

Basic Education

There's an old joke, the punchline of which is, "You can't get there from here."

For the general education curriculum, the line is apt. If where we want to go in curriculum is to a conceptually integrated, holistic educational experience for students, we can't get there by going in the direction we're headed. We've tried for more than a century to bolt the disciplines together to make them more accurately model the systemic nature of the real world, and we're farther away from the goal than we were when we started.

This isn't to say that worthwhile interdisciplinary instruction isn't possible, or that it's not taking place. But random explorations of disciplinary parallels and intersections is a long, long way from meshing the disciplines to form a comprehensive, coherent whole. Cementing a couple of bricks together doesn't make a building.

More recent attempts to integrate the curriculum around themes, concepts, student interests, social problems and the like are an improvement. But not by much. Excellent lessons can, of course, be built around any of these approaches. Real curriculum integration, however, requires that every theme, every concept, every topic, every lesson, fit logically with every other theme, concept, topic and lesson, in a way that students can understand and explain. Anything less merely replaces one kind of curricular fragmentation with another. This sort of total curriculum integration isn't even being attempted.

A Proposal

Our assumptions about the curriculum are so rigidly structured by the traditional disciplines that thinking freshly about alternatives is extremely difficult. But it can be done. Follow along with me while I attempt, in small steps, to point the way to a general education curriculum more defensible than the one presently imposed on students:

1. The purpose of schooling in general, and of general education in particular, isn't to master school subjects. "Out there," out at the edges of our senses, is something we think of as "reality"—trees, telephones, roads, rabbits, people, poetry, the moon, molecules, systems of government, styles of clothing, and all the rest. Expanding our understanding of this reality—that's what general education is supposed to be all about.

2. In our attempt to understand reality, we "Western culturists" want to see what it's made of, so we take it apart. There are a near-infinite number of ways to do this, but the educational establishment emphasizes just one. Reality is broken apart into botany, psychology, physics, language, bookkeeping, mathematics and so forth. (This is appropriate for people who want to become botanists, psychologists, physicists, linguists, bookkeepers, mathematicians and so forth. But for understanding reality in all its complexity, educators should be embarrassed by the separate-subject approach. Even if the parts could be summed—and they can't—they don't add up to the whole.)

3. If it's granted that it's helpful to "disassemble" reality so we can look at its components more carefully, it surely makes sense to back off far enough to see if perhaps there are better—less artificial, awkward, arbitrary—ways to do it.

And there are. Long before Newton, Darwin, Freud, Comte and other shapers of the traditional disciplines were born, a far simpler yet superior alternative for segmenting reality was solidly in place and in daily use. It had just five parts. To describe or analyze some part of reality, the basic categories were (and still are):

- (a) What's happening?
- (b) To what or whom?
- (c) Where?
- (d) When?
- (e) Why?

Too simple? No. Any one of the five is as complex as one chooses to make it. Taken together (as they should be), the complexity of their systemic relationships challenges the best minds. Millennia hence, that complexity will still be challenging the best minds.

Fortunately for the educational establishment, the young come to school knowing this five-part approach to the description and analysis of reality. They also bring with them a general knowledge of the systemic relationship of the parts. Unfortunately for the educational establishment, none of the young come to school **knowing** that they know their five-part approach to the description and analysis of reality, or that the parts of that approach are systemically related. Therein lies the educational challenge. That which is implicit must be made explicit. Students must be moved from knowing, to knowing what they know.

What's the difference? Before Sir Isaac Newton, all humans "knew" about gravity—knew that apples fell off trees, that water ran downhill, that what went up came down. But it wasn't until 1666, when Newton **told** us what we knew (made the known, known) that anything could be done with the knowledge. Only after Newton was it possible to, say, precisely compute rather than merely guess at the trajectory of a cannonball.

In the narrow confines of a short article I can't say how adoption of our "natural" approach to segmenting reality would work itself out for a November or April homework assignment for 5th graders. Neither can I briefly explain the enormous implications of the approach for the study of history, mathematics, French, or other fields of study. I can, however, in an effort to make my proposal clearer, illustrate the "core" assignment. Readers may then be able to take it from there, imagining either what it might be necessary to do to prepare students for eventual success with the assignment, or what could be erected on the conceptual framework created by the assignment.

