good at what he does. He should be admired.

What does Khan do? With his Khan Academy, he "delivers information."

A new Time magazine article identifies him as a 35-year-old hedge fund manager turned YouTube professor who has recorded well over 3,000 digital lectures on math and other subjects, lectures that are online and available free.

Khan believes, says the article, that, with his "video-driven teaching method at its heart," he has "stumbled onto a solution to some of education's most intractable problems. Learners watch his lectures as homework, then go to school where classroom teachers provide personalized help in learning the material he covered in his lecture. This reversal of the usual order of homework and schoolwork is called "flipping" the classroom.

Bill Gates is an enthusiastic fan of flipping — enthusiastic enough to have sent several million dollars Khan's way. "I'd been, frankly, frustrated at how little creative work was being done to use the Web as a core component of instruction," Gates told Time, "and when I saw this, I thought — yes, he's got it." Google, Netflix CEO Reed Hastings, and Irish entrepreneur Sean O'Sullivan have been similarly impressed and have added $10 million to Gates' several millions.

Is Khan right? Has he "stumbled onto a solution to some of education's most intractable problems"?

Education has more than its share of those "solutions." The fact that millions log on to his videos every day, that 15,000 classrooms make use of the lectures, that over 160 million videos have been watched since 2006, and that they're used in 234 countries, suggests that he's addressing some of those problems.

The afternoon and evening of July 3, 2012, I went with my wife to a family picnic in the back yard of the home of one of her grandnieces in Fairfield, Ohio. About 40 people, evenly split between adults and kids, attended.

Never having lived closer to her family than about 1,000 miles, and seeing most of them for only a few days a year, I couldn't be a very active participant in the picnic's catch-up-on-family-matters conversations. I mostly sat, listened, and watched.

Mostly watched Jonah. Jonah, two years and nine months old. I first noticed him squatted quietly watching his grand-uncle Gene fill dozens of water balloons to about tennis-ball size, tie them off, and hand them to older kids for their water war.

Jonah wasn't a warrior. When the novelty of the game began to wear off, Gene handed him a filled missile and went off to eat, leaving a stool, the garden hose, a bucket, a sprinkling can, and a handful of unused balloons.

Jonah squeezed his balloon and watched it bulge out. Squeezed it again and again, clearly taken with the feel of it. Eventually, fascinated by the bulges, he began pinching them with a finger and thumb.

A small, protruding bulge gave him an idea. He put it in his mouth and bit down. The balloon exploded in his face, soaking the front of his T-shirt.

Unperturbed, and oblivious of others, he picked up the hose and tried to fit one of the unused balloons over the end of the plastic nozzle. Tried and tried and tried. No luck. Tried with a two other balloons. Still no luck. Giving up, he turned his attention to the spigot, attempted to twist it left and right and finally found that a hard, counterclockwise turn produced a gentle stream.

He studied the stream's trajectory, pointing it down, up, out, in toward his mouth. He ran water into the bucket, poured it into the sprinkling can, tilted the can, watched as it emptied, then repeated the process.

After 45 minutes or so, his father came, picked him up, swung him in a circle, pitched him up in the air, caught him, then carried him off.

I've no idea what line of work Jonah will enter, but I watched as he laid the groundwork for a career in hydraulic engineering.

Here's a serious problem. To set wise education policy, we need to know how kids learn most efficiently. Notwithstanding the present blind faith in standardized testing, we can only guess at an answer.

Jonah, exploring how a part of the world worked, was obviously learning, and doing so at a deeper level, at a more rapid rate, and with a greater probability of life-long retention than would have been the case had he been strapped in his high chair and lectured on the subject.

But how can we know the level of efficiency of that process? How much had he learned? What sort of test could attach a score to it? Was his curiosity, or a particular product of that curiosity, more deserving of measurement? What practical use could be made of a score for either?

The myriad ways we learn and the number of uncontrollable variables involved put usefully precise evaluation of learner performance far beyond reach. If we can't do it for one kid in one learning situation, we're kidding ourselves if we think that computer-scored tests can evaluate the quality of thought of millions of kids for a year. We've made commercially produced standardized tests so important we're blind to the enormity of their inadequacies and to the damage they're doing to the young, to the teaching profession, and to the society for which the young will soon be responsible.

There being no scientific way to determine with useful precision the relative efficiency of different ways of learning, the judgment of those closest to the process — experienced teachers — is surely the best guide.

I can speak with authority only for one experienced teacher: Myself.

I haven't the slightest doubt that the Number One way that most of us know what we know is what Jonah was demonstrating — autonomous, firsthand, curiosity-driven, wide-ranging, self-directed, trial and error, immediate feedback, personal experience.

Number Two in efficiency is learning through shared experience and the dialogue that ordinarily accompanies it.

The Number Three way we learn — from "delivered information"— is a distant third in teaching-learning efficiency.

If I'm right, we have schooling backwards. On orders from corporate interests and Congress, we've put nearly all of our education eggs in basket Number Three, the least efficient. A few educator outliers use basket Number Two, but their claim that small groups working on projects of their own choosing to learn like gangbusters is widely ignored. Basket Number One — the one Jonah demonstrated — is of no interest at all to policymakers.

A mix of Numbers One and Two would move learners to a whole new level of performance, but the big money is on delivered information, and Khan delivers. He's good. His work fills a niche. He'll help sell a lot of high-tech hardware. He'll hand a crutch to teachers who need it. He'll nudge students along who click on his lectures, provided they're ready to be nudged. He'll get rich, and help manufacturers of standardized tests and test prep materials do the same.

He'll also powerfully reinforce the theory of learning that, more than any other, has brought education to crisis — the belief that pre-packaged, delivered information is how we come to know most of what we know.

Yes, Khan is good. In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

But a lecture is a lecture. The teaching limitations of delivered information are inherent and familiar to all experienced teachers who pay attention. Flipping classrooms will hardly make a dent in education's most intractable problems. The idea doesn't even come close to meriting the over-the-top head that Time's editors gave the article: "Reboot the School."

Intractable educational problems will begin to disappear when learners' rear ends are gotten off school furniture and allowed out where life is being lived, when learners' eyes are lifted from reference works passed off as textbooks and directed to the real world, when learners' minds are respected too much to treat them as mere storage units for secondhand, bureaucratically selected information.

Intractable problems in education will begin to disappear when kids are not just allowed to chart their own course, but are encouraged to do so, and given means to that end. Too bad there are no policymakers willing to promote that idea, and no rich philanthropists willing to put up encouragement money. Ω

Education's biggest design flaw

Posted July 29, 2012

I live on the west bank of the Indian River Lagoon on Florida's East Coast. Across the Lagoon, in the distance, is Kennedy Space Center. For years, I walked out on my dock and watched space shuttle launches.

On a clear, cold January day in 1986, a little before noon, the space shuttle Challenger lifted off the pad. Seventy-three seconds later it exploded, leading to the death of its seven crew members. There was almost no wind, so the white smoke plumes from the engines, then the explosion and burning debris, brightly lit by sunlight, hung in the sky for a very long time.

The disaster resulted from failure of an O-ring, a rubberlike seal in the right solid fuel booster rocket. Brittle from the cold, it allowed hot gas to leak and eat away hardware until it burned through the external fuel tank and ignited its contents.

Small design problem. Big consequence.

American education has a problem, and, left unaddressed, its consequences will be catastrophic. The problem is an appalling, embarrassing, inexcusable rate of childhood poverty, one of the worst in the developed world. Compare our 22.4 % rate with Sweden at 2.6%. Poverty being the single best predictor of test scores, that's pretty far from a level playing field for America's educators.

The poverty situation is so dire it almost seems inappropriate to call attention to a second, very different problem. I do so, first, because I believe the problem is far too serious to continue to ignore; second, because I want to toss a wrench into the corporate gears now grinding out destructive, market-based school reform policies. I'd like to think that the amateurs promoting today's simplistic reform policies are smart enough to realize they're in over their heads, that American education has problems they've never even thought about.

