

“So Why Do We Need To Know This?”

An Analytical Review of Education Reform Literature Throughout the 20th Century

Focusing on the Purpose of Education



By

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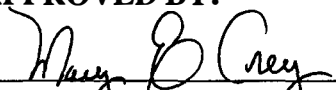
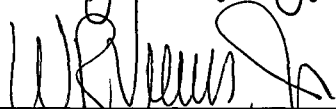
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Introduction

Rationale

When we hear the expression “education reform” we naturally assume the speaker is concerned with making schools better. But better how? What problems or difficulties are to be solved or addressed? Can they be solved or adequately addressed? All of this begs larger more fundamental issues: What do we (as local communities, states and as a nation) want our schools to do and achieve? What is the *purpose of public education* in today’s society? Who should decide this and how? If we know what we want, can the current structure, organization, philosophies, personnel, preparatory programs, methodologies, techniques, technologies, standards, systems, resources and so on of the current educational community meet our goals? If not, what are the remedies or alternative approaches? The purpose of this review is to deepen my own understanding of the major positions taken on the above issues by a sampling of the most influential and often controversial educators, social critics and philosophers of the 20th century. It is not intended to be a comprehensive review, merely a starting point for future study and contemplation.

My reasons for pursuing this project are intellectually personal. I wanted to increase my knowledge of the history of educational theories and become more conversant in the epistemologies of various pedagogical approaches. During my combined preparatory and masters degree program I found that many of the authors I have chosen to read were discussed only briefly, even cursorily and summarized by other writers into the distillation of formulaic methods and singular descriptions like “constructivist.” I was struck by the fact that although so much of modern educational approaches purport to come from the ideas of Dewey, Hunter and even E.D. Hirsch, we, as new teachers, were not required to actually read their words and engage them –

something the state standards implore us to have our own students do! I thought this to be the perfect opportunity to do so for myself; or more accurately, to at least begin the process.

Selection of Authors

The process for selecting authors to be read for this review was not scientific and may not be viewed as a “balanced” sample, depending on the experience, interests and biases of the reader. I began with writers on education who seemed to me to be the most politically and philosophically polarizing in the debate over the purpose of education. As mentioned above, I also wanted to engage works that are often referenced in Education and Human Development course syllabi but not always read critically in the courses, on their own merits and in their own context (this may be most relevant to Dewey, Hirsch and Sarason). I then attempted, in consultation with my advisor, to explore some writers with whom I had little experience but whose writing would add a unique outlook to my review (bell hooks and Jacque Barzun).

Those I spent the most time on (Dewey, Hirsch and Postman) monopolized my attention for different reasons. I believe that a thinker as important, yet unread as Dewey demanded attention. E.D. Hirsch is important because of his significant contribution to the modern content-based movement, although his motives do not seem to be clearly understood even by those who support it. Neil Postman simply excited me the most. I stumbled upon his first book with Charles Weingartner then wanted to see where his thinking progressed. It was a surprising, challenging and satisfying journey that was well worth taking.

Finally, I wanted to include at least something by John Goodlad because I had been impressed by his research, to which I had been introduced during my graduate studies. I agree that Diane Ravitch, Jonathan Kozol, Theodore Sizer and many others could have been included, but again, this was only intended to be a start.

Format

The format I have chosen for the body of this project is divided into five sections described below. These sections will be used to summarize and analyze each work:

- ◆ **Summary of Reading** – A synopsis of each work read by a particular author, highlighting premises, research, major themes and author’s conclusions.
- ◆ **Diagnosis** – A description of what the author thinks is wrong with schooling and why.
- ◆ **Remedy** – The author’s proscriptio for what should be done. In most cases, these are not cosmetic changes or “ready made” blueprints, but major shifts in the way education and schools are perceived, conceived, organized and operated.
- ◆ **Way** – This is a term often used in defining religious and philosophical constructs and I believe it to be useful here. This section will attempt to summarize the author’s perspective and underlying philosophy including, most importantly in my view, the purpose of education.
- ◆ **Analysis** – In this section I will evaluate the author’s approach in the context of New York State Standards, suggest obstacles to the implementation of his/her ideas and/or discuss relevant counter arguments.

John Dewey

Summary of Reading

My Pedagogic Creed (1897)

This article, according to Dewey scholar and editor John J. McDermott, contains in seminal form Dewey's major concepts and beliefs regarding education on which Dewey would later expound in his later larger works such as *Schools of Tomorrow*, *The Child and the Curriculum*, *Experience and Education* and *Democracy and Education*. Its form, as the title implies, is that of a manifesto, divided into five Articles, each starting with the line "I believe that..."

Article I – What Education Is

Dewey defines all education as a social process and relationship. The individual, from birth, responds to the social construct into which he/she is born and subsequently creates meaning in social terms. In the example of language, Dewey points out that "through the response which is made to the child's instinctive babblings ... transformed into articulate language, and thus the child is introduced into the consolidated wealth of ideas and emotions...."

The educational process is comprised of two equally important ("organically related") dimensions – psychological and sociological. It reflects the interdependent relationship between the individual and society: Each individual both benefits from society and is responsible to it. "Education, therefore, must begin with a psychological insight into the child's capacities, interest and habits. ... [These] must be continually interpreted.... They must be translated into terms of what they are capable of in the way of social service."

Article II – What School Is

School should not be a clinical or artificial environment. It is a process of living, an end in itself. "The school must represent present life – life as real and vital" as other experiences of

the child do. Additionally, it should be a simplified version of the outside social world so that a child gradually learns his part in society. School's role is to "deepen" and build upon the moral values developed at home and to instill functional social values. Dewey states that education fails because it ignores this primary principle of school as a "form of community life." School is erroneously conceived as a place for imparting information, forming habits and preparing for a future life and, therefore, is not part of the child's immediate life experience.

The role of the teacher is to make that community and life experience useful and relevant to each child. They select the influences that affect their students and should assist in helping students respond "properly" to these influences. Their decisions are based upon "larger experience and riper wisdom."

Article III – The Subject-Matter of Education

A child's social activity should be the core of the curriculum. *Subject-matter should not be introduced as new peculiar experience* – it must be connected to prior knowledge. New information is a tool to be used in the context of previous experience. Subjects should not be artificially separated and dissected from life as a whole. Therefore, different disciplines cannot be divided into discreet, graduated curricula. The purpose is to develop new skills and greater interest: "Education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; *that the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing.*"

Article IV – The Nature of Method

How material is presented and treated should be based upon each child's own nature (specifically their abilities and interest). Activities should favor the active over passive; physical over sensory. Symbols that separate meaning from action should be avoided. Formation of meaningful images is the key to education. "Interests represent dawning capacities" and indicate new developmental stages which must be observed and monitored, not suppressed or humored.

