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A salvage operation for public education

By Valerie Strauss

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By Marion Brady

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](#), an early, important figure on the corporate-manager side of the faceoff, says educating is just a matter of "delivering information." [Bill Gates](#) 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.

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