Call this one a design problem. It may seem small, but its consequences are huge. Solve the poverty problem, and America's scores on international tests will once more be at or near the top. But leave the design problem in place, and the scores of none of the top performers will mean what they could and should mean.

The design problem? Traditional instruction is dumping poorly organized information on the young, and they can't process it. The problem isn't the amount of information — the brain isn't a bucket that can overflow. The problem is the information's incoherence.

That the organization of information is important is taken for granted. That's what school subjects do-organize information about chemistry, economics, the Renaissance, geology, physiology, Elizabethan literature, geometry, and so on. And on and on.

Teachers have it easy. They only have to deal with the organization of information in their specialization. But kids have it impossibly hard. They're expected to deal with five or six different knowledge organizing schemes, switching from one to another as their daily schedules require.

And they can't do it.

Don't dismiss this as an esoteric or marginal matter. The kids who seem to be coping, are not, are instead relying primarily on the fleeting benefits of short-term memory. The rest are turning off, forgetting, parroting, stressing, resisting, rebelling, acting out, disengaging, dropping out.

Every one of those reactions screams SYSTEM problem, but today's reformers insist that poor performance is a PEOPLE problem, that all would be well if teachers could just be bribed, scared, or otherwise pressured into doing better work. Better yet, they should quit and be replaced by electronic talking heads on learner laptops.

Reneé Descartes, writing in 1628, summarized the design problem:

"If, therefore, anyone wishes to search out the truth of things in serious earnest, he ought not to select one special science; for all the sciences are connected to each other and interdependent..."

Rigor advocates notwithstanding, kids love searching out the truth of things in serious earnest. They can't help it. It's human nature. They turn off, forget, parrot, stress, resist, rebel, act out, disengage, and drop out because, overwhelmed by random, abstract, disconnected information, they can't pull it together and make enough sense of it to find satisfying truths.

This is at the top of my list of reasons for opposing the current corporately driven education reform juggernaut. Its dedication to the curricular status quo — the Common Core State Standards — makes addressing the design problem impossible. Got that? Impossible.

The problem of information organization can be solved, and rather easily, by making use of systems theory, but it won't get done by Bill Gates, Arne Duncan, Jeb Bush, Michelle Rhee, big-city mayors, syndicated columnists, hedge fund managers, Congress, state governors, testing companies, or any of the rest of those now running the show.

Their misdiagnoses of the causes of poor performance are leading us down one expensive, counterproductive path after another.

If there's ever a real winner in the international education competition, it will be the country whose education policymakers see the applicability to education of the ancient story of the blind men and the elephant.

That country won't be the United States. The super-hyped Common Core Standards, created by subject-matter specialists who don't talk to each other about the whole of which their specializations are parts, will see to that. Pearson, McGraw-Hill, and other test manufacturers, knowing they don't know how to test the connections and interdependencies that make information make sense, will help. They'll hire more lobbyists, expand their public relations departments, increase their political campaign contributions — whatever is necessary to keep the Common Core Standards in place. Contracts for the newly popular end-of-course standardized exams will shovel money from taxpayers into corporate coffers so fast it will be only a blur as it passes through local school budgets.

Meanwhile, the kids will continue to choke on unorganized and disorganized information. They'll study Standards for the Study of Tusks, Standards for the Study of Trunks, Standards for the Study of Ears, Standards for the Study of Legs, Standards for the Study of Flanks, Standards for the Study of Tails.

Elephant? What elephant? Ω

Eight problems with Common Core standards

Posted August 13, 2012

E. D. Hirsch, Jr.'s book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, was published March 1, 1987.

So it was probably in March of that year when, sitting at a dining room table in an apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side, my host — publishing executive, friend, and fellow West Virginian — said he'd just bought the book. He hadn't read it yet, but wondered how Hirsch's list of 5,000 things he thought every American should know differed from a list we Appalachians might write.

I don't remember what I said, but it was probably some version of what I've long taken for granted: Most people think that whatever they and the people they like happen to know, everybody else should be required to know.

In education, of course, what it's assumed that everybody should be required to know is called "the core." Responsibility for teaching the core is divvied up between teachers of math, science, language arts, and social studies.

Variously motivated corporate interests, arguing that the core was being sloppily taught, organized a behind-the-scenes campaign to super-standardize it. They named their handiwork the "Common Core State Standards" to hide the fact that it was driven by policymakers in Washington D.C., who have thus far shoved it into every state except Alaska, Minnesota, Nebraska, Texas, and Virginia.

This was done with insufficient public dialogue or feedback from experienced educators, no research, no pilot or experimental programs — no evidence at all that a floor-length list created by unnamed people attempting to standardize what's taught is a good idea.

It's a bad idea. Ignore the fact that specific Common Core State Standards will open up enough cans of worms to keep subject-matter specialists arguing among themselves forever. Consider instead the merit of Standards from a general perspective:

One: Standards shouldn't be attached to school subjects, but to the qualities of mind it's hoped the study of school subjects promotes. Subjects are mere tools, just as scalpels, acetylene torches, and transits are tools. Surgeons, welders, surveyors — and teachers — should be held accountable for the quality of what they produce, not how they produce it.

Two: The world changes. The future is indiscernible. Clinging to a static strategy in a dynamic world may be comfortable, even comforting, but it's a Titanic-deck-chair exercise.

Three: The Common Core Standards assume that what kids need to know is covered by one or another of the traditional core subjects. In fact, the unexplored intellectual terrain lying between and beyond those familiar fields of study is vast, expands by the hour, and will go in directions no one can predict.

Four: So much orchestrated attention is being showered on the Common Core Standards, the main reason for poor student performance is being ignored—a level of childhood poverty the consequences of which no amount of schooling can effectively counter.

Five: The Common Core kills innovation. When it's the only game in town, it's the only game in town.

Six: The Common Core Standards are a set-up for national standardized tests, tests that can't evaluate complex thought, can't avoid cultural bias, can't measure non-verbal learning, can't predict anything of consequence (and waste boatloads of money).

Seven: The word "standards" gets an approving nod from the public (and from most educators) because it means "performance that meets a standard." However, the word also means "like everybody else," and standardizing minds is what the Standards try to do. Common Core Standards fans sell the first meaning; the Standards deliver the second meaning. Standardized minds are about as far out of sync with deep-seated American values as it's possible to get.

Eight: The Common Core Standards' stated aim — "success in college and careers"— is at best pedestrian, at worst an affront. The young should be exploring the potentials of humanness.

I've more beefs, but like these eight, they have to do with the quality of education, and the pursuit of educational quality isn't what's driving the present education reform farce.

An illustration: As I write, my wife is in the kitchen. She calls me for lunch. The small television suspended under the kitchen cabinets is tuned to CNN, and Time cover girl Michelle Rhee is being interviewed.

"On international tests," she says, "the U.S. ranks 27th from the top."

Michelle Rhee, three-year teacher, education reactionary, mainstream media star, fired authoritarian head of a school system being investigated for cheating on standardized tests, is given a national platform to misinform. She doesn't explain that, at the insistence of policymakers, and unlike other countries, America tests every kid — the mentally disabled, the sick, the hungry, the homeless, the transient, the troubled, those for whom English is a second language. That done, the scores are lumped together. She doesn't even hint that when the scores of the disadvantaged aren't counted, American students are at the top.

If Michelle Rhee doesn't know that, she shouldn't be on CNN. If she knows it but fails to point it out, she shouldn't be on CNN.

It's hard not to compare Rhee with Jennifer, a friend of my oldest son. He wrote me recently:

> *…I asked Jenn if she was ready for school.*
>
> *"I'm waiting for an email from my principal to find out if I can get into my classroom a week early."*
>
> *"Why a whole week?"*
>
> *"To get my room ready."*
>
> *She teaches second graders. I ask her why she loves that grade. She laughs and says, "Because they haven't learned to roll their eyes yet."*
>
> *But I know it's much more than that. Her sister was down from Ohio for Jenn's birthday, and when she asked her what she wanted, Jenn said she needed 18 sets of colored pencils, 18 boxes of #2 pencils, 18 boxes of crayons, construction paper, name tags and so on — $346 dollars total.*
>
> *She's been doing this for 25 years. I'm sure she makes less than I do, but they could probably cut her salary 25 or 30% and she'd still want to get into her room early."*

Rhee gets $50,000 a pop plus first-class travel and accommodations for putting in an appearance to tell her audiences what's wrong with the Jennifers in America's schools, and what clubs should be swung or held over their heads to scare them into shaping up.