Article V – *The School and Social Progress*

Dewey believed deeply in the power of school as a social force: “Education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform.” Both individualistic AND socialistic ideals are important values for the community as a whole. Through education, society forms its own purpose, organizes its resources and shapes itself. Because of their profound responsibility in this regard, educators must have all the resources needed for the task (specifically, Dewey mentions those teaching the arts, science and psychology). “The teacher is engaged, not simply in the training of individuals, but in the formation of the proper social life.” He extols the importance, indeed the sanctity of the teacher’s calling: “The teacher always is the prophet of the true God.”

The School and Social Progress (Chapter One of *The School and Society*, 1899)

Here, Dewey begins to detail the project method and the social responsibility of the school to provide realistic programs. He asserts that it is important for parents and educators to take the broader social view and not focus, as is natural, on the success and experience of one’s own child. The “new Education” is part of “the whole social evolution.”

Dewey talks about the changing world of his time – industrialization, technology, the application of science, the growth of a world economy, mass production and distribution, rapid and cheap communication, changing political boundaries and the rise of cities. The dramatic effects of these changes could be seen everywhere and in everything. Prior to these changes, the home was the center of all occupational activity and every family member participated. Discipline and responsibility were natural and necessary. In his view, the home was a *natural educational environment* that required children to observe, mimic and create using logic, first hand experience and imagination. *All information was functional* with “a real motive behind and a real outcome ahead.”

But Dewey understood that the 20th century would be a different time. Dewey identified some of its advantages as diversity, tolerance and greater commercial activity. Education was becoming available to all people thanks to commercial printing, cheap and rapid communication and improvements in travel. The result was that an “intellectual revolution.... a distinctively learned class...[would become] an anachronism.”. How do we make use of these advantages in education while at the same time integrated the advantages of the natural learning environment?

Part of Dewey’s answer is the concept of manual training (woodwork, metals, sewing, cooking, et al). The pursuit of manual skills opens up opportunities for holistic learning – natural sciences, economics, history, geography, mathematics, and the arts. If proper direction and questioning from the teacher is provided, many possibilities emerge. The occupation becomes “a medium, an instrument, an organ of understanding – and is thereby transformed.” This process allows for a broader understanding of the *meaning* of occupations. Such meaning is necessary for the individual who is doing the work to find the *significance* in it, no matter how elevated or menial. Students are actively engaged, not passive and receptive, and are learning practical skills.

But there is a larger result to be had from this method. These activities must be seen in the context of their social significance, making “school itself. . . a genuine form of active community life, instead of a place set apart in which to learn lessons.” Classrooms should create community through common needs and aims (interdependence). The school culture, according to Dewey, cultivates no common and productive activity, like the rest of society, which is why it can’t organize itself as a natural social unit. There is “no obvious social motive for acquirement of mere learning” except for (in Dewey’s view) the negative of competition.

Dewey alludes to the advantages of cooperative learning (“mutual assistance” “interchange of ideas,” “successes and failures of previous experiences”). He also discusses the “certain disorder” with regards to discipline of an active learning environment as a necessary

difficulty. He asserts that discipline is not an end in itself. In school, it is usually artificial.

Experience in life teaches us discipline best – we learn responsibility for ourselves by having to work with others and when we are motivated by “having a part in constructive work, in contributing to a result, social in spirit...” School should be an “embryonic society.”

In response to criticism that manual training tends toward the production of specialists as opposed to the cultivation of liberal culture, Dewey argues that liberal education is one-sided in that it only address the human need to accumulate information and to get control of the symbols of learning. “The simple facts of the case are that in the great majority of human beings the distinctively intellectual interest is not dominant.” Our society and culture have gone through tremendous change, requiring similar changes from schools. School needs to be a vital community that fosters self-discipline, employs active, expressive and self-directing instruction and imbues students “with the spirit of service.”

The Child and The Curriculum (1902)

Dewey discusses the tension and dichotomy between child and adult experience. He views the difference between the two as dialectic and not opposing. Traditional views of this issue have given birth to unsuccessful educational approaches – depositing subjects logically into the child as a receptacle of facts and information. Dewey sees the result of this as a generation of morally and intellectually depreciated youth. However, if personality and the development of character is the only priority, the result is a child without skills or social purpose.

To bridge the gap, Dewey suggests the ideas of interpretation and guidance – evaluating where a child is in his/her development (strengths, weaknesses, interests) and maximizing the educative value of their experiences by providing the proper *reflective* mature guidance that adult experience brings. He uses the analogy of a map. A map is an “arranged, orderly view of [others’] previous experiences . . . [and] serves as a guide.” It does, however, take the place of the

actual journey. Material must be translated into real life-terms so that it is relevant, functional and purposeful. Dewey identifies three “evils” of not taking this approach: 1) the material becomes formal, symbolic and dead, 2) there is no craving to learn or motivation on the part of the student, and most importantly 3) vital aspects of the subject matter are lost.

Education as Growth (from Democracy and Education, 1916)

Children are dependent but also adaptable. Dependence has an intrinsic component of future growth. Children thrive because of their natural ability to learn easily, particularly in social situations. Additionally, the adaptability of children (Dewey calls this “plasticity”) is “essentially the ability to learn from experience; [it is] the power to retain from one experience something which is of avail in coping with the difficulties of a later situation.” This leads to *a habit of learning and learning to learn.*

Plasticity requires the acquisition of habits. Habits are not simply skills, but an ability to control or use one’s environment to accomplish a particular end. This definition of habit is active and is not consistent with routinization. Routine habits and bad habits are severed from reason and reflection and actually “put an end to plasticity” – we become dependent upon them and they limit our ability to learn new things – they make us averse to change. What are the educational implications of these assertions? Dewey identifies two things: “1) The educational process [or human growth – in children or adults] has no end beyond itself; it is its own end, and 2) The educational process is one of continual reorganizing, reconstructing, transforming.”

Traditional education makes three mistakes in achieving the purpose of education, which Dewey defines in this work specifically as acculturation into the adult environment. The first mistake is not accounting for the instinctive or native powers of the young. The second is “failure to develop initiative in coping with novel situations;” and the third is the unnecessary emphasis on developing “automatic skills at the expense of personal perception.” For Dewey, a successful

education is one that produces adults who have the desire and ability to continue to learn through the process of living (in modern pedagogical parlance, life long learners). We are all engaged in the process of growing, only the modes and conditions are different.

