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# Marion Brady: How Ed Reformers Push the Wrong Theory of Learning

Tuesday 24 August 2010

by: *Marion Brady* | **Washington Post** | **Report**

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** 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 skills.”

A recent press release provides an example of the New Progressives’ long reach: “NBC Universal presents ‘**Education Nation**,’ an unprecedented week-long event 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.** “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." 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.

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## **Well said, Marion. The idea**

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 16:52 — Anonymous (not verified)

Well said, Marion. The idea that kids are empty ciphers to be filled with information and then dumped into the workplace so that people like Gates, Bloomberg et al can prosper is the most insidious and inhuman 'theory' of learning one can imagine. It contains not one iota of real knowledge about how humans grow. We should have learned enough to know that ANYTHING promoted by George Bush cannot possibly be based on a reasonable view of the world or the people in it. He is and almost mindless war criminal and a perfect example of what our education can and too often does produce: unthinking xenophobic robots. That Obama can champion the same ideas through Duncan and thousands of brain-washed followers has very dangerous consequences for the health of this nation. Soon we will be able to measure everything but there will be nothing of consequence to measure. It's time for all educators who have any conscience left to rebel against the unspeakable paucity of this race to vacuity. Let's stand up and be counted.

Thanks, Marion.

## **a well written piece by a**

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 18:25 — Anonymous (not verified)

a well written piece by a professional who knows the territory. the use of r and t to define the two theories was well developed a way of getting the message across. the cogent description from a to f is the best i have read of the process and complexity of how learning takes place. i am 81 and taught pre first through a college graduate classes. teaching is a very honorable profession and the public experts have a lot to learn. thanks marion it is a great teaching moment hope they are not too closed minded to learn.

## **Parents, teach those kids**

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 19:59 — Anonymous (not verified)

Parents, teach those kids yourselves!

## **This analysis of "Theory T"**

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 20:05 — Regina (not verified)

This analysis of "Theory T" demonstrates the drill toward rote absorption perpetrated by the non-educators funding it. I would have expected better from Bill Gates, but the others named are a dead giveaway. They want a passive

population that will swallow everything that's "taught" without question, challenge, or contradiction, and carry that docility into adult life. "The better to control you, my dear."

## [.....and that is why in](#)

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 20:23 — Redreamer (not verified)

.....and that is why in the USA there is a growth in the homeschooling of children.....

Because it is self evident to me that the administration of public education has nothing to do with HOW KIDS LEARN.

Basing a national agenda of learning based on anything except learning theory is appalling and demonstrably failing A LARGE % of the student population.

Thank you for a well crafted article Marion. It is time Corptocracy got OUT of education reform and actually went back the what EDUCATIONALISTS know works. The Tabla Rasa perception of students went out in the dark ages... a quote by Bandura comes to mind.

"it is not always beliefs that change in the direction of social reality. Acting on erroneous beliefs can alter how others behave, thus shaping the social reality in the direction of the mistaken beliefs . . . As with all human transactions, the influence process is best represented by bidirectional causality between belief and social reality."

You would almost believe it was deliberate.

## [This is why I'm glad my kids](#)

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 20:31 — Eric (not verified)

This is why I'm glad my kids go to a private Waldorf school. It's worth the sacrifice. Theory R is close to what Steiner was after, but Waldorf goes way deeper. It's too bad that we're being led astray by rich people with mostly good intentions, but the old saw about the road to hell being paved with good intentions seems to apply to the U.S. in more than one case right now...

## [Amen. People like Gates](#)

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 20:33 — Anonymous (not verified)

Amen. People like Gates pretend to 'know' about learning and education but have the money to make changes that will lower the standard of thought in every classroom. Their real goal is to privatize education and gobble up what is left of the tax money and put it in their coffers.

This week even Oprah joined the beat up a teacher crusade. I have a question for her. She is overweight. She has done numerous programs on the causes of obesity. She has access to personal trainers, medical professionals and psychological gurus and yet with all of her 'obesity education' she is still fat. Are all those professionals who provided her with knowledge simply incompetent ?