Future historians (if there are any) are going to shake their heads in disbelief. They'll wonder how, in a single generation, the world's oldest democracy dismantled its engine — free, public, locally controlled, democratic education.

If they dig into the secretive process that produced the Common Core State Standards, most of their questions will be answered. Ω

The 9th problem with the Common Core standards

Posted September 16, 2012

On August 15, the Washington Post's "The Answer Sheet" ran a column by me titled "Eight Problems with the Common Core Standards."(above).

Marc Tucker, long-time major player in the current test-based education reform effort, in an Education Week "Top Performers" blog, took me to task with a piece called "8 Problems With the Common Core State Standards? I Don't Think So." (http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top_performers/2012/09/8_problems)

My Washington Post piece was a little over 1,000 words. Mr. Tucker's response was twice that. If I were to respond point by point to his objections to my eight criticisms of the standards— which I'd really like to do — it would almost certainly double that word count. Few readers would stick with me for 4,000 words, even if editors were willing to publish them.

I'll stand by my criticisms, but try to move the dialogue along by adding a ninth. I'd have included it before, but couldn't squeeze it into a paragraph.

Mr. Tucker buys the conventional wisdom, that the subjects that make up the core — math, science, language arts, and social studies — "cover" the important stuff that kids need to know, from which it follows that anything that nails down more precisely what actually gets covered is a good thing. Ergo: the Common Core Standards.

He says, "…the core academic disciplines (the core subjects in the school curriculum) provide the conceptual underpinning for deep understanding of virtually everything we want our students to know."

Most people agree, including most teachers, especially younger ones. That's what they've been taught, and experience hasn't yet caused them to question orthodoxy.

I disagree, not about the standards providing conceptual underpinning for the core subjects (which I've never questioned). I take issue with the contention that the standards provide "deep understanding of virtually everything we want students to know…"

I'm not alone. Buckminster Fuller, Kurt Vonnegut, Alfred North Whitehead, Felix Frankfurter, Harlan Cleveland, Neil Postman, John Goodlad, David Orr, Ernest Boyer, Arnold Thackray, and dozens of other nationally and internationally known and respected people are on my side of the issue.

But we have a problem. The idea we're trying to get across isn't part of the current education reform dialogue. That means that in a few hundred words, I have to try to

introduce a new (and very abstract) idea, explain why it's of fundamental importance but at odds with the standards, and offer an alternative.

Here's that idea, as articulated by Peter M. Senge, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, he says:

> "From a very early age, we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world. This apparently makes complex tasks and subjects more manageable, but we pay a hidden, enormous price. We can no longer see the consequences of our actions; we lose our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole."

That "larger whole" is reality. We want kids to make better sense of it. To that end, we send them off to study school subjects that explain various parts of it. We don't, however, show them how those parts fit together, relate, interact, elaborate, and reinforce each other. When the bell rings, off they go to study a different subject that, as far as they can tell, is little or not at all related to the one they just left.

As this brief slideshow (http://www.marionbrady.com/Powerpoint/TheInvisibleElephant.swf) illustrates, this is a first-order problem, and the Common Core Standards ignore it. Locking the core subjects in place tells the world that America thinks a curriculum patched together in 1892 by 10 college administrators, a curriculum that reflects the industrial policy of the era, a curriculum that fails to acknowledge the fundamental, integrated nature of reality, is the best way to organize knowledge.

It's not. Systems theory as it developed during World War II is far better. Period. It doesn't replace the core subjects (which I've never advocated), just makes them working parts of a single, simpler, more efficient "master" mental organizer.

This is absolutely central to learning. Knowledge grows as we connect bits of it — as we discover relationships between, say, street width and sense of community, between birth order and certain personality traits, between capital investment decisions and political stability.

Compartmentalizing knowledge gets directly in the way of the basic process that makes kids (and the rest of us) smarter.

That systems thinking integrates knowledge isn't an original idea. I'm just passing it along and offering a way to operationalize it.

A little story: Years ago I realized that what educators like John Goodlad, Neil Postman, Alfred North Whitehead, Ernest Boyer and others were saying in books, articles, and speeches wasn't making any difference in what was actually happening in classrooms. Knowing it isn't always easy to translate theory into practice, I wrote a course of study for adolescents that showed how systems theory could help them see the connected nature of all knowledge and the minute-by-minute way they were experiencing it.

I chose to write for middle schoolers because they hadn't yet been thoroughly programmed by traditional instruction to compartmentalize what they knew, and because an earlier project I'd undertaken for Prentice-Hall, Inc. had led to friendships with several middle school principals around the country.

I contacted them. Would they be willing to pilot my course of study and give me feedback so I could refine it?

Nobody turned me down. Everything was in place for the fall of the year, then No Child Left Behind became law, and that was the end of that. I got letters and phone calls from the principals apologizing for having to back out of their commitment. It was clear to them that raising test scores, not improving kids' ability to make better sense of experience, was now the name of the education game.

And so it remains. Over the years, with my brother's help, I've continued to play with the course of study (http://www.marionbrady.com/Connections), thinking some rebel school system somewhere might pilot and help improve it, but the money and power behind the "standards and accountability" juggernaut probably make it unstoppable. The standards have been swallowed by just about everybody, and as soon as they've been digested, Pearson, McGraw-Hill, Educational Testing Service, and other manufacturers of standardized tests will be ready with contracts in hand for computerized tests in numbers sufficient to crash web servers.

The tests, of course, will build in a failure rate set by some faceless decision-maker — an easily operated spigot for meeting stockholder expectations. Open it — boost the failure rate — and up go sales of tests, test prep tools, instructional materials. And, of course, profits.

Even if I'm wrong about the eight other problems with the Common Core Standards (and I'm not), I don't see any wiggle room on this one. If I'm right, the current reform effort's centralizing of control of education, its micromanaging of classrooms by non-educators, its blocking of all innovation not tied to the core, and its reliance on destructive, simplistic tests that fail to take account of the fundamental nature of knowledge, and of human complexity and variability, will, in Senge's words, exact an "enormous price."

That price will be the inability of our children and our children's children to cope with a future shaping up to be more challenging than anything humans have thus far faced. Ω

A good teacher?

Posted October 11, 2012

A few weeks ago I flew into Buffalo, New York, rented a car, and drove down to northeastern Ohio for a high school class reunion — the 55th — for students I'd taught when they were 9th graders in 1952.

They told me stories about myself, some of which I wish they'd kept to themselves, but what they had to say got me thinking about the teacher I once was.

I have a lousy memory, but it's good enough to tell me that, notwithstanding assurances that I was their favorite teacher (what else could they say?), I hadn't really been a good one.

I certainly wasn't a good teacher in 1952. No first-year teacher is a good teacher.

I wasn't a good teacher in 1958 either. Some people thought I was; they had spoken sufficiently highly of me to prompt a superintendent from a distant, upscale school district to come and spend an entire day in my classes, then offer me a considerable raise if I'd come and teach in his district.

I did. But I can clearly recall leaning against the wall outside my room during a class change and saying to Bill Donelly, the teacher from the room next door, "There has to be more to it than this."

The "this" was what I was doing — following the standard practice of assigning textbook reading as homework, then, next day, telling kids my version of what the textbook had covered. Pop quizzes and exams told me how much they remembered. (According to reunion attendees, not much.)

I still wasn't a good teacher in 1963, but some people thought I was. I'd again been recruited, this time to teach in the "demonstration" school on the campus of a big state university.

Maybe I'm a slow learner, but I didn't start to feel good about what I was doing until about 1970. What helped make that happen were a few, almost casual, words.