Experience and Thinking (from Democracy and Education, 1916)

Here Dewey explains his famous (or notorious) maxim “we learn by doing.” “Thinking is...the intentional endeavor to discover specific connections between something which we do and the consequences which result, so that the two become continuous.... it makes connecting links explicit in the form of relationships.” However, for learning to take place, simple experience is not sufficient. The process of experience must be active; it must be “a trying” that includes thinking processes and reflection. Additionally, there must be consequences and feedback from the experience that yields meaning and significance: “To ‘learn from experience’ is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequences.”

Experience is not primarily cognitive, but cognition is the translator of experience into knowledge. Dewey describes a destructive dualism in education, severing body (experience) from the mind (interpreting experience and transforming it into knowledge). This leads to ‘discipline problems and general lack of attentiveness; fighting a losing battles with the students’ bodies. Even if the body cannot be utilized at all times, at least the senses should be employed.

Things and ideas are not defined in the mind by listing their corresponding qualities and characteristics but by their purpose and their connection to other things. “An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory because it is only in experience that a theory has vital and verifiable significance.” However, Dewey quickly adds, “no experience has meaning without some element of thought.” Reflection is required to analyze an experience and decipher the cause and effect. A reflective experience (for Dewey the cornerstone of learning) starts with confusion or doubt over an incomplete situation in one’s environment and ends with new knowledge. The process he suggests mirrors the scientific method: 1) a survey or analysis of the problem, 2) an inference or hypothesis, 3) testing the hypothesis, 4) observation of possible evidence, and 5) use of judgment

in the recognition of relationships. “Any further development, however elaborate it may be, is only an extending and a refining of this simple act of inference.” Although not perfect, reflective experience, because of the process of careful analysis and the construction of precise hypotheses, is far preferable to simple trial and error.

The Need for a Theory of Experience (from Experience and Education, 1938)

In this short lecture, written later in his life, Dewey cautions advocates of progressive education (a term most associated with his own name) against the mistake of assuming that all experiences are educative. For an experience to be enriching (and therefore one in which the teacher should have students engage), it must be both “agreeable” to the student and “fruitful” in that it will lead to and be “creatively” connected to future experiences. This is a principle Dewey refers to as “the experiential continuum.”

Dewey also warns that with regard to the argument between progressive and traditional education, “departure from the old solves no problems.” Dewey emphasizes the need for a philosophy of education in a progressive school that is based upon a philosophy of experience. This cannot be hollow, “emotionally stirring” words without clear purpose; it must include a plan indicating what is to be done and how it is to be done. It must also take on the difficult task of ascertaining what kinds of materials, methods and social relationships are necessary. Dewey asserts that although progressive education is simpler in principle than tradition education (“artificiality always leads to unnecessary complexity”), it is not easier. Fighting against institutionally established habits is difficult.

Finally, Dewey laments the fact that advocates of progressive education have not successfully implemented school systems and classroom structures that would yield the intended results of this educational philosophy. He attributes this lack of success to the absence of a philosophy of education and to the reliance on existing systems of organization and order. The

new education requires new organizational concepts built “upon the empirical and experimental sciences” which offer the best types of organization.

Criteria of Experience (from *Experience and Education*, 1938)

In this essay, Dewey develops in further detail the “experiential continuum” and how it effects education. He also explicates the chief principles “for interpreting an experience in its educational function and force.” These principles are *continuity* and *interaction*. He discusses the specific role and responsibilities of the teacher and his/her active relationship with the student.

Dewey asserts that the progressive movement in education is more democratic and humane than the traditional approach, which is autocratic in procedure and harsh in its policies. He argues that we prefer that which is democratic and humane, in all institutions, because we believe that democracy promotes “a better quality of human experience” than other alternatives of human organization. Given such a belief, progressive education would be preferable because its suppositions and methods are akin to democracy. Making such a determination requires *discriminating between experiences and ascertaining their inherent value*. This leads Dewey back to the experiential continuum as a “criterion for discrimination.”

Habits of mind such as this are not simple or easy to develop. They are built upon previous habits and experiences. Experiences set up certain preferences and aversions; they also “widen the external conditions” or environment of future learning. We narrow the range of stimuli that effect us by the decisions we make based upon our experiences and choices regarding them.

How does this effect education? It is the responsibility of adults to use the “wisdom [their] own wider experience gives without imposing a merely external control.” Therefore, Dewey points out, the educator must “judge what attitudes are actually conducive to continued

growth and what are detrimental.” S/he must also “recognize in concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth.” As part of this construct, teachers need to be connected to the local community so that it may be utilized as a resource.

Dewey then clarifies the relationship, or to use his term *interaction*, between objective conditions (those imposed by those with greater experience, i.e. adults) and the internal conditions of the learner. He points out that this cannot be an *Either-Or* situation for right learning to occur. With regards to objective conditions, Dewey states that the advice of the experts is necessary, but it should not be followed or accepted blindly. Such a condition restricts the freedom of both the teacher and the learner and does not respect the internal condition. He reinforces his principle that this is not freedom for freedom’s sake, but necessary in the context of continuity in developing experience. Traditional education teaches skills and information in isolation, which is why people say they forget so much of what they learn in school. This process also tends to rob people of their desire to continue learning and cultivates a negative attitude towards learning.

Diagnosis

Dewey believed that the schools of his time had become irrelevant, given the rapid and pervasive social and economic changes (a sentiment echoed by Neil Postman in his own work, albeit about different kinds of changes). The focus on memorization of subject matter unrelated to the real world as well as the lack of physical activity lead not only to ineffective education but also to discipline problems and low motivation. Students forgot what they were taught because they couldn’t use it in their daily lives. They were not motivated because the learning experience held no relevance for them. Thirdly, schools did not give students real opportunities to be responsible or empowered in a microcosm of the larger adult community. Clearly, all of these indictments ring true in today’s schools.

Remedy

Schools need to be real communities where children are taught how to *live* the morals and values of their society. They also need to be places where students learn through experience, experimentation through use of scientific inquiry, and reflection. The curriculum should be defined in larger measure by what each child needs and where their experiences lead them as well as by what society needs. It should reflect the necessary balance between the needs of society and those of the individual. The educative focus should be on learning how to learn as well as the social reality of true interdependence. To achieve these ends Dewey clearly expects each school to have a thoughtfully conceived philosophy and *plan* – he does not advocate teachers and students following their whimsy without structure or direction.

Way

There is a strong social engineering component to Dewey's philosophy. The purpose of education is largely to help children find their place in society (he uses the term "acculturation") so that they can contribute to the greater social good. Schools should extend the teaching of social and moral values that begin at home through real interdependent experiences with other children. Students should be actively engaged in the community which should serve as an important resource and primary laboratory for most learning experiences. Most of all, Dewey believes education is about the continual process of creating knowledge through experience, judgment and reflection. Toward this end, schools should teach children *how* to learn, to love learning and to see the intrinsic value of learning in their daily lives.

