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Why all high school courses should be elective

By Marion Brady

Both my late mother’s and my father’s right foot tended to be heavy when in contact with car accelerators. Their brothers and sisters shared the tendency, suggesting some sort of genetic propensity — which I, unfortunately, seem to have inherited.

The last time it got me in trouble I was given a choice. I could either have the evidence of my bad behavior recorded on the back of my driver’s license, or I could spend four hours on a Saturday morning in a highway safety class.

Looking ahead, I chose the latter.

The class started at 8 a.m. and continued until noon, with one 15-minute break. To his credit, the instructor did his best to liven up his presentation, mixing humor, props, videos, and body language. Notwithstanding all that, it was four of the longest hours of my adult life.

Now, when I visit classes (mostly at the high school level) in an effort to keep in touch with reality as it manifests itself in American education, it’s a rare experience that doesn’t trigger two vivid memories—one of my sitting in that Saturday morning class trying to pay attention, the other of a scene in the film, “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” when the camera pans slowly (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uhiCFdWeQfA>) across the faces of students as the teacher “covers the material” in a history class.

I’d like to be able to say that student boredom and mental disengagement are the exception rather than the rule in America’s classrooms, but decades of firsthand observation, student surveys, research on attention span, statistics on truancy and drop-outs, and the near-universal problem of classroom discipline tell me they’re not. A recent Gallup poll of a half-million students in 37 states (<http://www.gallupstudentpoll.com/home.aspx>) says that the longer kids stay in school, the less engaged they become.

That’s the reverse of what ought to be happening.

It’s impossible to quantify the problem with precision, but if educational efficiency is indicated not by standardized test scores but by adult recall and use of what was once taught, I’d estimate the high school average when I graduated in the 1940s at no more than about 15%, decreasing slowly until about 1990, then more rapidly when the current standards and testing fad kicked in. Now, I’d put average institutional efficiency as something less than 10%.

Very few of us could pass the subject matter tests we once took, or would agree that being unable to do so significantly handicaps us. How can we ignore the implications of that fact?

I don't blame teachers. What we have is a fundamental system problem, and it can't be solved by following the advice of business leaders and politicians and merely doing longer, harder, and with greater precision, what we've always done.

In a November 12, 2012 "The Answer Sheet" blog, (<http://www.marionbrady.com/articles/2012-Washington%20Post11-14.pdf>) I suggested addressing the problem with project learning, but project learning with a twist—moving beyond textbook and lecture abstractions and putting school subjects to meaningful, real-world work. The school and its site model the larger world in every important respect. If teachers treated it as a hands-on laboratory and had kids use math, science, language arts, and social studies to describe, analyze, and improve the school, disengagement would either end completely or be radically reduced. The core subjects would be better taught, and learners would take with them a comprehensive sense-making template they'd use for the rest of their lives.

I have another, more unorthodox proposal for attacking the problem of disengagement. Most readers will consider it unthinkable, and some will write me off as a danger to the republic, but decades of working with kids tell me it would eventually trigger a performance explosion.

That proposal: Make every required course at the high school level elective. And if, say, five or more students submit a request for a class not offered, work with them to design and offer it. Take seriously the contention usually attributed to Albert Einstein that, "Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid."

I stand against this idea expressed by Marc Tucker in a January 15 Answer Sheet blog post: (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/01/15/common-core-standards-arguments-against-and-for/>) "There is no substitute for spelling out what we think students everywhere should know and be able to do."

I don't reject the notion that there are ideas so important every kid should understand them. The titles of two of my books—"What's Worth Teaching?" and "What's Worth Learning?"—make clear what I think kids need to know. I'm convinced, for example, that a thorough understanding of the sense-making process radically improves student performance in every field of study.

Not far behind in importance I put an understanding of the unexamined societal assumptions that shape our thoughts, actions, and identities. At a less abstract level I have kids look at the familiar until it becomes "strange enough to see," raising their awareness of how built environments manipulate them in subtle, freedom-depriving ways, and I help them develop a skill obviously lacking at the highest levels of American policymaking—the ability to imagine unintended consequences of well-intended actions (just to start a list of matters the Common Core State Standards ignore).

Yes, I have strong feelings about what kids should learn, which is why I'd put them in charge of their own educations. Experience assures me they'll get where they need to go, and do so more efficiently than will otherwise be possible. Experience also tells me that won't happen as long as they're fenced in by a random mix of courses required because they've always been required, by courses based on elitist conceits, by courses shaped by unexamined assumptions. The core's boundaries are far too narrow to accommodate the collective genius of adolescents.

Kids bring to the curriculum vast differences—differences in gender, maturity, personality, interests, hopes, dreams, abilities, life experiences, situation, family, peers, language, ethnicity, social class, culture, probable and possible futures, and certain indefinable qualities, all combined in dynamic, continuously evolving ways so complex they lie beyond ordinary understanding.

Today's reformers seem unable or unwilling to grasp the instructional implications of those differences and that complexity. They treat kids as a given, undifferentiated except by grade level, with the core curriculum the lone operative variable. Just standardize and fine-tune the core, they insist, and all will be well.

That's magical thinking, and it's dumping genius on the street.

Don't tell me I'm naïve, that high school kids can't be trusted with that much responsibility, or that they're too dumb to know what to do with it. Would it take them awhile to get used to unaccustomed autonomy? Sure. Would they suspect that the respect being shown them was faked and test it out? Of course. Would they at first opt for what they thought was Easy Street? You can count on it.

Eventually, however, their natural curiosity and the desire to make better sense of experience would get the better of them, and they'd discover that Easy Street connected directly to all other streets, and that following it was taking them places they had no intention of going, or even knew existed.

I know this because I've been there with them.

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