Once again, I'd been recruited, this time by a textbook publisher. They'd contracted with a husband and wife team to produce a series of textbooks, and the team had run out of steam about halfway through the project. The publisher hoped to salvage the series, thought I could do it, and offered to pick up my salary if I'd take a leave of absence and work on it.

I hedged. I wasn't sure I could deliver, so we agreed that, with my brother's help, I'd produce something. If they liked it, and an independent panel of their choosing liked it, then we'd talk about a contract.

Three months later we submitted our stuff. It was good enough. But someone on the outsider review panel wrote a comment that pushed me around a corner. Permanently.

Referring to a particular activity, he or she said the student was being asked merely to, "Guess what's on my mind."

I think the main reason I was recruited to ever-better positions was the degree to which I fit the "good teacher" stereotype. I looked and acted the part. I could hold a class's attention. I liked kids. I had useful, non-school, "real world" experience. The only things I'd really enjoyed when I was in high school were the extra-curricular activities, so the kids and I had in common the feeling that much of what we were doing was something to be endured.

I met most of the standard, "good teacher" criteria well enough, but I eventually concluded that when I played that role there wasn't much real learning going on. Whoever tossed off that short comment almost 20 years into my teaching career had put a finger on my problem: What was in my head wasn't important. What mattered was what was going on in kids' heads.

I changed. In fact, I changed so much that if I were still teaching in a high school of the sort most policymakers seem to think is good and an evaluator came in with a checklist to evaluate me, I'd probably soon be looking for other work.

I moved my desk to the back of the room and shoved it into a corner, with no room to get behind it. I traded student desks for easily moved tables and chairs. I stopped using textbooks. I told the principal my classes might be meeting elsewhere than in my room. I protested administrative insistence on lessons plans for the week ahead, arguing that I couldn't know what to do on Thursday until I saw what had happened (or not happened) on Wednesday. I gave a one-question test at the beginning of the year, and asked the same question at the end of the year.

But the single biggest change: I shut up and sat down, which is where today's evaluator would be most likely to find me. I came to believe that my most successful classes were those in which I felt no need to talk at all. I gave tough assignments — tough not because they required a lot of work but because they required a lot of thought, no less from me than from the kids. And because I felt I needed to know about the quality of that thought, I put them in small conversational groups where they were comfortable "thinking out loud." I either just listened, or became just another group member. The really good days were those when the groups challenged each other's thinking, and I just sat and watched them have at it.

The work hung together and built toward an aim everyone clearly understood. In journal articles I wrote at the time, I often summed it up with some version of this:

"Each of us has acquired from our society a conceptual model of reality. The most important task of a general education is to help us understand that model, the models of

those with whom we interact, and the range of alternative models from which we might choose."

That, I believed and believe, is true "basic education."

In the 1960s, in high contrast to today's top-down mandates, federal education policy encouraged educators to think and dream. And they did, coming up with some wonderful ideas that quickly found their way into classrooms.

And bombed. Looking back, the reason was clear — failure to heed the biblical warning about putting new wine into old wineskins. For example, the university at which I was teaching at the time developed kits of hands-on materials that helped kids figure out for themselves certain principles of physics. They peddled them to commercial manufacturers of educational materials, who packaged them beautifully, wrote glowing (and true) sales pitches about what kids could learn from playing with the equipment, and sold them.

Most of the materials ended up on shelves in schools across the country. Some of them are probably still there under layers of dust, artifacts of a genuine revolution that never happened.

Because, when it comes to change, you can't do just one thing. Switching from passive to active learning — which is what that 1960s effort was all about — had, at the very least, implications for classroom furniture, textbook use, length of class period, student interaction, teacher understanding, learner-teacher relationships, methods of evaluation, administrator attitudes, parental and public expectations, bureaucratic forms and procedures.

Those didn't change, so the new teaching materials, not being "system friendly," were rejected. Worse, when system inertia caused the new materials to fail, there was a "back to basics" swing of the pendulum, and the seeds of today's simplistic reading and math grind were sown.

Some random questions prompted by reminiscing: Why won't the teacher effectiveness fad meet the same fate—change nothing because it tries to change just one thing? Might that not explain the supposed failure of the Gates Foundation "small schools" initiative? Is the present fixation on teacher characteristics reinforcing teacher-centered education rather than student-centered education? Are "effective" teacher qualities the same from kindergarten through 12th grade? Are the walls being erected by present reform efforts so high that real improvement is even farther out of reach?

And what explains the fascination with and faith in data and quantification that's driving education "reform" in America, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand? The Gates Foundation is spending $45 million on a project titled Measures of Effective Teaching (MET). MEASURES of Effective Teaching! Is there something in our shared cultural heritage that causes us to think that everything can be measured and a useful number attached to it?

The new big thing in reform circles is that every education-related decision must be data driven. Why do we resist the fact that, more often than not, the inherent complexity of quality makes it impossible to quantify it? Is resistance to that fact a crippling cultural trait? Ω

Note: *This op-ed piece was originally given a title by Valerie Strauss: "How long it took one teacher to become great." The word "great" does not appear in the article.*

How to save taxpayers billions of $$ — really

Posted October 24, 2012

My last of several jobs in industry before I began teaching school was with Atlas Powder Company. At Atlas, I learned something useful for the current education reform effort.

The production facility was about as wide as an average kitchen but a hundred or so kitchens long, stitched together along its length by a conveyor belt moving 155-mm artillery shells. Empty at the start, the shells moved down the belt, were poured full of hot, light-brown liquid explosive, then allowed to cool and harden. A four-inch-deep hole was drilled into the solidified explosive at the nose, a proximity fuse was inserted, the shells' tips were screwed in place, then off they went to underground storage.

The building's unusual shape was designed to minimize damage in case someone got careless.

Main problem: When the explosive mix cooled inside the shell, air bubbles would sometimes form. No kind of see-through-the-shell technology was in use, so inspection involved a very close look at the hole drilled in the nose. Was every square millimeter of it absolutely smooth?

Finding out took time and really good lighting, and the conveyor kept moving. So defense department mathematicians did studies and said, "You don't need to check every shell. You can find out if you have a bad batch by pulling off the line and carefully inspecting 6% of them."

Which is what the inspectors did. Sampling six out of a hundred did the job and helped keep costs under control.

Which brings me to your local, state, and federal tax bill for last year, this year, next year, and into the foreseeable future. And also brings me to the famous warning in President Eisenhower's January 1961 Farewell Address to the Nation. "We must," he said, "guard

against the acquisition of unwarranted influence …by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."

Here's another version of that warning: "Beware the education-test manufacturer complex. The potential for disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist."

Right now the scale on a per-dollar basis of the education-test manufacturer complex isn't on par with that of the military-industrial complex. However, companies that create and sell tests are on the problem and moving fast.

Forget for now the money involved. Think about the long-term consequences of taking control of kids' minds away from homes and parents, away from neighborhood schools and teachers, away from locally elected school boards and local press, and handing it over to people for whom quality education is far down their list of priorities, if it appears at all.

Do that, and you may come to the conclusion — to continue Eisenhower's warning — that this is a greater danger to our children's and grandchildren's "liberties and democratic processes" than that posed by the military-industrial complex.

What's the education-test manufacturer complex's long-term strategy, as coordinated by the American Legislative Exchange Council?

(1) Invent an education emergency and make skillful use of the mainstream media to push it.

(2) Attack the legitimacy of public education by destroying trust in its most obvious representatives — teachers.

(3) To make manipulation easy, centralize decision-making for standards and accountability at the highest possible level.

(4) Work behind the scenes with politicians from both political parties, wealthy foundations, and Wall Street types to push vouchers, charters, and funding for anything public that can be profitably privatized.

(5) Call congressional hearings on the matter and invite to testify only those "educators" and think-tank "experts" who — if they taught long enough to understand what they were doing — have long since forgotten it.