Analysis

Although Dewey has been such a profound influence on teaching over the past one hundred years, it seems obvious that his philosophy and approach have not been implemented as he described it. Granted, teachers employ hands-on activities, cooperative learning techniques, et

al and talk about constructing knowledge, but Dewey's core concerns remain: students memorize facts, they learn in isolation, there is little or no real interdependence among students, the liberal arts curriculum has remained largely in tact and the school environment is both artificial and separate from the outside community. I would think he would look at schools today and say, "If you were listening to me, this is not what I meant."

Dewey expects a great deal from progressive teachers. He wants them to create an environment in which each child can learn through physical or sensory experiences. This environment also needs to be a democratic and interdependent community where children learn how to behave in socially productive ways. It would be very difficult to create such an environment in anything resembling a traditional classroom, which hasn't really changed in the last hundred years. The teacher must then have sufficient wisdom, knowledge, judgment and freedom (both intellectually and practically) to guide the students without prejudicing the results of their inquiry. To be done correctly, this approach would require a dramatic change in the physical school setting (perhaps they wouldn't exist in their current form at all), the preparation and ongoing development of teachers and the administration of schools – a tall order, indeed.

I believe Dewey's focus on utility and his rejection of liberal education is overstated in critics like Hirsch. Dewey seems to believe that it is important, in fact necessary, to understand one's culture, but the process of understanding that culture must come from "real life" experience and interaction with others. If information is to have meaning for students, for Dewey, it must be functional and relevant.

Schools have taken on a much more active role in addresses social and psychological issues as Dewey suggests. I would guess he would be concerned that the effort is remedial and not proactive – group counseling sessions and anger management units in health class are not the same as an "embryonic society" where students are truly responsible to each other.

In the works that I have read (and I am well aware of the fact that I have read only a small sample of his prolific work) I found no discussion of how teachers should handled children's experiential learning when it results in ideas or processes that contradict the existing social order or values. Dewey seems to assume that the values he discusses are clearly the most desirable. Given my interest in Neil Postman's work, I was disappointed that this possibility was addressed in my reading.

Neil Postman

Summary

Teaching as a Subversive Activity (with Charles Weingartner)(1968)

Postman and Weingartner suggest that traditional schools are created by the powerful (or their followers) in society who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. They believe that, instead, schools should “serve as the principle medium for developing in youth the attitudes and skills of social, political, and cultural criticism [necessary for them to become]... experts at crap detecting.” Conserving the ideas and values of a society is only beneficial if those ideas and values are *still relevant to survival* of that society. In a world of very rapid change, it is critical that threats are identified and solutions are generated. But to do so, the young must know how to recognize and resist dogma and useless information. They must be persons who are “...flexible, tolerant, innovative...who can face uncertainty and ambiguity without disorientation, who formulate viable new meanings to meet changes in the environment...” (p. 6)

To insure their survival, cultures by nature develop certain biases and traditions that are not necessarily based on fact or truth. Additionally, cultures, like all systems, are prone to entropy or breakdown. Bureaucracies (political, religious, media, administrative, business) are by design engines of entropy through their use of standard practices and conventional assumptions. They are resistant to change and “new strategies.” Bureaucracies are not bad in and of themselves but they need to be controlled and used as tools for a defined *purpose* (“what is it good for?”), not seen as inevitable monoliths of social organization. To control or at least slow entropy, society needs people trained to monitor this process and to “sound the alarm when [it] accelerates to a dangerous degree.... We are talking about schools cultivating in the young that most ‘subversive’ intellectual instrument – the anthropological perspective.” (p. 13)

The concept is to produce citizens who simultaneously participate actively in the culture but also have the skills necessary to critically view it as an outsider. This approach suggests a seismic shift away from traditional schooling. Most teachers see themselves as being in either the “information dissemination” business or in the “cultural heritage transmission” business. The authors believe that these roles for education were acceptable up until the information age, an era of rapid pervasive change of every kind. Education now requires a new purpose.

To develop an anthropological perspective in students, Postman and Weingartner assert that students first need to be good learners. Good learners are confident, enjoy problem solving, tend to know what is relevant, look for the facts, trust their own judgment, aren't afraid of being wrong, are flexible and understand that most answers aren't black and white. To create such learners the authors turn to the inquiry method. Since knowledge begins with the process of asking questions without a specific end in mind (*“the art and science of asking questions is the source of all knowledge”*), students should be taught the importance of this process and how to do it. The inquiry approach makes sequential, compartmentalized teaching obsolete. It eliminates the concept of discreet subject disciplines. It also completely redefines the role of the traditional teacher (which is addressed later in the book). Inquiry is not just the asking of questions; its goal is to educate through use of the scientific method, subjecting “existing meanings from the students to a testing and verifying, reordering and reclassifying, modifying and extending process.” The inquiry method is described (by some students using it) as a functional tool that helps someone to know “a) what he is talking about, b) what sort of information he wants, c) whether or not a question can be answered, and d) what he must do to find an answer if one can be found.” In addition to such complex deconstructive questioning techniques, the authors also suggest “game” techniques that requires discovery (by students in teams with guidance by the teacher) of “viable alternative solutions” to real world problems.

All of this clearly provides relevance and functionality of learning to students. Traditional schooling relies on a complex construct of “pretend” relevance. Students trust that what they are taught is important because they are told that it is. It is not immediately useful or meaningful to them. So what is relevant and worth knowing? The authors suggest having students and teachers develop and investigate a list of starting point questions: What is important to you? What is “good”? How do you decide? Where do words come from? What does “meaning,” mean? Etc. For such questions to be useful in this approach they should 1) increase the learner’s capacity to learn, 2) help give him/her a sense of joy in learning, 3) involve further questioning, 4) allow for alternative answers, and 5) help the learner understand the universals of the human condition. This does not mean that the learner makes all decisions about what is to be pursued. The point is to “extend the child’s perception of what is relevant and what is not.”

Postman and Weingartner, using the research of Adlebert Ames, Jr., describe perception as an internal understanding of what is outside of us. It is based on past experience and is unlikely to change unless our current perception is no longer useful to us (as determined through new experiences). Perception is different for each individual. However, since we are social creatures we share the various descriptions of our perceptions through language. Language is a system of symbols. We not only use these symbols to communicate with each other, we use them to define what we know – “*knowledge is language.*” The words or lexicon we collectively assign to a particular subject cannot be separated from the subject itself. The words give the subject meaning. Therefore, to change the language is to change the perception of learner. This concept leads the authors to the somewhat obvious conclusion that all classrooms are “student-centered.” Once the students believe the fact that the process is truly *for* them (in that the central focus is the meaning, relevance and understanding made by the individual student), the entire context of the

classroom experience changes. Similarly, once teachers change their perception of what their students know and are capable of doing, they can create a self-fulfilling prophecy of success.