"Okay, everyone. Get with your team. It's time to go to work.

"As most of you have noted by way of sarcastic remarks, I've brought my bike to class.

"Tell me. In your opinion, do you understand bicycles?"

“Ah! You say you do. Okay, then, I want you to demonstrate your understanding by putting on paper the most complete, thorough, organized, systematic guide or outline for the study of bicycles you can create.

“Give this your best shot. This is no 15 minute assignment.”

[Three or four days later]

“All right. What you’ve just done for a small part of reality—bicycles—I want you to do for a somewhat larger piece of reality—the school and the school grounds.

“If you get really stuck, I’ll answer any precisely worded question.”

That’s it. That’s the assignment. And for dealing with it, no canned instructional material. No textbook. No lecture. No film. No computer. And deliberately minimal coaching. In the study of reality, the most comprehensive instructional material is reality itself, and the most elegant categorizing system for its study is location, time, actors (or objects), action, and cause.

To many, the idea of spending weeks, months, or even years studying one’s own school may seem an unacceptable waste of time. But consider:

One: No instructional content is more relevant. For students, school isn’t preparation for life, school **is** life.

Two: No content is more on target. The goal is to expand understanding of reality. Most textbooks and other instructional materials are at least third- or fourth-handed descriptions of reality. The school is the real thing.

Third: No content is richer. Just about every concept of significance for general education, in every field of study, manifests itself in some observable way within the bounds of the school. This permits “hands on” learning—not hands on in the laboratory, but hands on the real thing. Students form the concepts essential to understanding the world beyond the school in the one context where the concepts are least likely to get lost in abstraction.

Fourth: No content is more thought provoking. Traditional instructional materials, because they’re mediated and thereby vastly simplified, leave students with little cognitive stimulation. All they can do with the usual academic fare is try to remember it. Direct study of reality in all its complexity, on the other hand, forces the constant use of every known thought process.

Fifth: No content more successfully levels the academic playing field. Traditional, book-bound schooling, climaxed by The Standardized Test, has us confused. We’ve come to believe that adeptness at playing word games is a sure sign of general intelligence. Working directly with reality puts students on a far more even footing, and strengths and weaknesses not previously noted become apparent.

Sixth: No content is less expensive. It’s already in place.

Finally, and more important than any of the above, no content surpasses the immediate reality of the school as a vehicle for helping students make explicit their implicitly held conceptual models of reality. Immediate reality is, after all, all we really have, for neither the past nor the future are directly accessible. We can recall the past, and project probable and

possible futures, but recalling and projecting are no substitute for examining the present moment in all its subtle complexity. Once in place, of course, the student can take the conceptual framework fashioned in the study of the here and now to any point in time or space for the description and analysis of whatever's there. But for formal instruction, nothing matches the concreteness of immediate experience.

A Prospect

Our minimal expectations for students leaving school should be clear. They should be able to identify the major elements of their mental models of reality, explain the nature of the relationships between those elements, and demonstrate that they can put what they know to practical use. Nothing students can learn is of greater value, yields more insight into self and situation, is more capable of freeing thought and spirit, is more central to continuous personal and societal growth.

Innovations in education come and go. Most enjoy a measure of success. Sadly however, that success usually has less to do with the merit of the innovation than with the Hawthorne Effect. Students respond to most innovations positively because more attention is being paid to them, because someone cares enough about them to think about the instructional process, and because what's happening is almost always better than the sterility and irrelevancy of what preceded the innovation.

That's good, but not good enough. We've hardly scratched the surface of student potential, and we won't until every school moves beyond random innovation to a holistic curriculum. The means to that end are ours for the taking. All that's required is an expansion of mind, an acceptance of the proposition that what students need more than anything else—what we all need—is an awareness of the conceptual frameworks which underlie our own and others' thought and action.

That's basic education.

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