(6) Dazzle the continuous stream of new, young, inexperienced teachers with slick, colorful, ready-made instructional materials heavy with current jargon about it being "data driven," "child-centered," "research-based," "technology enabled," "blended," "aligned with the new Common Core Standards. "

Take these institution-destroying steps without checking out the history of previous similar attempts, without talking to real teachers, without research, without pilot programs, without trial runs, without cost-benefit analyses, without apology for a sneaky coup.

And keep bribing everybody in sight with campaign contributions, travel, sponsored conferences, free breakfasts, free lunches, free hospitality rooms, free whatever-your-little-heart-desires, just-ask-and-we'll-see-what-we-can-do.

Like the military-industrial complex, the tentacles of the education-testing complex reach into hidden places beyond the reach of democratic processes. Firmly backed (no questions asked) by both political parties, high-stakes standardized tests aren't going to go away. In fact, lots more are on their way.

But money is short, and some aspiring young office-seeker may see electoral gold in asking a simple question related to my Atlas Powder Company experience: What are we getting from the billions being spent on mass testing that couldn't be learned from representative sampling at a tiny fraction of the cost?

Answering that question will lead to other questions which, investigated, will yield a clear answer: Nothing. Mass, standardized, high-stakes, machine-scored tests tell us nothing useful that we couldn't learn with greater precision in other, far less costly ways.

Every testing company knows this. But they also know that most Americans have a sick fascination with measuring, labeling, and ranking, they know they're in the testing business to make money, and they know that taxpayers are an easy mark if they're not suspicious.

Thus far, most aren't. To keep it that way, test manufacturers work behind closed doors, keep test items from public scrutiny, get laws passed that make it a crime to examine them, and wrap the scores in mathematical formulas so complex few understand them well enough to even ask a question.

After our sick fascination with testing and ranking has run its course, after we finally decide to listen to real experts (http://www.pta.org/2553.htm) on testing rather than politicians; after thousands of neighborhood schools have been closed; after the best teachers have been driven out of the profession; after math and reading drills have replaced powerfully productive childhood play, art, music, and other drivers of personality development, creativity and ingenuity; after all the non-standardizeable kids are out on the street with nothing to show for the work they've done; after a bedrock of real democracy has been destroyed rather than thoughtfully enhanced, attention may be paid.

But the damage, irreversible, will have been done. Ω

The ultimate education reform

Posted November 14, 2012.

We learn most of what we know by doing something while thinking about it—learn about cooking by cooking, learn about getting through airport security by going through airport security, learn about removing appendixes by removing appendixes.

No textbook ever printed, no lecture ever delivered, no computer program ever written, puts school subjects to more relevant use, more thoroughly engages every thought process, or more directly simulates creativity, than learning by doing while thinking about it.

In learning, place is important. Learning to cook is easier in kitchens than in garages. Learning airport procedures is easier in airports than in shopping malls. Learning to remove appendixes is easier in hospital operating rooms than in restaurants.

Yes, place makes a difference in the quality of learning. We'd do well, then, to pay closer attention to the places we create for teaching and learning—schools.

Think back to those you attended. Recall the buildings, the classrooms, the design and arrangement of classroom furniture. More often than not what you'll remember are physical environments that had little or nothing to do with learning by doing. Typically, the buildings, classrooms, and furniture encouraged passivity—sitting still, facing front, maintaining eye contact with a teacher, listening, speaking either when spoken to or when given permission.

Traditional schooling assumes learner passivity. That's what gets textbooks printed, talking heads videoed, "star" teachers recruited, virtual learning ballyhooed, tough-love charter schools populated, university lecture halls furnished with hundreds of podium-facing seats.

We say, "Experience is the best teacher," then build schools that say we don't believe it. Point out the inconsistency, and hear the rationalizations: "Learning by experience is too inefficient." "Kids don't need to reinvent the wheel." "Trial and error take so much time it's not possible to cover the material." "Learning by doing should come later, after essential knowledge and skills have been learned."

I'm not saying that new ideas can't be transferred intact from the mind of a lecturing teacher or textbook author to the minds of learners. I'm saying it rarely happens.

So I've a proposal. America has trillions invested in school buildings, their foundations deep underground, their shapes set in brick and reinforced concrete, networked with pipes, wires, and ducts, doors and windows permanently in place. Their designs encourage learner passivity, and there's neither the money nor the will to change them.

Can they be re-purposed to really educate?

Yes. And it won't cost a dime. Not a door knob, light switch, patch of carpet, or pencil sharpener needs to change.

Within homes, apartments, offices, stores, workshops, factories, on work sites, and so on, are complex social systems—groups of people sharing an aim and interacting because of that aim.

Within schools are people who sometimes interact, but they're not really a social system, primarily because they almost never share an aim other than wanting to be somewhere else.

But they *could* share an aim. And if they did, kids would be learning to do better what they're going to be doing for the rest of their lives—trying to make sense of experience. Every waking moment, consciously or unconsciously, they're sizing up the situations in which they find themselves and trying to figure out how to make the most or the best of them.

Schools are "situations." They're real, vibrant slices of life. Their physical and social complexity model in miniature the world outside their walls, just do so on a smaller scale. Learners can measure them; compute their volumes; determine their locations, orientations, and methods of construction; reproduce their floor plans; trace their histories; study their climate control and communication systems; identify goods that enter and waste that exits; analyze their populations in dozens of different ways; explore parental and citizen attitudes toward them; investigate their funding; evaluate their decision-making procedures; bring their efficiencies and inefficiencies into the open; compare their claimed and actual aims.

Schools, in short, are comprehensive laboratories for the study of life. Every school subject worth teaching can be brought to bear in making sense of them, with enough raw material at hand for non-stop investigation at any level of sophistication, the task made easier by their immediacy, easy accessibility, compactness, tangibility, transparency (in theory, at least), and by adult guidance.

And because school is unfailingly relevant (even for those who are utterly bored or who hate it), the emotions without which learning never happens are dependably close. Look kids in the eyes, give them a genuinely difficult task—ask them to help make their school do what it's supposed to do and what society desperately needs for it to do, *and mean what you say*—and they and their teachers will create dynamic learning communities that, finally, justify the school's cost.

Close schools, reopen them the next day as learning organizations, allow them to move beyond the pedestrian constraints imposed by standardized testing, and they'll revolutionize the social institution upon which so much of humankind's chance of survival depends.

Note: For those who see potential in learning by doing that requires complex thought, click here: http://www.marionbrady.com/Connections-InvestigatingReality-ACourseofStudy.asp
Ω

Nine questions about ’21st Century curriculum

Posted November 28, 2012.

Willie Sutton, asked why he robbed banks, is supposed to have replied, “Because that’s where the money is.”

Willie said those weren’t his words—that some newspaper reporter had put them in his mouth—but it makes a good story.

“That’s where the money is” is also a major reason for Wall Street’s growing interest in public education. We’re closing in on two-thirds of a trillion dollars a year being spent on schooling in America, most of it collected as taxes, and corporate interests want as much of that steady money as they can get.

Like who? Test manufacturers, publishers of textbooks and test prep materials, charter school chains, tutoring organizations, manufacturers of computers and other education-related hardware and software, operators of virtual schools, and the new “education management organizations”—all have their eyes on a share of the public education funding pie. Even foreign investors are being told there’s serious money to be made in American education.

Here’s an excerpt from a March 31, 2011, Harvard Business Review blog:

> The development of common standards and shared assessments radically alters the market for innovation in curriculum development, professional development, and formative assessments. Previously, these markets operated on a state-by-state basis, and often on a district-by-district basis. But the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets . . .

Got that? No more tedious, costly attempts to cater to the idiosyncrasies of the 50 states or, worse yet, to school districts with ideas of their own about how their kids should be educated. With the Common Core State Standards in place, everything from promotional brochures to the pool of test items can be simplified and standardized, radically cutting costs and increasing profits.

Joanne Weiss, quoted above, thinks that’s a very good thing, and Weiss isn’t just some casual blogger. She’s U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan’s chief of staff.