To explain how the media of language changes the purpose of language and therefore perception, the authors devote a chapter to a brief history of human communication – from oral traditions to the written word to the printing press to the technological revolution that began in the mid-19th century and continues today. Conversation (favored by philosophers such as Socrates) is immediate and interactive. It was then replaced by the written word, which is timeless, unidirectional and fixed. It was not until print, however, that “another linguistic medium drastically” intruded on “man’s symbolic consciousness.” Widespread circulation of the Bible and other works fostered both (diametrically, yet simultaneously) individualism (because people read alone and had their own resulting original ideas) and nationalism (because cultures took pride in their own language and literary traditions). Subsequently, reading has become the “essence of scholarship.”

Language, or more succinctly “media literacy,” then must be studied not as grammar or as a tool for social and economic advancement but as the “*major factor in producing our perceptions, our judgments, our knowledge, and our institutions.*” This new approach to language study (underscoring its effect on perception) must include the new *media*: specifically electronic media [which, if this book were written today and not in 1969 would surely include the internet]. The purpose of such study is to help students to remain “open systems” (or “crap detectors”) – individuals who are not “locked into predetermined decisions [due to] their limited language resources.” One can only learn something if their perception (the way they see the world and those around them) is open to change. With regard to a curriculum for this kind of language study, Postman and Weingartner suggest some basic premises:

Questions are instruments of perception; the nature of a question (its form and assumptions) determine the nature of the answer; observing is a function of the symbol systems the observer has available to him [language, numbers, etc.]; facts are statements about the world as perceived by human beings [and therefore are] as tentative as all human judgments... (p. 78)

All of this, it follows, must begin with a change in the perception of teachers. Postman and Weingartner suggest a number of “bizarre proposals” for the foundation of the “new education.” Their list includes the abandonment of textbooks, dissolving all subjects, having teachers switch subject areas, having elementary and high school teachers switch jobs, limiting teachers’ declarative statements to three per hour, allowing students to publicly critique teachers and faculty by posting graffiti about them in entranceways, and eliminating all tests and grades. They insist that these are not facetious proposals. These suggestions are all intended to put the focus of school back on the learners. They make the case that tests, particularly standardized tests, have forced schools to shift from the business of education to the business of training students to perform the specific task of test taking. Courses are designed largely to produce passing grades on these tests, which are largely about trivia and not real knowledge.

The authors briefly address the unique challenges of city schools. Schools have become largely irrelevant because, as public institutions, they do not address the problems of the communities they are intended to serve. Schools should become instruments of community action. To that end, students should be guided in the “invention, initiation and implementation” of community programs and activities that address local issues and concerns. Private businesses, government and individuals should be tapped as both resources and opportunities for students to actively and tangibly improve their community. They even suggest a kibbutz experience. The point here is to utilize the community in pursuit of a relevant, “total education” experience.

For real change to occur in any school there must be an emphasis on new teachers and how they are trained and supervised. For new teachers to be able to facilitate an inquiry approach

for the purpose of developing an anthropological perspective in their students, *they must be taught in the same fashion – it must be modeled for them*. The new “curriculum” would require prospective teachers to begin by asking fundamental questions about the purpose, processes and activities of the school life. The learning environment of new teachers must be non-authoritarian and must encourage creativity, self-reliance, originality and independence. They should not be able to pass a test about learning; they should live it. The goal is to create “creative...anti-entropic agents [of self-renewal] ready to question (and provide answers to) the attitudes in school that produce institutional inertia.” Such “agents” should not be lead by bureaucratic administrators, but by those with the power in the system – the students. Postman and Weingartner argue that school should model the democratic ideals they espouse to uphold.

So what should you do as a teacher if you agree with these ideas? First, question what you are having students *do* and why they are doing it. Again, what is the purpose of the activity and what is the value of the resulting knowledge? Second, encourage active questioning by refraining from giving students answers for some period of time. The teacher should provide counseling as the students problem solve on their own. Third, incorporate activities that require you and your students to really listen. One example would be to require people (including the teacher) to restate what the previous person said before they speak. Fourth, teach students how to ask evaluative questions that challenge definitions and assumptions. Fifth, examine your own values. Why did you become a teacher (honestly)? How subjective are your own judgments? Do you make assumptions about your students and have preconceived expectations of them? Sixth, help students “discover what kind of knowledge they think is worth knowing and help them decide what procedures can most profitably be used to find out what they want to know” by giving everyone an “A” in advance. The point here (even if administrators veto the plan) is to get students to focus on actually learning and not on grades, which the authors believe does not

motivate students to learn. Seventh, utilize questions that focus on the future and require students to imagine alternative outcomes. Eighth, incorporate media studies into every curriculum. As mentioned previously, the authors believe strongly that communication and the questioning of language assumptions is critical in defining perspective and knowledge. Therefore, it must be a central part of education. Ninth, remember that all of these ideas are about *process* and are not parts of a new formula. One does not have to throw out all of his/her old materials and ideas, just question them through an orientation that focuses on real relevance and problem solving.

Teaching as a Conserving Activity (1979)

Postman starts this book by acknowledging the twelve years and his personal change in perspective since his conversely titled *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. He summarizes the 1960's school of reform, and especially the "free/alternative school" movement, as honorable but believes that it ultimately offered no real solutions or even effective lasting change. He charges that many of these education critics (Holt, Kozol, Herndon, Hentoff, Kohl, Densson, et al) did not grasp the complex social nature of schools and educational policy. Postman suggests that these writers were not satisfied to offer improvements; they wanted a complete change in the educational system and tended toward "self-righteousness." Finally, there were the economic troubles of the seventies that produced budget cutbacks preventing the implementation of expensive reforms. He then reminds the reader that he is writing in a time of "getting back to basics" in curricula, pointing out the ebb and flow of reform. His hope is for ongoing discussion and debate. Postman then states what always seems to interest him most regarding education – what is the purpose of education and what should every child be taught?

Postman approaches the question this time from what he calls an ecological perspective. In terms of purpose, he proffers the following metaphor: "Education is best conceived of as a thermostatic activity –" its purpose in society is to help maintain *balance*. Nothing is inherently

good or bad, as long as it plays a productive role in the whole system. Therefore, in practice, education should never be static. It should never be permanently traditional or innovative. It should not always be conservative or subversive. It's job is to offset the effects of other cultural influences that threaten society. Education should employ this "metaphilosophy" to ascertain what it should do, given the environment it wishes to influence.

