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Why Common Core isn't the answer

By Marion Brady

As far as I know, no one has asked the general public's opinion about the Common Core State Standards for school subjects. My guess would be that if polled, most people—including most educators—would say they just make good sense.

But [not everyone is a fan](#).ⁱ Few oppose standards, but a significant number oppose the Common Core State Standards. Those on the political right don't like the fact that—notwithstanding the word “State” in the title—it was really the feds who helped to railroad the standards into place.

Resisters on the political left cite a range of reasons for opposing the standards—that they were shoved into place without research or pilot programs, that they're a setup for national testing, that the real winners are manufacturers of tests and teaching materials because they can crank out the same stuff for everybody—just to begin a considerably longer list.

Three cheers for those on the political right. Three more for those on the left. May the chaos in Washington and state capitols over education policy help the public realize that, in matters educational, the leaders of business and industry and the politicians who listen to them are blind bulls in china shops.

I began pointing out problems with subject-matter standards beginning with a 1966 article in an education journal, the *Phi Delta Kappan*, and have been at it ever since. A [link](#)ⁱⁱ to a list on my homepage summarizes a few of the problems. Here, however, I want to focus on just one problem which, unless it's addressed, could ultimately be fatal to the education system.

I'll start by affirming what I believe most thoughtful educators take for granted: The main aim of schooling is to model or explain reality better. As you read, don't lose sight of that. The aim of schooling isn't to teach math, science, language arts, and other school subjects better, but to expand our understanding of reality.

When I use the word “reality,” I'm being concrete and specific. What I can see out of the window directly in front of me is a slice of it. I live on the west bank of the Indian River Lagoon on Florida's east coast. Not really a river, the lagoon is a body of brackish water that stretches fifty or so miles north and about twice that to the south. Off the end of my dock it's about two miles wide.

This bit of reality costs me money, and continues to do so, but its moods are a source of pleasure, its sunrises are often spectacular, and its easy access by boat to some local restaurants, the Atlantic Ocean and the rest of the world, are all pluses. I have, then, reasons to try to understand this particular bit of reality. (Be patient. I'm getting to the point.)

Thirty years ago, when I started building my house, I could often almost walk across the river stepping from clam boat to clam boat. The only clam boats I see now are on trailers in back yards.

Buoys marking underwater crab traps used to dot the river. The traps are gone because most of the crabs are gone.

There was a time when the fish in the Lagoon were so plentiful I've had dinner-sized mullet jump into my boat. That no longer happens.

Sea grasses used to cover much of the lagoon's sandy bottom. Now, the stretch of grassless sand that says the lagoon is sick extends for perhaps a quarter of a mile beyond my dock and keeps expanding. All else being equal, my property is losing value.

What's happened? Here's an over-simplified version:

1. When I began building my house, only one house light was visible at night across the river on Merritt Island. Mangrove thickets lined the shore for miles in both directions. Now, there are dozens of lights, and many manicured lawns stretch down to the water's edge.
2. Much of the property on both sides of the river (including mine) isn't part of a municipality. Everyone has a septic system.
3. The soil up and down the coast is mostly sand. The outflow from septic tanks, and the fertilizers and chemicals used to maintain lawns, easily percolate down to the water table, then seep into the river.
4. Nitrogen and phosphorus compounds in the fertilizer and sewage feed unnatural algae blooms, blocking the light from sea grasses and using up dissolved oxygen needed by marine life.
5. Dead organisms turn into black muck, discouraging new grass growth.
6. Property owners, reasoning that their fertilizer and sewage have negligible effect, say, "I'm taxed enough already. Why should I pay for sewage lines and treatment plants?"

As I said, I have a serious stake in understanding the reality I've been describing. Unfortunately, no subject in the core curriculum can give me that understanding. I have to assemble it myself using content drawn from demography, geology, botany, mathematics, sociology, law, chemistry, hydraulics, political science, psychology, economics, meteorology, and other fields.

Then comes the hard part—*exploring the relationships between those fields.*

Choose something to think about—anything—and the above applies. Whatever you’ve chosen to understand can’t be thoroughly understood in isolation because it’s part of a system. That system will have many parts, the whole will be greater than the sum of those parts, and, to add to the sense-making challenge, the whole is dynamic. While you’re trying to make sense of it, it’s changing.

Compared to most of the complex realities facing humankind, what’s happening to the reality visible out my window is small potatoes. But making sense of it (and *all other realities*) requires a particular kind of thinking—a kind of thinking that makes civilized life possible. *However, the Common Core Standards don’t promote that kind of thinking. That means it won’t get taught, which means it won’t get tested, which means we’re not really educating, which means too much to even try to summarize.*

This is why Alfred North Whitehead, in his 1916 Presidential Address to the Mathematical Association of England, told educators they needed to “eradicate the fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of the modern curriculum.”

This is why Harland Cleveland wrote: “It is a well-known scandal that our whole educational system is geared more to categorizing and analyzing patches of knowledge than to threading them together.”

This is why John Goodlad, after a massive, multi-year study of American high schools culminating in a 1984 McGraw-Hill book titled, *A Place Called School*, wrote, “The division into subjects and periods encourages a segmented rather than an integrated view of knowledge. Consequently, what students are asked to relate to in schooling becomes increasingly artificial, cut off from the human experiences subject matter is supposed to reflect.”

This is why dozens of other scholars have been saying the same thing for at least the last several hundred years: What we’re doing isn’t working!

The systemic nature of reality, the seamless way the brain perceives it, the organizing process that aids memory, the relating process that creates new knowledge, the conceptual networking that yields fresh insights, the meshing of two seemingly unrelated ideas that underlies creativity—all rely on holistic, systemically integrated and related thought. *And it’s not being taught.*

Before today’s education “reformers”—in a spectacular fit of hubris—took over America’s schools, progress in modeling reality more simply and accurately was being made based on [General Systems Theory](#)ⁱⁱⁱ as it had developed during World War II. *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* kissed that progress goodbye. Policymakers assume there’s nothing wrong with the core curriculum adopted in 1893, so shut up and study, kids.

We can work our way out of the hole [we’ve dug for ourselves](#)^{iv}, but it can’t be done by following orders handed down by authorities in Washington and state capitols,

orders that ignore the nature of knowledge, the history of education, the wisdom of hard-earned expertise, the conclusions of research, the nature of human nature, simple management principles, and common sense.

Pushback against a system now abusing the young and wasting their potential is decades overdue. Teachers need autonomy, freedom to experiment, and opportunities for meaningful dialogue with each other and the communities they serve that they don't now have. For most, however, pushing back in today's economy and retribution-prone school culture comes at a price few can afford to pay.

Political power must be exercised, but parents, grandparents, and thoughtful, caring citizens are the only ones with enough clout to exercise it effectively. They need to recognize poor policy when they see it, organize, and act appropriately.

i <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/01/27/why-support-for-common-core-is-sinking/>

ii <http://www.marionbrady.com/documents/Problems-CCSS.pdf>

iii http://www.communicationcache.com/uploads/1/0/8/8/10887248/general_systems_theory_-_the_skeleton_of_science.pdf

iv <http://www.marionbrady.com/CIR.asp>