In the well-engineered drive to privatize public education, the phrase "21st Century curriculum" plays a role similar to "New and Improved!" on boxes of laundry detergent. It doesn't really mean anything, just has a vague, positive ring to it. The characteristics of a good curriculum haven't changed since the word was invented, and they're not going to change in the 21st or any other century unless human nature changes.

A school's curriculum is its primary *raison d'être*. No matter anything else, if its curriculum is lousy, the education it provides will be lousy.

How can you tell if curricula pitched as "21st Century" are lousy? Here are a few easy-to-answer questions to ask:

- Does it have a clear, concrete, *overarching* aim consistent with societal values?
- Could most kids explain how every lesson connects to that aim?
- Does the curriculum not just respect but capitalize on learner differences?
- Does it progress smoothly through ever-higher levels of "idea" complexity?
- Does it require routine use of all thought processes?
- Is what's taught immediately useful in dealing with life outside school?
- Does it get kids out of their seats and doing something they consider important?
- Does it reflect the recent switch from difficult to easy access to near-limitless information?
- Is what's learned too complicated to be evaluated by machine?

A good curriculum will get a "Yes" response to all the questions, including some theoretical and philosophical ones not on the list.

The familiar, traditional general education curriculum in place in America's schools and colleges gets an across-the board "No" for the nine questions.

Unfortunately, criticism of that curriculum makes almost nobody happy. The misnamed "education reformers" don't like it because it doesn't fit their insistence that what ails American education is simply a lack of rigor. Many educators don't like it because it calls into question what they've always taken for granted. Bureaucrats don't like it because maintaining the status quo is what they're paid to do.

Once upon a time, teachers could close their classroom doors and work around the flawed curriculum. No more. That option is all but gone, shoved aside by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers in a Common Core campaign financed in part by the Gates Foundation. By promoting adoption of the Common Core Standards, they've locked a 19th Century curriculum in place, and with corporately produced standardized tests, have made deviating from it all but impossible.

It grieves me—an unapologetic progressive educator—that the most organized opposition to the Common Core is coming from hard-right conservatives. I applaud their effort to keep control of what's taught out of congressional and Department of Education hands, but I know from firsthand experience that their answers to my nine questions are the same as

the privatizers' answers, the same as shallow-thinking educators' answers, the same as the bureaucrats' answers:

"No."

P.S. If you think you were well-educated, re-read the nine questions. Ω

Why schools used to be better

Posted January 3, 2013.

You enter a checkout lane at Walmart, Target, or other big-box store and put your purchases on the counter. They're scanned by a device that reads bar codes and translates them into data fed at the speed of light through fiber optics cables to corporate headquarters and distribution centers.

The data produced by the bar code readers keep track of inventory, determine appropriate staffing levels, provide feedback about advertising effectiveness, and much else that guides decision making.

Those in Washington now shaping education policy are certain that what data tracking does for business it can do for education.

But there's a problem. Kids don't come with bar codes, and teachers don't have scanners. Nancy Creech, the Michigan kindergarten teacher who recently told her story here on "The Answer Sheet", summarized a consequence of data-collecting mandates. Authorities in her state, unwilling to trust her professional judgment, require her to give more than 27,000 grades or marks to her 4- and 5-year-olds. That number, evenly distributed over the school year, would require her to take a data-related action every two minutes of every school day!

This, of course, is ridiculous — almost as ridiculous as assuming that machine-scored standardized tests produce important data about the mental ability and future potential of those who take them.

As others have pointed out, computer programmers have an appropriate acronym for irrelevant data: "GIGO"—"Garbage In, Garbage Out." If data fed into a computer is nonsense, the data coming out will be nonsense.

The non-educators now in charge of education have the teaching profession awash in GIGO.

Scores on tests created by and for the dominant culture but given to every kid? GIGO. Scores on tests that can't evaluate original or complex thought? GIGO. Scores on tests deliberately designed to produce a pre-determined failure rate? GIGO. Scores on life-

affecting tests that ignore dozens of variables over which educators have no control? GIGO. Scores on tests that …well, you get my point.

Put aside for the moment the data produced by commercially manufactured, machine-scored standardized tests, and consider this data (http://www.schoolsmatter.info/2012/10/us-leads-world-in-downloading.html):

United States: 61,361
Germany: 31,122
China: 19, 826
UK: 8,066
Japan: 6,915
Canada: 6,752
Australia: 6,020
India: 5,552
France: 4,880
South Korea: 4,630

Those are the numbers, by country, of scientific articles downloaded from the internet over a 24 hour period on April 12, 2012. Do they suggest America's educational system is teetering on the edge of catastrophe? Or do they instead raise questions about the usefulness and reliability of test scores that say we're 17th in the world in science and 25th in math?

The lack of fit between our standardized test scores and our scientific productivity calls for explanations. Possibilities: Unlike at least some other countries, America tests just about every kid; educational systems differ from country to country in what's taught to whom, when, making direct comparisons impossible; an increasing number of American kids, tired of the guessing game, no longer take tests seriously.

But perhaps what's most important in international comparisons is that the published scores are country averages, and it's not a country's average kids but its high scorers who grow up to download scientific papers.

And America has a lot of high scorers.

Surely a more important question, then — one that's not being asked — is "Why does America have far more than its share of high scorers?"

Here's a theory: Up until this generation of kids — before business leaders and politicians took control of schooling, before No Child Left Behind, before Race to the Top, before high-stakes testing, before the drive to super-standardize, before the not-enough-rigor hysteria — a usefully descriptive word for America's system of education was "loose."

In that earlier era, I taught in four high schools. They differed — rural, urban, rich, poor, big, small — but on certain measures, they were alike.

In all four, my professional judgment was respected. I was free to capitalize on what educators call "teachable moments," free to make use of local issues, free to appropriately pace instruction, free to experiment with alternative approaches, free to adapt to a class's distinctive "personality." And probably most importantly, I was free from mandates directing me to try to standardize kids. That meant I could deal differently with them, could, for example, know who was most likely to be reading scholarly articles 10, 20, 30 years down the road and steer them appropriately.

Second, all the schools offered more elective classes than are now available. Freedom to adapt their schedules to their interests and abilities put fewer kids in classes in which they held back those future readers of scholarly articles.

Third, no test-based, stress-creating fog of fear permeated the four schools. The usual, sometimes-stupid policies that came down from state departments of education (often stemming from some powerful state legislator's whim), could be ignored without threatening loss of professional reputation or job.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that in the good old days America's schools were great. I've written whole books about why they weren't, and what could be done to make them better. I am saying that before decisions about what's taught were made in Washington, before the attacks of the privatizers, before rigor-mania, schools were better than they now are. System looseness allowed teachers to teach, and a sufficient number of them did it well enough to turn out kids who eventually downloaded those 61,361 scholarly papers.

As the students of that "loose" era retire, replaced by standardized test-takers and test-prep teachers, kiss the creativity goose that laid the golden eggs goodbye. Ω

Why all high school courses should be elective

Posted January 22, 2013

Both my late mother's and my father's right foot tended to be heavy when in contact with car accelerators. Their brothers and sisters shared the tendency, suggesting some sort of genetic propensity — which I, unfortunately, seem to have inherited.

The last time it got me in trouble I was given a choice. I could either have the evidence of my bad behavior recorded on the back of my driver's license, or I could spend four hours on a Saturday morning in a highway safety class.

Looking ahead, I chose the latter.

The class started at 8 a.m. and continued until noon, with one 15-minute break. To his credit, the instructor did his best to liven up his presentation, mixing humor, props, videos, and body language. Notwithstanding all that, it was four of the longest hours of my adult life.

Now, when I visit classes (mostly at the high school level) in an effort to keep in touch with reality as it manifests itself in American education, it's a rare experience that doesn't trigger two vivid memories—one of my sitting in that Saturday morning class trying to pay attention, the other of a scene in the film, "Ferris Bueller's Day Off," when the camera pans slowly (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhiCFdWeQfA) across the faces of students as the teacher "covers the material" in a history class.