I worry for the next generation of children. When the plutocrats finish with school will they ever be able to think.

## ["New Progressives"?](#)

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 20:48 — Kevin Schmidt (not verified)

"New Progressives"? NOT!

Since they embrace the failed education philosophies from two centuries ago, they are anything but "New Progressives", which is quite an Owellian description! A much better description is "Faux Progressives", or "New Regressives".

## [I would strongly suggest](#)

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 20:50 — indigoken (not verified)

I would strongly suggest investigating the Soka learning method. Originally started in pre-war Japan by an educator Tsunasaboro Makiguchi, it opposed conventional Theory T methods and was so revolutionary that the founder was thrown in jail by the Japanese thought police at that time. Since then there is a emerging Soka school system in Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore and Soka University here in the US.

## [It is poverty, broken homes,](#)

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 21:05 — Anonymous (not verified)

It is poverty, broken homes, individual emotional, mental, behavioral issues that determine who fails & who learns. Stop blaming teachers.

The can tell who will be the drop-outs or criminals before middle school.

Teachers work hard but can not perform miracles.

Make charter schools take the special ed/behavior problems whose parents don't care & see how they'll do then.

## **We learn by doing. Project**

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 21:29 — Charly (not verified)

We learn by doing. Project based learning teaches thinking, and it is the cognitive skills that we need to encourage. 18th century education worked in a period when little changed generation to generation in terms of the knowledge base. It is the use of information that our kids need to understand, not only how to get it how to make it work for them, how to evaluate, to be critical of the source.

The baby Einstein - sit your kid in front of a TV worked in reverse - those privileged kids were dumber than average!

Now we learn that aerobic exercise promotes growth of the parts of the brain which aid in self control and focus. In the meantime we cram so much rote into school that there is not time for recess. America is filling up with obese, lazy and bored dullards. Play is how children learn, directed play directs learning.

I think it comes down to your vision for the future - are we preparing wage slaves? Then train kids to accept boredom and have them do busy work.

Are we wanting people that can work together to solve problems and create new products, create new ideas? Then we need to teach that by having them do that.

## **There are certain very**

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 22:54 — Pragmatic Realist (not verified)

There are certain very important questions to which the right answers must be given. There are certain methods of doing things so that things will be done a certain way.

This is about the control of society, and those who presently control society have an interest in making sure it stays the way it is.

In this situation, it may well be said that the less schooling the better. After the child is 6 years old, the game is over anyway.

## **How to Think Critically The**

Sun, 09/26/2010 - 23:16 — Kevin Schmidt (not verified)

How to Think Critically

The problem with most people is they don't know how to think in the best ways possible. Not only is there a way to think that will consistently yield better results, but there are actually several distinct ways of Critical Thinking. What you are trying to accomplish from a particular problem or project, will determine the best way of thinking that is best suited for that occasion.

CriticalThinking.Org

## **To add a bit more evidence**

Mon, 09/27/2010 - 00:23 — Texas Aggie (not verified)

To add a bit more evidence to the point made in the article, think about the things you remember from lectures. Not a whole lot, but what you did remember is vicarious experience, in other words the "war stories" your professor told you. These vignettes out of real life stuck with you because second hand experience had meaning and were something that you could relate to. So the R-theorists are trying to use this phenomenon to teach reality to the kids, but the T-theory theorists in their ivory towers with no real world experience are the exact personas that they accuse real teachers of being.

## **The American education**

Mon, 09/27/2010 - 00:42 — Hatchetman (not verified)

The American education system is little more than a brainwash to make the masses conform to the expectations of the latest reigning power.

The world has been dragged into a hopeless dead end with no chance of survival!

