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One way to help solve America’s major curriculum problem

By Marion Brady

In [my January 31st post](#)ⁱ on this blog, I joined Rene Descartes, Buckminster Fuller, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., Alfred North Whitehead, Felix Frankfurter, Thomas Merton, Neil Postman, John Holt, Harlan Cleveland, Ernest Boyer, John Goodlad, and dozens of others saying that the Common Core Standards are reinforcing an idea that’s doing great damage to education.

Of course, most of the scholars I named, being dead, didn’t actually mention the Common Core, but they left no doubt about how they’d have reacted to education policies that ignore the fundamental nature of the world that schooling is supposed to help the young understand.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology Professor Peter M. Senge [summarizes the problem](#)ⁱⁱ on page three of his best-selling book, [The Fifth Discipline](#)ⁱⁱⁱ:

“From a very early age, we are taught to break apart problems, to fragment the world. This apparently makes complex tasks and subjects more manageable, but we pay a hidden, enormous price. We can no longer see the consequences of our actions; we lose our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole.”

If Senge and the others are right that adequate sense can’t be made of the world by slicing it into little pieces and studying the pieces without regard for how they fit together and interact, it follows that modern education worldwide isn’t meeting its major responsibility.

What this means (at least to me) is something that almost nobody who has a stake in education wants to hear. Current controversial issues—standards, accountability, benchmarks, teacher quality, evaluation, length of school day, the nature of rigor, school grading, test design and uses, value-added measurement, Race to the Top, international comparisons, etc.—are sideshows. They may have slight effects one way or another on performance, but by diverting attention from the main problem, they’re doing more harm than good.

Solving the problem of the traditional curriculum’s too-narrow scope would change those issues so much that every one of them would have to be rethought.

That’s probably not going to happen, so I’m not optimistic about the future of American education. We’re a society that’s never been particularly interested in the life

of the mind. Our sense of community—“us-ness”—has withered, and with it the ability to solve shared problems. We’re not embarrassed by a level of poverty that makes it almost impossible to adequately educate a quarter of the young. Dominated by corporate interests focused on short-term profit, we refuse to acknowledge the near-certainty of a future that will challenge humankind’s ability to survive. We expect good work from teachers locked at the bottom of a bureaucracy that gives them no voice in and no control over decisions central to their effectiveness.

And we think the rich and powerful know more about educating than educators. Most people, for example, still don’t know that manipulating test scores to flunk more and more kids is just one of many sneaky strategies engineered to convince the citizenry that public schools should be handed over to McCharter chains (with taxpayers continuing to pick up the tab, of course).

My expectations are low, but if, as I believe, a minor tweak can go far toward solving our major curriculum problem, if it can significantly improve what goes on in learners’ heads, if it costs nothing to adopt, if it requires no change in staffing, facilities, or equipment, and if it necessitates no special knowledge or training, I argue that the tweak deserves a trial.

Unfortunately, testing it is against the law, law supported by both political parties, the National Governors Association, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the American Legislative Exchange Council, the Center for American Progress, Exxon-Mobil, the Waltons, the mainstream media, Arne Duncan, Bill Gates, Mike Bloomberg, Jeb Bush, and many, many others. In educational matters, they’ve put their faith in market forces and their money on test-and-punish reform policies, and gotten Congress to bless that faith with legislation. Educators who don’t fall in line are likely to find themselves looking for other lines of work.

The tweak I’m advocating is below. It’s addressed to educators, but it’s in plain English because non-educators—particularly those who vote—are the only effective counter-force to those now setting education policy. The general public needs to understand the tweak and decide if it warrants pressuring politicians to allow educators to check it out.

One: Accept that something is seriously wrong with traditional schooling. Learning is natural, pleasurable, and satisfying, but what most schools do is so at odds with those emotions it requires all sorts of social and legal pressures to keep them operating.