Every organism or culture is threatened by stagnation at one extreme and overexertion at the other. In our society, Postman argues, "our society is overdosing on change . . . we have lost the arts of preservation." So given this diagnosis, what role should schools play? If a society stresses autonomy, education should stress social cohesion. Conversely, if a society stresses conformity, education should encourage individuality. All ideas, no matter how good or noble, need counterarguments to keep a society vital. Acknowledging that schools could not possibly be the perfect cultural thermostat or do all that is asked of it, Postman puts forth three guiding questions to direct the purpose of education at any given time:

- 1) What specific cultural biases, if left unchecked, will leave our youth with incompetent intellects and distorted personalities?"
- 2) To what extent is formal education competent to deal with such biases?"
- 3) How may education oppose, both emphatically and constructively, such biases as the school hopes to address? (p. 11)

Postman discusses the "interrelated properties" of information, and subsequently, knowledge: form (the coding system or symbols of speech – the language a people use is not just communication, it is a manifestation of the perception of the world around them); quantity – both too much and too little information can threaten a society); speed (the rate at which information is utilized – e.g., face to face, written, printed, by phone, by e-mail, in codified forms such as laws, etc; direction; accessibility (who has access to information and how that access is obtained). These qualities of a society's information systems contribute significantly to the overall composition of its culture. Form is as, or perhaps more, important than content. The

subject of education consists of little else than the “analysis of communication forms, the interpretation of their psychological and social effects, and the development of school environments which supply a balance to such effects.” (p. 33)

The communication media in our society that most concerns Postman is television. He is also concerned with other media (film, radio, recordings, and most recently, one could the internet) that greatly impact individuals and society. He defines both television and school as “total learning systems,” as curriculum. They are both highly structured whose purpose is to “influence...or cultivate the mind and character of our youth...to control our young.” Postman asserts that television, not school, is the predominate curriculum. It (and other electronic media) consumes more of a child’s time than school. It is not compulsory and has no penalties for truancy or lack of attention. In fact, its only goal is attention. The properties of its information are significantly different than that of school. It uses picture stories, delivered quickly and pervasively. It also requires a different (not passive, Postman insists) response from the child – an *emotional* one based upon what is *seen*. School requires a *reflective*, transactional response to what is *said*. You react to TV, you don’t argue with it. Unlike school, the television curriculum does not build upon itself, adding and refining knowledge. It requires little else from its student but attention and offers immediate reward for that attention. No work, no delay. It teaches that life is that way as well. It also presents the world without “theme or logical sequence.” Its essence is *discontinuity*. Postman says that he is not “ridiculing” television but is pointing out how its biases contrast to that of the school environment (which extends to its entire culture, not just that of the classroom). School is community-centered; TV is individual-centered. This allows the television viewer to have complete control over the curriculum there. TV is about images, not ideas. It promotes individualism “not of the mind [as in the world of books] but of personality.” It is authoritarian by nature but is “contemptuous of authority.” Postman believes that even

though the quality of programming could be improved on television, its structure and character cannot be changed. So what is its effect and how can that effect be balanced through education?

The danger of our highly “technicalized” society is that the purpose of any activity becomes lost in the method. Additionally, people “submit themselves to the sovereignty of ...formal procedure.” On television, this submission can be found in the easy solutions of sitcoms and commercials; all problems can be solved – bad breath, low self-esteem, and financial problems – with the right product, procedure or technology. School’s examples of this include achievement tests, “Let us measure everything.... We will conquer subjectivity...eliminate complexity and ambiguity and replace them with precision.” Postman regards this dominant feature of education as “both revolutionary [in that it is a rejection of the past] and dangerous.”

Postman believes that schools have an overburdened agenda of vaguely or ill-defined objectives. Schools have been asked to do, and have accepted the responsibility of doing, much more than they are capable. They have taken on intractable social, political and personal issues that are outside the scope of education and beyond the talents and skills of educators. Postman’s short list of such things includes sex education, “teaching the whole child” (providing food, emotional support, psychological counseling, etc.), creating motivation to learn, cultivating ethnic pride (a new agenda after failing to *de-ethnicize* children), protecting prayer in school and psychotherapy. As schools blur the lines of authority between themselves and other social institutions, both are weakened. Additionally, Postman contends, making moral and personal concerns social issues relieves the individual of responsibility.

The important ongoing questions (which is rarely seriously addressed by schools or by the larger community) remains: *What is worth doing in school and what can schools realistically do?* Postman finds Thomas Jefferson’s answer reasonable: to protect oneself from tyranny, of all sorts. To do so, Jefferson believed one should study reading, writing, mathematics and history.

Through these disciplines one could identify threats and think critically, logically and historically in addressing them. Postman amplifies that answer by suggesting that students be provided with that which is considered irrelevant by the prevailing culture (whatever that subject may be), thereby *balancing the biases*. He finds current curriculum lacking sufficient purpose or themes to meet this need. Current curricula are full of discontinuity, much like television. Classes are broken up into discreet disciplines that do not foster an understanding of their interconnectedness. They are not a “course of study at all but a meaningless hodgepodge of subjects.”

Postman proposes a theme or scaffolding [in his next work he will use the terms “narrative” or “story”] on which a useful course of study could be based. He suggests “the ascent of humanity,” an investigation of the story of mankind, through all its productive disciplines, as it has tried to “understand nature and find its place in it.” For Postman, the story of humanity is largely about the “growth of knowledge and knowledge systems.” Such an approach must stress history (in all disciplines), scientific inquiry, “...disciplined use of language, arts and religion, and the continuity of human enterprise.” With every subject being taught in the context of its own history (in order to create continuity) the study of history would become more of a meta-subject – conceptual and comparative history as a way to understand theories of historical understanding, the complexities of cultural stories, perspective and the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity. Postman believes that all students of all ages should study philosophies and processes of scientific inquiry as well as semantics (the study of the relationship between language and perception) and comparative religion. These are critical in understanding how knowledge is obtained and what relevance it has to the human experience.

Postman strongly believes that all teachers must be language teachers. Why? All answers are useless without the question they answer. Questions, the most important intellectual tool we

have, come from language. “A question is a structure for thought. Language education, therefore, must include the most serious exploration of the structure of questions – their assumptions, limitations, levels of abstraction, and the sources of authority to which they appeal.” Knowledge is largely based on context, perspective, shared assumptions, chosen metaphors and lexicon.