I'd like to be able to say that student boredom and mental disengagement are the exception rather than the rule in America's classrooms, but decades of firsthand observation, student surveys, research on attention span, statistics on truancy and drop-outs, and the near-universal problem of classroom discipline tell me they're not. A recent Gallup poll of a half-million students in 37 states (http://www.gallupstudentpoll.com/home.aspx) says that the longer kids stay in school, the less engaged they become.

That's the reverse of what ought to be happening.

It's impossible to quantify the problem with precision, but if educational efficiency is indicated not by standardized test scores but by adult recall and use of what was once taught, I'd estimate the high school average when I graduated in the 1940s at no more than about 15%, decreasing slowly until about 1990, then more rapidly when the current standards and testing fad kicked in. Now, I'd put average institutional efficiency as something less than 10%.

Very few of us could pass the subject matter tests we once took, or would agree that being unable to do so significantly handicaps us. How can we ignore the implications of that fact?

I don't blame teachers. What we have is a fundamental system problem, and it can't be solved by following the advice of business leaders and politicians and merely doing longer, harder, and with greater precision, what we've always done.

In a November 12, 2012 "The Answer Sheet" blog, (p. 126) I suggested addressing the problem with project learning, but project learning with a twist—moving beyond textbook and lecture abstractions and putting school subjects to meaningful, real-world work. The school and its site model the larger world in every important respect. If teachers treated it as a hands-on laboratory and had kids use math, science, language arts, and social studies to describe, analyze, and improve the school, disengagement would either end completely or be radically reduced. The core subjects would be better taught, and learners would take with them a comprehensive sense-making template they'd use for the rest of their lives.

I have another, more unorthodox proposal for attacking the problem of disengagement. Most readers will consider it unthinkable, and some will write me off as a danger to the republic, but decades of working with kids tell me it would eventually trigger a performance explosion.

That proposal: Make every required course at the high school level elective. And if, say, five or more students submit a request for a class not offered, work with them to design and offer it. Take seriously the contention usually attributed to Albert Einstein that, "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid."

I stand against this idea expressed by Marc Tucker in a January 15 Answer Sheet (http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/01/15/common-core-standards) "There is no substitute for spelling out what we think students everywhere should know and be able to do."

I don't reject the notion that there are ideas so important every kid should understand them. The titles of two of my books—"What's Worth Teaching?" and "What's Worth Learning?"—make clear what I think kids need to know. I'm convinced, for example, that a thorough understanding of the sense-making process radically improves student performance in every field of study.

Not far behind in importance I put an understanding of the unexamined societal assumptions that shape our thoughts, actions, and identities. At a less abstract level I have kids look at the familiar until it becomes "strange enough to see," raising their awareness of how built environments manipulate them in subtle, freedom-depriving ways, and I help them develop a skill obviously lacking at the highest levels of American policymaking—the ability to imagine unintended consequences of well-intended actions (just to start a list of matters the Common Core State Standards ignore).

Yes, I have strong feelings about what kids should learn, which is why I'd put them in charge of their own educations. Experience assures me they'll get where they need to go, and do so more efficiently than will otherwise be possible. Experience also tells me that won't happen as long as they're fenced in by a random mix of courses required because they've always been required, by courses based on elitist conceits, by courses shaped by unexamined assumptions. The core's boundaries are far too narrow to accommodate the collective genius of adolescents.

Kids bring to the curriculum vast differences—differences in gender, maturity, personality, interests, hopes, dreams, abilities, life experiences, situation, family, peers, language, ethnicity, social class, culture, probable and possible futures, and certain indefinable qualities, all combined in dynamic, continuously evolving ways so complex they lie beyond ordinary understanding.

Today's reformers seem unable or unwilling to grasp the instructional implications of those differences and that complexity. They treat kids as a given, undifferentiated except

by grade level, with the core curriculum the lone operative variable. Just standardize and fine-tune the core, they insist, and all will be well.

That's magical thinking, and it's dumping genius on the street.

Don't tell me I'm naïve, that high school kids can't be trusted with that much responsibility, or that they're too dumb to know what to do with it. Would it take them awhile to get used to unaccustomed autonomy? Sure. Would they suspect that the respect being shown them was faked and test it out? Of course. Would they at first opt for what they thought was Easy Street? You can count on it.

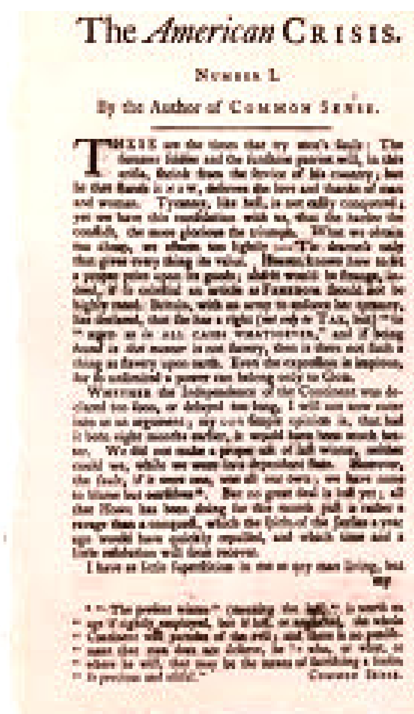
Eventually, however, their natural curiosity and the desire to make better sense of experience would get the better of them, and they'd discover that Easy Street connected directly to all other streets, and that following it was taking them places they had no intention of going, or even knew existed.

I know this because I've been there with them. Ω

A REAL paradigm shift in education

Posted on February 11, 2013

By Marion Brady


The *American* CRISIS.

NUMBER I.

By the Author of COMMON SENSE.

I envy Thomas Paine's way with language. I've been searching for years for words that would have the impact of those he penned in his 1776 pamphlet, "The Crisis."

Admittedly, "These are the times that try men's souls," and the words that followed, weren't a howling success. Only about a third of the colonists agreed with Paine's call for revolution. Another third wanted to stick with England. The remaining third were neutral or apathetic.

What Paine was able to do that I can't do is sell an idea to at least enough people to make something happen. I need to convince not a third of readers but, say, a tenth, to call their legislators and tell them to dismantle the education "reform" machine assembled in Washington by business leaders and politicians.

Long before corporate America began its assault on public schooling, American education was in trouble. Educators were, however, increasingly aware of the problems and were

working on them. When Bill Gates, Jeb Bush, Mike Bloomberg, Arne Duncan, Michelle Rhee, and other big name non-educators took over, that worked stopped.

What I want people to understand is that the backbone of education — the familiar math-science-language arts-social studies "core curriculum" — is deeply, fundamentally flawed. No matter the reform initiative, there won't be significant improvement in American education until curricular problems are understood, admitted, addressed, and solved.

Few want to hear that. Reformers are sure America's schools would be fine if teachers just worked harder and smarter, and reformers are sure the teachers would do that if merit pay programs made them compete for cash. They seem incapable of understanding that classroom teachers are doing something so complicated and difficult that even the best of them are hanging on by their fingernails. If they knew how to do better, they'd be doing it. Would surgeons operate differently if they were paid more? Would commercial airline pilots make softer landings if they made more money? Would editorial writers write better editorials if their salaries were raised?

Teachers are doing the best they can with the curriculum they've been given. Here (in regrettably abstract language) is the curricular problem at the top of my list:

> *Change is in the nature of things; it is inevitable. Human societies either adapt to change or die. The traditional core curriculum delivers* ***existing*** *knowledge, but adapting to an unknown future requires* ***new*** *knowledge. New knowledge is created as relationships are discovered between parts of reality not previously thought to be related. The arbitrary walls between school subjects, and the practice of studying them in isolation from each other, block the relating process essential to knowledge creation.*

Stick with me here. This isn't complicated, just different from the usual school fare.

(1) **Change is in the nature of things; it is inevitable**. The earth heats and cools. Seasons come and go. Water tables rise and fall. Human populations increase, decrease, migrate. New tools change the ways societies function. People multiply, resources diminish, and waste builds. Civilizations appear and disappear. This is — or should be — the usual content of the core curriculum.