Two: Accept that myriad internationally known and respected scholars may be right. Think of school subjects as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that make a lot more sense to kids when they can see the whole that a simple system for connecting the pieces makes clear.

Three: Add a class at the middle or high school level that uses the core subjects to do what everybody is already doing, and needs to do better—make sense of immediate experience. Personal interpretations of what’s happening “right here, right now,” determine what people do next, and what people do next determines the courses of lives and shapes human history. [Here](#) are several ways to put such a class in place without lengthening the school day or year or going outside the boundaries of familiar school subjects.

Four: Find a teacher or teachers on staff willing to meet with the class, not to “teach” it, but to join it as “coordinator and co-learner.”

Five: Accept that the unfamiliar nature of the classwork—making more sense of the everyday, of the utterly familiar, of life as it’s being lived—differs from traditional schooling enough to require a little handholding.

Six: Download (it’s free) *Connections: Investigating Reality*^{iv}, and see it as an example of a sequence of thought-provoking puzzles or problems that help learners organize knowledge and make sense of it in a simpler, more natural way than school subjects allow.

Seven: Consider the advantages of a general education curriculum that, unlike commercially produced materials, continuously evolves and improves as teachers and kids, [in electronic touch with each other](#)^v, talk about how to make that curriculum better.

That’s it. Those who familiarize themselves with *Connections: Investigating Reality* or [the general idea it promotes](#)^{vi} will, I think, discover that it not only gives learners a broader and deeper general education than the core curriculum, but that it does so in far less time. When that happens—when educators have more time to think about [ways to give depth and dimension to books and lectures](#)^{vii}—the potential for a genuine revolution in the quality of schooling presents itself.

For example: Some kids can sing—a few really well. Others can’t carry a tune, and couldn’t even if offered a chance to sing back-up in their favorite band. A few can run a less-than-five-minute mile. But most can’t, and couldn’t even if it earned them their choice of any pair of sneakers in the sporting goods store. There are kids who can paint an image well enough to peddle it, but most can’t produce anything beyond refrigerator door postings.

What’s true for singing, running, and painting is true for solving algebraic equations, writing stories, thinking like a chemist, and all other fields of study. It’s only when kids show up for school that common sense is suspended and, in the name of a vague, not-thought-through idea called “a well-rounded education,” every kid, no matter abilities, interests, demonstrated skills, life situation, or anything else, is herded through the standard academic hoops.

Wouldn't it make far more sense if schools got their general education expectations out of the way in an hour or so, then identified and grouped the math whizzes, the mechanically inclined, the artists, the writers, those involved in projects, and so on, assigned teachers to the groups, and let them go as far as they can go as fast as they can go?

Education is long overdue for what business types sometimes call "disruptive innovation," but the bureaucratic depth and complexity of systems of public education, and simplistic policies set by amateurs in state legislatures and Congress, block real innovation. My suggested status quo-accommodating tweak is an easy sell to a great many experienced educators, but it isn't being tried because present conceptions of "reform" are so narrow and rigid, and failure to fall in line is so certain to trigger a punitive response.

Here's this blog's takeaway: *It's impossible to understand a dynamic, systemically integrated world using a static, fragmented curriculum.*

I challenge education policymakers and pundits who disagree with that statement to either make their case, publicly, in the same medium in which they're reading these words, or get behind a campaign to allow public school teachers and administrators to experiment with innovations that can't be evaluated by machine-scored, multiple choice, standardized, subject-matter tests.

ⁱ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/01/31/why-common-core-isnt-the-answer/>

ⁱⁱ <http://www.solonline.org/?page=FifthDiscipline>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.amazon.com/The-Fifth-Discipline-Practice-Organization/dp/0553456342>

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

^v <https://www.facebook.com/groups/RealityBasedLearning/>

^{vi} <http://www.marionbrady.com/articles/journal/2004-ThinkingBigKappanDec.pdf>

^{vii} <http://www.marionbrady.com/documents/Enhancing--Mini-Courses.pdf>