Without an understanding of this fact and how these metaphors came to be used, students cannot truly understand any subject. Students should be taught how to identify and interpret the role of culture and its transactional relationship with ideas, particularly now when “technicalization” (a term Postman uses to describe dogmatic reliance on procedure and technology) and computers are pervasive.

Finally, Postman discusses the classroom as a technique or instrument. One way to view it through this metaphor is as a good tool that doesn’t fit the needs of those using it (students). Why isn’t it useful to them? One response is that they are unprepared due to cultural and socio-economic circumstances. Another is that television and other cultural forces have changed the *information environment* and subsequently the habits of mind and attitudes of students in ways not conducive to traditional schooling. Put another way, today’s students are products of 20th (now 21st) century culture trying to make productive use of a 19th century technique. For all its faults, however, Postman believes the traditional school structure has useful things to offer us – delayed gratification, social order, community and continuity in a time and culture that does not value these things. But given the disorder now evident in schools as well, what should be done if school is intended to be a conserving cultural counterbalance?

At this point, Postman becomes, in his own words, traditional, turning his “...back on 20th century liberalism...” He believes that schools need to be intolerant of disorder. They should be dignified, serious places that embrace rules, codes of conduct, civility and manners including dress codes (“You would not wear...a T-shirt which says ‘Feel Me’ when attending a

church wedding”) and insistence on the use of Standard English. Postman’s rationale is again based on television and the cultural environment. He states that the media is indiscriminately available and teaches selfishness and contempt for social order and discourse. TV contributes to the cultural belief that children and adults are equal and should be treated as such. This teaches students that they have nothing to learn from teachers or other adults and have no need to be respectful or disciplined.

Postman praises teachers who do not try to engage students using media techniques. He laments the now standard practice of limiting any activity to no more than eight minutes. Teachers need to allow for mistakes (“All learning is remedial” – we learn not by doing but by trial and error) and should not encourage fast answers. He suggests that we are selling children short and being seduced by the media ourselves: “However difficult it may be, the teacher must try to achieve student attention, even enthusiasm through *the attraction of ideas*.” Postman hopes the natural, developmental drive of the young to ask hard questions and to know things will win out if cultivated. It is important to note, however, that the author is less enthusiastic here about the inquiry method than in his previous book. He is concerned that this critical approach to learning is often used as an excuse for not teaching important subject content. He also fears that “in the hands of a teacher of technocratic mentality,” it becomes a pointless routinized activity that has no value. Or worse.

Postman ends this book with a discussion of evaluations. He believes that standardized tests should be eliminated because they rarely measure anything of educational or intellectual value. They are created by large businesses that are trying to please customers, none of whom are teachers or students. But since they are not going away, Postman suggests that administrators ask a number of questions to determine the usefulness of these tests as well as their unintended consequences in the classroom.

The End of Education (1995)

A society needs purpose, a reason, a narrative, an end for education. Postman defines narrative as a “story” that gives meaning to the people who believe it. It is not necessarily true or false, just *meaningful*. Narratives include religious faiths, belief in the power of scientific inquiry and political ideologies among other intellectual constructs and philosophies. They are overarching ideas and stories that give order to the universe. The value of a narrative can be found in its ability to create “a sense of personal identity, a sense of a community life, a basis for moral conduct” and a way to explain the unknown. All cultures need a god (or gods) to serve – these gods are embodied in such narratives.

There was a time in America, according to Postman, that school offered “*fully functional multiple narratives*” for its people. School’s purpose was to create one unified culture out the diverse cultures and traditions of the world. It utilized the narratives of democracy (an educated citizenry cannot be tyrannized, said Thomas Jefferson), the Protestant ethic (hard work, delayed gratification) and, to a lesser degree, cultural pluralism (recognition of the contribution of various ethnic groups to the American Creed and progress – not to be confused with modern multiculturalism). These were the *shared* stories of a culture that brought its people together and gave purpose to schooling. Postman is deeply concerned with the lack of such purpose today. He believes that the central question is not being asked or discussed: “What kind of public does [school] create? Angry, soulless, directionless masses? Indifferent confused citizens? Or a public imbued with confidence, a sense of purpose, a respect for learning and tolerance?” (p. 10)

Postman notes that the 20th century was a difficult one for most narratives: God, Reason, Certainty, Communism, Democracy, Fascism, Nazism. Most are dead, wounded or simple haven’t lasted. Therefore, the social institutions that rely on them, like school, have trouble finding purpose. Educators have focused more on the *how* of teaching – methods and techniques

– than on the *why*. It's pointless to get the trains to run on time, the author reminds us, if they have nowhere to go. National standards, assessment tests, computers, teacher accountability and charter schools dominate the conversation. The fundamental conditions of and reasons for education (as Jacques Barzun would agree) have been largely forgotten.

Postman states that schools and students are indeed asked to serve several gods, albeit ones that are inadvertent, usually uninspiring, and most importantly to the author, false. The god of Economic Utility promises those who study hard and pay attention [and, one could add, do well on standardized tests] will be rewarded with a good paying job. This story includes the idea that national productivity is directly related to high achievement in school (which the author refutes as unsubstantiated, but necessary for the narrative to work). Although adults believe in this story, it is reasonable to believe that it does little to inspire most children, who like to think of themselves as more than what they do for a living. A related deity is the god of Consumerism, which simply says you are what you own. Through the religion of advertising, people from a very early age are convinced of what they need and why. If you are a social outcast, simply wear the right clothes, drink the right beer, use the right deodorant and people will love you. If you want to rebel against society, buy this car, listen to this music, drink this soda. Good commercials take on the heir of parables that communicate far more than simple product information. This god clearly has a large congregation of followers in the classroom.

Then there is the god of Technology, which promises to solve problems of all kinds. And education is no exception. Postman insists that he is not against technology; he simply believes that it should not be followed blindly without weighing its benefits *and* price (what do we lose when we communicate primarily by computer?). Technology should be used consciously as a tool intended for a certain purpose, not as an end in itself. Some, like Diane Ravitch, have argued that computers will make schools obsolete, allowing children to study what they want on their

own. Postman thinks this is not only unlikely (unless a new species of child is discovered or created, he suggests facetiously), but ignores one of the primary reasons for school (in his view) – “making civilized people.” This requires, by definition, transactional contact with others which could become unnecessary in a world of on-demand, completely self-directed education. Postman is also suspicious of the claim that technology will become the great educational equalizer. Just as technology has had positive and negative consequences, it has also always produced winners and losers. Additionally, technology on its own cannot eliminate the myriad of disadvantages some children face before and after school that keep them from learning.