(2) **Human societies either adapt to change or die.** Ancient Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome are no more. A century ago, the Elks, Eagles, and Masons were popular organizations. More recently, Kodak, Bethlehem Steel, and Sony dominated whole industries. If we value our way of life, we need to understand the dynamics of change, but it's not in the core curriculum.

(3) **The traditional core curriculum delivers *existing* knowledge, but adapting to an unknown future requires *new* knowledge**. Obviously, what will need to be known in the future isn't yet known, from which it follows that it can't be taught. However, the *process* by means of which new knowledge is created *can* be taught.

(4) **New knowledge is created as relationships are discovered between parts of reality not previously thought to be related.** Levels of respect for elders and rates of societal change are related. Elapsed time since death and level of isotopes in fossil remains are related. Exposure to lead and learning difficulties are related. *Discovering and exploring relationships, not mentally storing information, educates*.

(5) **The arbitrary walls between school subjects, and studying them in isolation from each other, block the relating process essential to knowledge creation**. If astronomers only studied the heavens, and oceanographers only studied the ocean, the relationship of moon, sun, and tides would remain unknown. Technological and economic change profoundly impact values, beliefs, and behavior, but study of their connections is missing from the curriculum. Again: Discovering and exploring relationships, not mentally storing information, educates.

(6) **What needs to be known in the future can't yet be taught, but the *process* by means of which that knowledge is created can-and must-be taught.** Traditional instruction places far too much emphasis on content. The problem isn't just that what students need to know can't be known. The unreasonable amount of information dumped on them, the brief life in memory of most of it, and easy electronic access to a near-infinite amount of it, make merely delivering information a poor use of time. Focusing on the real world rather than on second-hand textbook versions of reality, and understanding the process by means of which sense is made of that world, are keys to new worlds of performance.

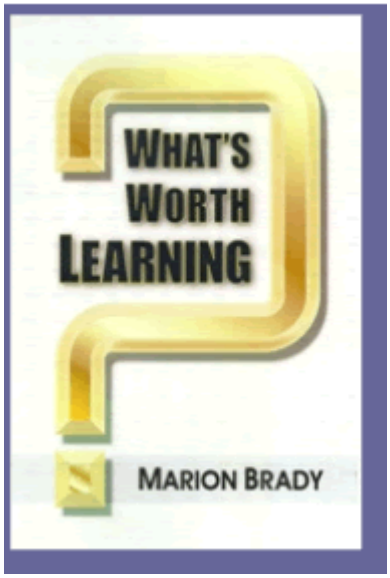
Standardized, high-stakes tests are the single greatest obstacle in the way of curricular improvement. Sold to the public as a necessary club to hold over teachers' heads, the tests are dumbing down kids at a spectacular rate. The problem isn't test overuse. The problem is their inability to measure what most needs to be measured.

Standardized tests are to accountability what a finger in the wind is to a weather station. What they measure — information stored in memory — is useful, but for kids facing an unknown future, that's not nearly enough. They need to know how to create new knowledge. That knowledge will be *original*, and standardized tests can't evaluate original, non-standard thought.

Unwilling to trust teacher judgment, we've handed their responsibilities to machines incapable of making judgment calls.

Tell business leaders and politicians to put their own houses in order and give education back to educators. Ω

What's worth learning?



Posted February 28, 2013

A few days ago I watched a Public Broadcasting System, Independent Lens video titled "The Revisionaries" (http://www.itvs.org/films/revisionaries). It follows Don McLeRoy, dentist and longtime conservative member of the Texas Board of Education, as he campaigns for the position of chairman, then, later, to continue to serve on the board.

The video follows proceedings as board members argue whether or not creationism should get equal billing with evolution, and if Thomas Jefferson deserves to be considered a Founding Father of the Republic.

Arguments are settled by board vote.

About forty years ago, I (with my brother's help) wrote a couple of textbooks for Prentice-Hall, Inc. The books were unorthodox, and the Internet hadn't yet been invented, so I spent a lot of time in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, working with editorial staff.

I learned a lot. Along with much else, they explained to me the importance of Texas in the textbook business. Leave something out of a book that a majority of the Texas State Board wants in, or put something in that it wants out, and your chance of landing a multi-million dollar contract for your book evaporates.

Because textbook evaluators in other states don't always see eye-to-eye with the Texas board, textbook authors have to walk a very narrow, please-everybody line if they hope to be published.

Prentice-Hall editors also explained what they saw as the industry's typical textbook-creating strategy: Study the current bestseller in a particular field, copy it as much as possible, but fatten it up a bit to make it seem more comprehensive than the competition. Finally, add a flashy gimmick in the text, in the teacher edition, or in a companion package, and train the sales force to pitch the gimmick.

At some stage in this process, get some big name in the field to add her or his name to the project (for a cut of the profit, of course).

The weight of the contents of student backpacks suggests that the textbook design strategy described to me all those years ago is still being used.

Which is a major reason why I don't think commercially produced textbooks have much to do with educating. If that sounds odd, chalk it up to my belief that the sheer volume of information in the typical textbook, the rapid rate at which the material in it is covered, the

colorless writing, the abstract nature of most of the content, its lack of immediate usefulness, and the passive role it forces readers to play, all combine to assure that little of lasting consequence results from textbook use—certainly nothing that would justify its cost.

Textbooks are designed to deliver information, but kids aren't designed to receive it.

The real world of the student's own school in all its physical and social complexity is a far richer, more comprehensive, more intellectually stimulating "textbook" than anything likely to meet with the approval of textbook adoption committees. Kids should design and execute plans to make sense of that complexity, a task that will require them to spend much of the school day out of their seats. Challenging them to use their increasingly detailed knowledge of the school to improve it will engage them emotionally, and the mental model of reality they'll construct will provide a solid foundation for life-long learning in any specialized field they choose to enter.

My opinion notwithstanding, textbooks (or online versions of them) are here to stay. Tradition, the conventional wisdom both inside and outside the education establishment, and publishing company lobbyists, will see to that. The challenge, then, is to improve them.

That's a lot harder than most people think, and it has to begin with understanding and accepting the fact that, in educating, "less is more." Indeed, a lot less is a lot more. Learners, hungry for knowledge, are being stuffed with mere information.

That's unacceptable. In the effort to make sense of our selves, each other, and the human condition, a relatively few ideas have an explanatory power of such magnitude that teaching them thoroughly is an absolute must. Send kids on their way with a solid grasp of everything in the Common Core State Standards but ignorant of those powerful ideas, and—notwithstanding top scores on standardized tests—they'll be as poorly educated as those responsible for the present thrust of education reform.

One of those "super ideas" (which the Common Core Standards don't even mention) is "worldview"—the framework of largely unexamined ideas, beliefs, and values by means of which an individual, group, society, or culture make sense of reality and interact with it. As ideas go, "worldview" is of first-order importance. Everything we do, individually and collectively, can be traced back to it.

Worldview explains why we brush our teeth, go to work, save and spend money, get married, pave highways, join clubs, pass laws, buy, sell, vote, play the stock market, pray or don't pray—and so on and on. It shapes emotions, arts, sciences, social institutions—whole ways of life. Differences in worldview trigger divorce proceedings, strikes, religious schisms, advertising campaigns, stupid foreign policies, world wars, the decline and fall of civilizations.

Worldview shapes every way of life on the planet, but the Common Core Standards ignore it, just as they ignore much else of fundamental importance. Millions of kids are busy picking up mandated acorns of information, unaware of the tree of knowledge from which they fall.

Enamored of wealth, power, and celebrity, America has handed over a system of education that was once the envy of the world to the likes of Bill Gates, Eli Broad, the Waltons, Jeb Bush, Joel Klein, Michael Bloomberg, Arne Duncan, Rahm Emanuel. Add Michelle Rhee to that list and the lot of them have a total of eighteen months of actual teaching experience.

Sensible education reform begins with a serious, society-wide dialogue about what's worth learning. It's a dialogue we've yet to have. Ω

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