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How Bill Gates can be an education hero

By Marion Brady

A couple of days ago I watched and read the transcript of Fareed Zakaria’s CNN primetime special, [“Restoring the American Dream: Fixing Education.”](#)

Zakaria talks to [Bill Gates](#), 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](#) 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](#)—was right when he wrote in a [Wall Street Journal op-ed](#) 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](#)” 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](#) 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-butts, 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](#) — 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](#). 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.

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