# How ed reformers push the wrong theory of learning -- Brady

*My guest is [Marion Brady](#), veteran teacher, administrator, curriculum designer and author.*

By Marion Brady
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 shills."

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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