

*Washington Post*, “The Answer Sheet” blog by Valerie Strauss

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## **12 ideas that help explain what’s wrong with most schooling today**

For nearly a decade, Marion Brady has been writing for The Answer Sheet about fundamental problems with what and how schools in the United States teach children to become productive and active adults. In this post, he gives a “CliffsNotes” version of the big ideas he has wrestled with, drawing a broad picture of where and how things need to change to really reform American education. [VS]

### **Cliff Notes**

#### **By Marion Brady**

George Mason University economist Bryan Caplan was quoted by *the Atlantic* as saying the following while pitching his new book, “[The Case Against Education: Why the Education System is a Waste of Time and Money](#)”:

“From kindergarten on, students spend thousands of hours studying subjects irrelevant to the modern labor market.”

Caplan is right about kids spending time on subjects seemingly irrelevant to the modern labor market, but he’s wrong about it being a problem.

What’s wrong with most schooling today isn’t its failure to meet the demands of the job market, but its failure to meet deep personal and societal needs.

Of those needs, none is more important than improving the ability of the young to think for themselves, for the obvious reason that today’s solutions won’t solve tomorrow’s problems. The accelerating rate of environmental, demographic and technological change is creating planet-wrecking stresses and generating problems that existing knowledge can’t solve. Long-term survival is possible only if each generation is smarter than the one that preceded it.

Education policies and procedures put in place beginning with the 2002 No Child Left Behind law haven’t simply failed. They, along with the Common Core State Standards and high-stakes standardized tests, have tightened the screws on a curricular platform that’s headed toward a cliff.

Respected thinkers have long waved [warning flags](#). The general education curriculum — traditional schooling’s attempt to prepare the young for life — is at odds with the nature of knowledge. Nearly all of my 70 contributions to The Answer Sheet over nearly 10 years have been attempts to show that the subjects in the core curriculum are working parts of a holistic structure of knowledge, that adolescents of every ability level can

construct useful versions of that whole, and in so doing better equip themselves for whatever the future may bring.

What follows is a summary and links to free, illustrative instructional materials assembled from projects my brother, educator Howard Brady, and I undertook for three publishers who saw potential in ideas I had advanced in academic journals beginning with a [1966 article](#) in the Phi Delta Kappan.

(1) We agree with many others that poverty is a major contributor to the achievement gap, but blame generation after generation of basically flat academic performance on the disconnect between experienced professional educators and state and federal education policymakers.

(2) We believe poor academic performance is primarily a consequence of information overload. The traditional core curriculum dumps poorly organized, often useless information on learners in unreasonable volumes at unreasonable rates.

(3) We believe standardized tests, and the simplistic assumptions about learning which they reflect, perpetuate merely the *appearance* of learning. Learners “cram” — store enough information into short-term memory to recite and pass quizzes and examinations. But when those threats no longer loom, most of what was “taught and learned” at great cost in money and time quickly disappears. In no other institution would such inefficiency be tolerated.

(4) We believe an effective general education curriculum must have an agreed-upon aim, and that “maximize learner ability to make sense of perceived experience” is that aim. It puts schooling’s emphasis where it belongs; respects the myriad implications attending personhood; is essential to the success of all legitimate aims of general education, and the inherent complexity of reality and of how the human brain perceives and processes information shuts down simplistic, attention-diverting “reforms.”

(5) The arguments of defenders of direct instruction and teaching scripts notwithstanding, we believe useful levels of understanding of big ideas can’t be delivered by text, teacher talk or technology. Firsthand experience isn’t just the *best* teacher of complex ideas, it’s the *only* teacher. Meaningful learning is assembled firsthand and gradually from sequenced experiences, a process labeled variously as active, discovery, inquiry or constructivist learning.

(6) Big idea: Knowledge is created by organized human groups — civilizations, societies, ethnicities and so on, from which it follows that organized human groups are the phenomenon most needing to be studied and understood.

(7) Big idea: From shared experience, groups’ cognitive systems emerge — distinctive structures of knowledge or “worldviews.” Assumptions about the nature of reality, self, others, the supernatural, time, “the good life,” causation, and a few other matters shape

everything important that groups think and do — their arts, sciences, institutions, religions, norms, values — everything.

(8) Big idea: Nothing a group can know is more useful than an understanding of itself, but the “fish would be the last to discover water” phenomenon makes acquiring that understanding difficult, and the information, when called to attention, seems too obvious and mundane to teach.

(9) Big idea: Understanding other groups’ worldviews is even more difficult. Most of the content of world histories has been generated by differences in worldviews, as has any randomly chosen day’s news. Earth and its people suffer catastrophic consequences from ignorance of self and others.

(10) Big idea: Human groups are *systems* — integrated wholes — and must be studied as such. Academic disciplines and school subjects focus attention on myriad *parts* of those wholes — their environments, populations, patterns of action, and so on — but failing to treat those as studies of system components blocks the basic knowledge-relating process by means of which knowledge expands.

(11) Big idea: Studying these big ideas is best begun by using close-at-hand reality as the main learning resource. Every school, its contents, and its immediate environs, is a functioning, systemically integrated whole sufficiently coherent, comprehensive, and complex to serve as a laboratory. That laboratory’s concreteness and accessibility make it ideal, its comprehensiveness makes it an inexhaustible source of data, and its relevance and importance to the young assures engagement long enough for the familiar to become “strange enough to see.”

(12) Big idea: Every human, consciously and unconsciously, seeks answers to the questions, “What’s going on here, and what should I therefore do?” Lifting that process into consciousness turns information into knowledge, and sometimes turns knowledge into wisdom.

It should go without saying that (6) through (12) require learners to hypothesize, generalize, infer, synthesize, relate, correlate, extrapolate, value, imagine, and so on — thought processes too complex and idiosyncratic for their quality to be evaluated by standardized tests. Useful evaluations of meaningful learner work will inevitably be subjective, a fact which, when understood, helps explain why thoughtful teachers believe grading that work is counterproductive.

As the curricular screw-tightening of the Common Core State Standards and high-stakes standardized tests makes clear, education policymakers routinely underestimate both the complexity of teaching and the ability of the young to think.

If we change nothing and continue to assume that the core curriculum does the job that needs doing, that teacher experience isn’t worth its cost, that class size makes no difference, that incompetent institutional leadership has no serious consequences, that

H.G. Wells was wrong in arguing that civilization is a race between education and catastrophe, then going over the educational catastrophe cliff isn't just possible, it's inevitable.

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To encourage experimentation and dialogue, instructional materials using core-subject content in ways consistent with (6) through (12) can be downloaded from the Internet and used free of cost and obligation. The lessons, and a small e-book arguing the merit of systems theory as the primary organizer of knowledge (and school subjects as secondary organizers), have been downloaded tens of thousands of times, suggesting an unmet need and the potential of bottom-up change and word of mouth to call attention to noncommercial, unadvertised teaching resources.

(a) EBook, *What's Worth Learning?*

<http://www.marionbrady.com/documents/WWL.pdf>

(b) Systems-based course of study:

<http://www.marionbrady.com/IntroductiontoSystems.asp>

(c) American history: <http://www.marionbrady.com/AHH.asp>

(d) World history: <http://www.marionbrady.com/WorldHistory.asp>

(e) World cultures: <http://www.marionbrady.com/InvestigatingWorldCultures.asp>

Note: This article was republished by *Alternet* and *Salon*.