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‘The Procedure’ and how it is harming education

By Marion Brady

In a [Wall Street Journal op-edⁱ](#), high-profile education reformer Lou Gerstner, Jr., wrote, “We must start with the recognition that, despite decade after decade of reform efforts, our public K-12 schools have not improved.”

In a [speech to the American Federation of Teachersⁱⁱ](#), multi-billionaire Bill Gates agreed, saying the United States has been “struggling for decades to improve our public schools,” and the results have been “dismal.”

In his [December 19, 2013 Education Week blogⁱⁱⁱ](#), Marc Tucker, another influential long-time education reformer, asks, “Why has US education performance flatlined?”

Like Gerstner, Gates, and Tucker, I don’t see any evidence that the army of corporate types who left business suites and corner offices to come to the rescue of American education have done anything but dumb down the public’s conception of the ends of public education and the proper means to more acceptable ends.

Corporate reformers have had two decades to make their case that what ails American education is a lack of rigor, and two decades to test their theory that market forces are the surest way to kick-start that needed rigor. To that end, they’ve introduced competition with a vengeance—kids against kids, parents against parents, teachers against teachers, schools against schools, districts against districts, states against states, nations against nations.

And it hasn’t worked. But like all true believers, it doesn’t shake their faith that rigor is the key to quality performance, that competition is the key to rigor, and that more of it will make America the winner in the bubble-in-the-right-oval race.

I come to the reform problem from a simpler, more direct perspective. Although at one time or another I’ve played most of the roles connected to education—student, parent, teacher, researcher, school board member, textbook author, contributor to journals, college professor, consultant, administrator, and so on, I think of myself primarily in the role I most enjoyed and in which I learned the most—a classroom teacher of adolescents, working with kids sent to me against their will, on orders from vague authority figures, behaving as kids could be expected to behave when caged for hours at a time in a small, dull space.

For years I wrote newspaper columns for Knight-Ridder, trying to help general readers think freshly about long-ignored school problems. Below is a response to one of my columns from John Perry, a classroom teacher in Central Florida. Read what he has to say and ask yourself how more rigor would solve his problem.

Marion,

Your comments about the SSS [Florida's Sunshine State Standards] hit home for me this year because I ended up teaching middle school science. It is unbelievable what we are asked to do to our students. I expected that middle school science might be divided up into, say, physical, earth, and life science in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade respectively. Well, no, even that would make too much sense. Sixth grade science is a survey course of...well, everything under the sun. We have a 776 page book loaded with very concentrated information. There are 23 chapters:

- 1. The Nature of Science*
- 2. Measurement*
- 3. Matter*
- 4. Properties and Changes*
- 5. Waves*
- 6. Motion and Forces*
- 7. Work and Simple Machines*
- 8. Views of Earth*
- 9. Resources*
- 10. Atmosphere*
- 11. Weather*
- 12. Climate*
- 13. Ecosystems*
- 14. The Structure of Organisms*
- 15. Classifying living things*
- 16. Bacteria*
- 17. Protists and Fungi*
- 18. Plants*
- 19. Plant Processes*
- 20. Invertebrate Animals*
- 21. Vertebrate Animals*
- 22. Animal Behavior*
- 23. The Solar System and Beyond*

Whew! Seem like a tall order for sixth graders to absorb in one year? Even absurd? Yeah. Well, I'm on a block schedule. My students are expected to absorb all of this in ONE SEMESTER! And get this—the team I'm on (myself, a math teacher, and a language arts teacher), was formed by taking the bottom third of the reading scores in sixth grade and putting all those kids together! How do you think they respond to this textbook, with its blizzard of unfamiliar vocabulary? These kids, who most need hands-on concept building, are expected instead to stand in front of a virtual fire hose of information and be blasted. (Please excuse the mixed metaphors!)

The district has two semester exams to diagnose how my students are doing. Soon, they will be tested on FCAT [Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test]. If they do poorly, the

students, the school and I will be labeled failures. Well, there is definitely a failure here, but it isn't me or my kids.

John

Imagine John as the best middle school science teacher in America. Put him in an expertly administered upper-class suburban school. Assign him smart, healthy, highly motivated kids, drawn from advanced placement classes. Be sure each has two college-educated, happily married parents. Limit his class to no more than a dozen, and schedule it for late morning when they're sharpest.

Now, hand John that 776-page textbook to distribute—the one organized like the contents of a dumpster at a demolition site—and assure him it covers the material that will be on the high-stakes tests.

What will happen? Almost certainly, at the end of the term every kid in John's class will ace the test, and everybody—kids, parents, administrators, school board, the local newspaper, cable news—will be impressed and happy.

Everybody except John. He won't be impressed and happy because (remember?) he's the best middle school science teacher in America, and he knows—notwithstanding the test scores—how little his students actually learned in their race to the end of the textbook. They slam-dunked the test not because they learned a lot of science but because they followed *The Procedure*.

The Procedure: 1. Take notes during lectures, and hi-lite key sentences in the textbook. 2. Before a big test, load the notes and hi-lited passages into short-term memory. 3. Take the test. 4. Flush short-term memory and prepare for its re-use.

It's no exaggeration to say that just about everybody in the country thinks *The Procedure* isn't just acceptable but essential. It's so broadly used, so familiar, so taken-for-granted, that many schools and universities go to great pains to accommodate it. Some even have rituals to enhance it.

The Procedure, of course, is called "cramming." Do it well and it leads steadily up the academic ladder.

But here's a question: Does *The Procedure* have anything do with educating?

Learning—real LEARNING—starts when, for whatever reason, the learner wants it to start. It proceeds if the aim is clear and what's being learned connects logically and solidly to existing knowledge. It's strengthened when mistakes are made, clarifying the potential and limitations of the new knowledge. It's reinforced when it's put to frequent, immediate, meaningful, real-world use. It becomes permanent when it's made part of the learner's organized, consciously known "master" structure of knowledge.

Slow down for a moment and think about it. Cramming is indisputable proof of the superficiality and inefficiency—even the failure—of what’s going on in most classrooms across America. *What’s crammed wasn’t learned or there would be no need to cram; what’s crammed isn’t learned or it wouldn’t be forgotten.*

In the real world, where it counts, the gap between crammers and learners is vast, and tends to widen over time. Unfortunately, the thus-far-successful “reform” effort to cover the standard material at a standard pace, and replace teacher judgment with machine-scored standardized tests has further institutionalized cramming and hidden the failure its use proves.

What a waste!

Here’s a fact: Information overload is just one of about two-dozen serious problems directly or indirectly connected to our 19th Century core curriculum. Sadly, no, tragically, instead of rethinking that curriculum, starting with its fundamental premises and assumptions, reformers have considered it so nearly perfect they’re determined to force it on every kid in America.

Aren’t we going at the job backwards? Shouldn’t we be doing just the opposite—developing and capitalizing on the learner diversity that enables humankind to adapt to change?

ⁱ <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB122809533452168067>

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