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Why Not Reform Education from the Bottom Up for a Real Change?

By Marion Brady

Learning is one of the deepest of all human drives and, ordinarily, a source of great personal satisfaction, even excitement. Kindergartners bring enthusiasm to schooling, but mandatory attendance laws, the use of grading, ranking, and other extrinsic motivators, and classroom discipline problems testify to the gradual decline of learner enthusiasm.

It's essential to restore and expand the school and teacher autonomy that once made the education profession appealing, made American education a model for the world, and brought the nation far more than its share of patents, international prizes, and other evidences of excellence.

The depth of public schooling's multilayered bureaucracies makes meaningful change discouragingly difficult. However, by using traditional content in non-traditional ways, and by addressing a few long-ignored institutional problems, genuine institutional transformation is possible—from passive to active learning, from text-centered to student-centered instruction, from simplistic top-down policies to bottom-up, educator-guided instructional activities.

Consider—

Problem:

> 'Alice (in Wonderland) came to a fork in the road. 'Which road do I take?' she asked.
>
> 'Where do you want to go?' responded the Cheshire Cat.
>
> 'I don't know,' Alice answered.
>
> 'Then,' said the Cat, 'It doesn't matter.'

A little more than a half-century ago I was teaching interdisciplinary social science at Florida State University, working with teacher candidates in the School of Education and with the heads of the sociology departments of FSU and Florida A&M University on a project for the American Sociological Association.

Research connected with that project prompted me to begin making a list of what authors of articles in professional academic journals thought was the overarching aim or purpose of a general education.

The twenty-eight authors on my list had twenty-eight different opinions: Instill a love of learning; explore 'eternal' questions; prepare the young for democratic

citizenship; introduce the core disciplines; transmit societal values; prepare for college and careers, and 22 more.

The institution has no agreed-upon, overarching aim. To resist inertia and function efficiently, its purpose must be understood and shared by every stakeholder.

Solution: Given an unknowable future and the regional, ethnic, cultural, and situational differences in America's nearly 350 million citizens, capitalizing on their myriad perspectives requires the aim most likely to support all legitimate aims of schooling: *Maximize learner ability to think clearly, creatively, and independently*.

"Thinking," a process, must have an agreed-upon meaning, must actually and routinely require learners to hypothesize, generalize, synthesize, imagine, relate, integrate, predict, extrapolate, and so on through the dozens of thought processes and countless combinations of thought processes that make possible routine human functioning and civilized life.

General education's present operative aim is "covering the material" in the curriculum adopted by America's secondary schools in 1893. How little most adults remember and use of what they once "learned" at great cost in money and time is irrefutable evidence of an unaddressed institutional problem.

Make general education's aim maximizing the ability to think clearly, deeply, and creatively, and learners will draw on the specialized studies of the traditional disciplines as needed and appropriate.

Problem:

No one disputes the contention that firsthand experience is the best teacher, but traditional schooling makes alternatives to seat-time and learner passivity difficult. Schools sometimes rival medium security prisons in the degree to which they isolate their charges from the outside world and regiment their actions.

Schooling's subject matter is reality—what it is and how it works. The whole of that, of course, is beyond comprehension. Reality needs to be scaled down to a size that makes direct, firsthand experience possible.

To that end, imagine a bubble enclosing the school and its surrounding environment—north, south, east, west, above, below, everything inside the bubble, from earthworms under to air above, functioning as it ordinarily functions. Imagine the bubble's content as textbook, as laboratory, as working, tangible, directly accessible phenomena reasonably representative of the whole of reality of which it's a part.

Solution: *Make the school (or selected aspects of it to keep the tasks manageable) an ongoing focus of study—not the only but the primary general education project.*

With understanding will come ideas for improving school performance. If learners know their ideas will be taken seriously, they'll be motivated to produce sophisticated

presentations for school boards or other authorities. That's a demanding, real-world, intellectually challenging task that parallels the responsibilities of adult citizenship.

Taking action: The young face an unprecedented, accelerating rate of technological, demographic, environmental, economic, and social change. If they're to have a fighting chance of coping with the collisions of differing societal worldviews which those changes will trigger, they'll need much more than traditional schooling can give them.

Keeping the effort small, bottom up-and voluntary, here's how to demonstrate that meaningful academic reform is possible inside existing bureaucratic boundaries and expectations:

1. Start at the middle school level. Middle schools began with a commitment to integrating knowledge, but stumbled by assuming that integrating knowledge meant integrating school subjects. Wrong assumption. All humans routinely integrate knowledge, and making deliberate use of this subconsciously known skill radically simplifies just about everything of consequence about educating.

2. Don't lose sight of the big picture. Covering secondhand material to be remembered shouldn't be schooling's primary objective. The ancient Greeks had it right: "Know thyself." Every person on the planet has a mental model of how the world works that shapes their thoughts and actions. Schooling should lift awareness of those models so they can be examined and refined. The core curriculum eats most of the school day without doing that because it breaks reality apart and studies the parts but doesn't put it back together. Integrate knowledge systemically, study the real world rather than textbooks about it, and the general education component of the curriculum will do in a couple of hours what presently isn't being done at all. The instructional time made available will allow identification, attention, and development of individual interests and abilities to an extent not previously possible.

3. Small work groups are optimal. They facilitate dialogue, the main class activity when active learning replaces passive learning.

4. The most effective teachers don't teach, they engineer experiences from which learners learn,* then back away, dealing with roadblocks with questions, not answers. If teachers with differing skills are teamed, the quality of questions will be better.

5. Stop fixating on data. When improving the quality of learner thought replaces recalling secondhand information as schooling's primary aim, data-producing standardized tests—unable to quantify quality—are useless.

*Sequenced instructional materials that illustrate holistic, systemically integrated, reality-based active learning, written for middle school and older learners and using traditional content in non-traditional ways, are available free of cost or other obligations when used by teachers with their own students. The materials can be downloaded from

the link below. If policymakers will remove obstacles to their voluntary use, and teachers, worldwide, work together, continuous improvement of the general education curriculum will follow.

The fact that bottom-up improvement is possible despite the curse of standardization and high-stakes testing is indicated by years of thousands of downloads of files from http://www.MarionBrady.com.