

A Question for Betsy DeVos

MARION BRADY FOR BUZZFLASH AT TRUTHOUT Tuesday, 17 October 2017 08:09

Worldwide, the rate of environmental, technological and demographic change is more rapid than it's ever been, and is accelerating. If we want to maintain our way of life, we must understand the changes, manage those that can be managed, and adapt to those that are beyond our control.

Because problems can't be solved using the same kind of thinking that created them, understanding, managing and adapting to change require an ability to think in new ways. In the 1960s, thoughtful federal education legislation and funding for research encouraged educators to think freshly, and new instructional materials in the physical and social sciences, and humanities began to appear that emphasized "learning by doing" rather than merely trying to remember secondhand, delivered information. The materials went by various labels -- "inquiry," "discovery," "active learning" and "constructivism."

Traditional schooling had emphasized a single thought process -- the ability to recall secondhand information delivered by textbook text and teacher talk. The new "inquiry" instructional materials required kids to use dozens of thought processes -- to analyze, categorize, infer, hypothesize, relate, synthesize, imagine, predict, sequence, extrapolate, value and so on.

Unfortunately, that departure from traditional expectations generated a "back-to-basics" backlash. Leaders of business and industry highjacked the backlash and used their clout with federal and state politicians to engineer a souped-up version of traditional schooling. No Child Left Behind, the Common Core State Standards, Race to the Top and high-stakes standardized tests, brought back traditional schooling's emphasis on learner ability to merely recall (and sometimes) apply existing information.

The business and industry-initiated reforms didn't just bring back an emphasis on memory work to the neglect of all other thought processes. Progress, today's policymakers say, has to be "measurable." Kids, teachers, administrators, schools and school systems must be sorted and ranked based on standardized test scores.

The "measurable" fad has made meaningful education reform impossible. The measuring is done by machine-scored standardized tests that can't evaluate complex thought, can only count correct or incorrect answers. Questions that appear to require thought are really guess-what-the-writer-of-the-test-item-was-thinking. That's a skill, but not a particularly useful one in the real world.

Today's test-based "reforms" are preparing the young for what was, rather than the world as it is and is becoming. That isn't just stupid, it's a recipe for societal disaster.

Those responsible* for the reactionary policies that continue to block the use of teaching materials requiring the continuous use of complex thought processes owe the US a satisfactory answer to a question:

The pursuit of life, liberty and happiness requires the routine use of myriad interdependent thought processes too complex and idiosyncratic to be evaluated by standardized tests. Given this fact; given the cost to taxpayers of those tests; given the time devoted to preparing for them; given the life-altering consequences of their scores for learners, teachers and schools; and given their role in perpetuating intellect-limiting conceptions of learning, why is it not morally unacceptable, ethically indefensible and practically unwise to continue their use?

If a satisfactory response isn't forthcoming, those who take seriously the responsibilities of citizenship will encourage and support the "opt-out-of-testing" movement.

**To begin a much longer list: Lou Gerstner; Edward Rust, Jr.; Bill Gates; Jeb Bush; Arne Duncan; Mike Bloomberg; Joel Klein; Kati Haycock; Bob Wise; Betsy DeVos; the officers of the Business Roundtable; the U.S. Chamber of Commerce; Education Trust; Democrats for Education Reform; the American Legislative Exchange Council; the Gates, Walton, Broad, Bradley, Dell and other foundations; members of Congress, and most state legislators.*