## **Goodbye Rhee! Fast Company**

Mon, 09/27/2010 - 02:30 — Anonymous (not verified)

Goodbye Rhee! Fast Company Harpy of recent times in DC. Cut, slash and burn, blame, demoralize and then fire the employees. Just another reason the rich hate the inconvenience of taxes - after all, they shuttle their kids to private preparatory academies. (Then off to some Ivy league entrepreneurial processor, which they graduate from with the skills to drive the lower classes deeper into the ground)

## **I recommend that we all not**

Mon, 09/27/2010 - 02:32 — Mike L (not verified)

I recommend that we all not be particularly impressed by Bill Gates wading into this with a bunch of other people's money -- we should take note that his primary objective over the next several years is to obtain unlimited importation of Asian, Indian, African, etc., "guest workers" (as opposed to the limited tens of thousands that they have been importing to date) so that Microsoft and the other big multi-nationals doing business in the US don't ever have to hire another US citizen. So he and his ilk care nothing for whether or not the education system works because they have no intention of using any of the products of it.

## **It drives me Bat-SH&! CRAZY**

Mon, 09/27/2010 - 04:15 — Maggie (not verified)

It drives me Bat-SH&! CRAZY that "Theory R" supporters' voices DO NOT EVEN FIGURE in the national debate!

## **As someone who grew up in a**

Mon, 09/27/2010 - 04:22 — Xenobio (not verified)

As someone who grew up in a country with an exam-oriented system (Malaysia) but had the benefit of 2 years in American public schools (mid-8th to mid-10th grades), I am appalled and disgusted that some Americans think that putting more standardised tests into their system is a good thing.

Overemphasising standardised exams makes a joke of learning, because test-taking becomes a meta-game in which the objective is to beat the test, not to internalise and synthesise the content being tested. Students come up with all kinds of arcane strategies like poring over previous years' exam papers to "forecast" what might come up this year. Adults in my home country have been so brainwashed into the idea that exam scores are an objective indicator of how smart you are and what you can achieve in life that there has been public outcry at the recent suggestion by the government that they might do away with the primary and lower-secondary national exams.

## **And with T-theory you end up**

Mon, 09/27/2010 - 05:08 — joshua Bigley (not verified)

And with T-theory you end up with a a nation just like China-where they cant see past their nose and standardized exams--come to China and you will see how true this article is, how the tyranny of common-sense rules all right down to ordering a dish at a restaurant and the staff cant comprehend any changes to the order--"no salt--but it have salt--that is the way it is." For 5000 years there has been no change or innovation in China--only in name or rhetoric--but nothing evolves and revolutions have never been revolutions--just name changes and power shifts. The claim of China on the rise--the so-called success of China is because western innovation is outsourced to china, western jobs, western minds, western technology-all evolving out of theory-R teaching, not standardized drones. This "new progressive" reform is noting more than fascism. America is the king of fascism. Democracy is a lie. And any of it that remains is being killed, punished, alienated, and starved.

This article should be required T-theory transfer reading.

## **Interesting - do any of**

Mon, 09/27/2010 - 05:52 — John (not verified)

Interesting - do any of these promoters of the Theory T concept remember coming to school with nothing in their heads? Are they sending THEIR children to school with empty heads?

This is ridiculous. Every student comes into school with their own knowledge & experience base. They all have different ideas of the value of education.

One nice thing about Theory T is that everyone could be taught the same way.

What happened to the idea that teaching techniques had to be backed by research to prove their validity?

## **The real purpose of ed**

Mon, 09/27/2010 - 05:58 — Tricia (not verified)

The real purpose of ed "reform" is to get rid of public sector unions, the last bastion of unionism in this country, tenure and seniority. Conservatives hate the idea of anyone with a stable, secure job - ideally everyone should be in fear of losing his/her job so they will accept any working conditions and anything the big boss orders, wage cuts, etc., without a murmur. Only the filthy rich and business people should have money.

Another reason for the endless attacks on public ed is the push to privatize it as the solution to the "failed" public model. Public ed costs \$8 billion a year; why have this money go to middle class teachers and ed personnel when the private sector could be collecting it. After all, what good is anything unless someone is profiting from it?

The purpose of using testing as the sole criteria of ed success, with its emphasis on rote learning, is to create a nation of morons who will do and believe anything their corporate masters tell them.

Look at the people driving this - Bloomberg, Duncan, Gates, etc. - privatization whores and corporatists all.