

Salvaging public schooling

By Marion Brady (Published March 27, 2021 on Diane Ravitch's blog.)

Public schooling should be the bedrock of democracy, but the institution's failure to produce a citizenry more resistant to authoritarianism and fantastical conspiracy theories is surely evidence of a serious institutional problem.

Unfortunately, it's also a problem that most schools are poorly equipped to address. It has to do with what learners think and, with one exception, traditional schooling's interest in what learners think is minimal.

That exception: How much of the "core" curriculum's standardized, secondhand information can kids stuff into short-term memory long enough to pass a test?

Good teachers do good things with the subjects in the core curriculum, but no mix of traditional school subjects will produce learners or a citizenry with sufficient intellectual depth and breadth to support democracy, societal stability, and the fresh thinking required by the accelerating rate of social change.

[Think I'm wrong?](#)

Rethinking the core

Woodrow Wilson said that changing the curriculum is harder than moving a cemetery. He was right, but the curriculum is where the rubber meets the road in schooling, and for general education purposes, the core curriculum's failure to model reality systemically and holistically creates a fatal vulnerability.

The brain seeks order, organization, pattern, regularity, connections, relationships, wholeness. The core gives it a hodge-podge of disconnected subjects with differing aims, incompatible conceptual frameworks, specialized vocabularies, myriad abstractions and dissimilar methodologies, all at odds with both the integrated nature of the world that schooling is supposed to explain and the way our brains organize information to create sense and meaning.

A couple of paragraphs from a column I wrote twenty or so years ago for Knight-Ridder/Tribune newspapers for a series called "Rethinking Schools" illustrates why the core's standalone subjects can't do the job that needs doing.

"We want a pair of socks. Those available have been knitted in a Third World country. Power to run the knitting machines is supplied by burning fossil fuels. Burning fossil fuels contributes to global warming. Global warming alters weather patterns. Altered weather patterns trigger environmental catastrophes. Environmental catastrophes destroy infrastructure. Money spent for infrastructure replacement isn't available for health care. Declines in the quality of health care affect mortality rates.

Mortality is a matter of life and death. Buying socks, then, is a matter of life and death.

“Making detailed sense of this simple cause-effect sequence requires not only some understanding of marketing, physics, chemistry, meteorology, economics, engineering, psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science and a couple of other fields not usually taught in middle or high schools, *it requires an understanding of how fields fit together and interact.*”

Planet Earth is on an unsustainable path largely of humankind’s choosing. The accelerating rate of environmental, demographic and technological change is creating problems with no known solutions. If our children and our children’s children are to have more than a snowball’s chance in hell of coping with the world they’re inheriting, they need more than a curriculum based on the Common Core Standards or similar knowledge-fragmenting curricula can give them.

Curricular change

Fortunately, a general education discipline that welds not only the core subjects but all present and future school subjects into working parts of a single, comprehensive, integrated, easily understood and used structure of knowledge doesn’t have to be invented. It already exists, is in universal use, teaches at rates unmatched by any other approach, costs nothing to adopt, and fits inside present bureaucratic boundaries and expectations.

Every reader of these words began using that discipline’s major organizers at birth and developed them to sophisticated levels long before reaching school age.

We’re born hungry. We fuss and a nipple with nourishment appears, introducing the thought process that, radically elaborated by lived experience and appropriate schooling, will teach us most of what we’ll learn for the rest of our lives.

That thought process? Not *recalling* information, but *relating it*.

Relating

Knowledge expands as relationships are discovered between and among aspects of reality not previously thought to relate—nipples relate to fussing, tides relate to moon, societal stability relates to trust, peace relates to justice, time relates to space.

The relating process that teaches so much so rapidly and efficiently has five elements rooted in the questions where, when, who, what, why? When we focus attention on a particular matter, we (1) locate it in space, (2) establish time parameters, (3) identify relevant actors or objects, (4) describe action, and (5)

assume or postulate the action's cause. The five, integrated systemically, create sense, meaning, "stories," knowledge, understanding.

Because all fields of study are elaborations of answers to the five questions, and because (when focused on a particular matter) the questions integrate systemically, all knowledge integrates systemically, maximizing the *knowledge-creating relating process*.

And humankind's chances of survival.

Institutional transformation

Do this: Switch middle and high schooling's primary focus from learner ability to *recall* secondhand information, to learner ability to *relate* information.

Engineer "deep" understanding by requiring adolescents to discover the relating process *for themselves* via "active learning"—engaging in activities that help them lift the relating process into consciousness and put it to intellectually challenging use.* Do that, and the young will move to levels of academic performance not now possible, levels so far beyond the reach of machine-scored standardized tests their inability to evaluate complex thought will be obvious.

I know this to be true beyond a shadow of doubt from leading a seven-year-long nationwide project involving dozens of middle school teachers working with kids of every level of ability. The project was cut short by the reactionary "back to basics" fad, followed by "standards and accountability" and high-stakes testing.

Using scores on tests of recalled core curriculum content to shape education policy doesn't just invite societal suicide, it assures it.

###

*The links below access FREE—no strings, no advertising, no obligations—materials supporting and implementing the above.

- *What's Worth Learning?* Small, jargon-free e-book elaborating the above. Read a review:

<https://www.marionbrady.com/articles/WWTReview.pdf>

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

- Courses of study written for middle school and older learners—

An introduction to systems thinking; American history; civics; world history; world cultures.

(Free for teachers/mentors for use with their own learners:)

<https://www.marionbrady.com/Systems-Based-Learning-Courses.asp>

- Provision for user dialogue to encourage continuous improvement of lessons; other books, articles, op-eds, blogs. <https://www.marionbrady.com>