

In education, sometimes less is more

May 27, 1997

I commend the Sentinel for its continuing concern for high-quality education. The articles may not be as exciting as local murder and mayhem, but they're more important. H. G. Wells was surely right when he said, "Civilization becomes, more and more, a race between education and catastrophe."

I read with interest John C. Bersia's oped-page interview of Timothy Snyder. The question "What's wrong with today's classrooms?" Snyder answered that current technologies are "old and out of synch with the way students think."

Now, I'll grant that technology has a role to play in instruction. But I certainly don't think technology deprivation ranks first as what's wrong with education or that upgrading it will bring revolution. Technology has little to do with quality.

When Bersia asked if educators might be "trying to teach young students too much," he was much closer to a fundamental problem with most instruction. Snyder was right in answering that there's no known limit to what students can learn, but he ignored the real issue – the critical role played not by the amount of information taught but by its organization.

Our brains cannot handle massive amounts of random data, and much of what students are now taught falls into that category. The educational establishment's historical theory of learning is best exemplified by the old saying, "If you throw enough mud on the wall, some of it is bound to stick." Each day, students are given a few minutes of this and a few minutes of that, with little concern given to how the information fits together logically or to the mind's need for order. That's why we remember so little of what we learned in school.

In the early years of the 20th century, long before the news-media explosion and the Internet compounded the problem of information overload, British mathematician, teacher and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead was telling the educational establishment it was flooding students' minds with too much miscellaneous stuff. "Let the main ideas which are introduced into a child's education be few," he said, "and let them be thrown into every combination possible."

The educational establishment wasn't listening then. And it isn't listening now.

The world we're trying to help young people understand is a single, systemically-integrated whole. The curriculum we're using to try to explain that whole to kids is a random, disjointed, fragmented, incoherent mess. We accept it because it's what we're taught. And, because we think we're pretty smart, it must be OK.

It isn't OK. Kids show up for kindergarten with a mental system for organizing and relating information already firmly in place in their minds, a system built into language and culture. That system is far more sophisticated than the educational approach adopted in the 1890s, which gave us the current industry-inspired collection of narrow subjects and courses.

We need to make that implicit "natural" system explicit, base general education on it and help students see the whole of which their specialized studies are a part.

##

NOTE: This column also appears in a free e-book, *The Road to Hell*, linked at Marion Brady's homepage: <http://www.marionbrady.com/>.