As mentioned above, Postman believes that cultural pluralism has helped to enlarge the productive narrative of the American Creed over the past seventy years. In recent years, however, it has mutated into multiculturalism, a false (perhaps even dangerous) god with a powerful narrative that the author believes runs completely counter to another vital purpose of public schools – to blur our differences and create, not separately white or black or Italian or Asian or Hispanic, but a unified American culture. A statement by (Warren Crichlow, et al) members of the Rochester, New York school board during the 1990’s is used by Postman as an example of the extremism present in some multiculturalists’ perspective. They believed the narrative of white Europeans must be rejected in order for real knowledge to be discovered. Obviously, it is important for children to know about and be proud of the contributions their ethnic group has made to history. However, it should not be at the expense of 1) the truth (as best as it can be ascertained through inquiry and evidence), or 2) the traditionally unifying narratives the author supports. Although democracy and equality have been flawed stories, they are still valuable ones. They are also still being written – their ideals, failures and progress need to be discovered by all students.

Postman insists that schools and teachers do not create the narratives of a culture; they “collect...amplify...distribute...ennoble” and sometimes “refute or mock” them. These stories exist in society and have varying degrees of weight at any given time (Postman argues that his anthropological perspective as advocating in *Teaching As a Subversive Activity* was an existing, albeit somewhat “sleeping,” one when the book was written). The question is, which of these are necessary, useful and inspiring for a functional democracy at any given time (one premise of *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*)? Postman suggests five “Gods that may serve” and discusses how they could give focus and purpose to education.

The first is The Spaceship Earth. The premise of this community and environmentally centered story is that we are all in the same boat and therefore share in the responsibility of keeping the boat clean, safe and inhabitable for each other and future “crew members.” The story emphasizing our interdependence and underscores the universality of all human problems. It makes provincialism, intolerance and shortsightedness useless concepts. There are several educational implications to this narrative. One is the importance of teaching children how to be an active part of their community and how to care for that community. Helping students take real responsibility for their own schools and neighborhoods is the best way to help them to become conscious and conscientious stewards of the whole ship. Another is the need for students to study ancient (archeology) and contemporary cultures (anthropology). The point here is to see the continuity of human civilization (there have been and will be others here in the boat), to recognize the differences and commonalities of all cultures, and to appreciate both the progress and destruction inherent in all histories. It is also a way to learn how narratives and stories compete and to understand how one can benefit from the beliefs of others without losing their own. A third implication is the importance of studying astronomy. What is out there that could damage our ship, or help make it safer or run better? Are there other ships and crews we need to

be aware of? Postman emphasizing that such a study should be done historically so that students see the price paid for such knowledge.

Postman's next narrative is *The Fallen Angel*. It holds that, by nature, we all make many mistakes. The sin is not in making them but in believing we don't or ignoring the ones we do make. Blind faith in unquestioned truths is the antithesis of education and learning and, indeed, progress in any practical, social, intellectual or moral human endeavor. Unfortunately, most of us would rather defend our position out of pride or fear of embarrassment than stay open to other possibilities. Therefore, teachers should help students engage in "The Great Conversation;" the ongoing process of human knowledge. What Postman suggests is using this narrative (simply sharing the truth with our students that we as teachers and everyone else in the world – past, present and future – makes countless mistakes) to teach students to become "error detectors." We learn by making mistakes, identifying those mistakes and correcting them. The obvious educational implication is to allow children to question everything (include the questions themselves and their premises) and suggest alternative answers.

To help teachers do this, Postman returns to ideas he has proposed in previous works. The first is to require teachers to teach subjects out of their regular subject area. The purpose of this exercise is to get teachers to struggle with unfamiliar knowledge and concepts that would force them to generate their own questions regarding the ideas and assumptions of that subject. It would also force them to question their own assumptions and perspective regarding teaching itself. If they struggled with foreign material, it may help them to empathize with students who have difficulty in the classroom. Second, all textbooks should be eliminated or at least challenged and deconstructed [perhaps, this writer not Postman would suggest, having students taking the approach James Loewen used in his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*]. The idea needs to be shared with students that textbooks are imperfect and are not "packaged truths." They have their

own biases and agendas. One obvious alternative to textbooks is to have teacher choose documents and materials for students to engage directly [a concept consistent with current New York State Standards]. Third, students should be required identify factual and logical errors made by the teacher (they could actually receive grades or extra credit for this).

To create a school where such a learning environment exists would first require training teachers to become error detectors themselves. To achieve this goal, higher education would have to create programs in the study of error (Postman suggests several authors, including Erasmus, Swift, and Gould for a possible syllabus). The objective of such a course of study would be to help teachers come to (at least) three conclusions: 1) error is pervasive, 2) because it is something we *do*, error is reducible, and 3) error is primarily a product of language. This third point is more evidence that language must be studied (by both teachers and students) as the driving force of any other subject. The language of a subject, and how we organize and use that language, defines what we believe and know about it.

Making students into error detectors would also require a significant change in the classroom environment. Error would have to not only be tolerated but also maintained as the focal point of all discussion. In most classrooms, students are so afraid to make mistakes that they don't raise their hand, dread being called upon and often feel the need to cheat so as not to be wrong. To remedy this condition, the teacher must encourage students to question perspectives, facts and assumptions from all sources, including themselves, each other and the teacher. This process is intended to help students learn how facts and ideas become accepted as true then often later become modified, mutated or wholly discarded.

The next narrative suggested by Postman is *The American Experiment*. Postman reminds us that the founding fathers conceived of the United States as a collection of ongoing arguments. Many of our constitutional ideas are based upon conflicting assumptions and are not necessarily

designed to be resolved. They each have their own advantages and disadvantages. Everyone, as a citizen, is entitled to participate in the discussion. Students need to understand that the great questions of the American Experiment began well over two hundred years ago and continue to be asked and argued today: “Is it possible to have a coherent, stable culture that allows the greatest possible freedom of religious and political thought and expression?” Can such a culture exist in the context of a multitude of different religions, traditions and races? How does a democratic society balance the needs and rights of the majority against those of the individual? “Is it possible to provide a free public education for all citizens? Is it possible to preserve the best of American traditions and social institutions while allowing uncontrolled technological development?” In leading the discussion of such questions, the author suggests the following seminal works as a starting point for teachers: Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man*, The Declaration of Independence, The Constitution, Alexis deTocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, the Gettysburg Address, the Emancipation Proclamation, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Scarlet Letter*, John Dewey’s *Democracy in America*, John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address, and Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. The point is to teach students to continue the experiment, create better arguments, “reveal our ignorance, our timidity...and have faith in the future.” Postman hopes this story gives students a reason for learning, which is after all, the point of his book.

The Law of Diversity offers a story that could “help the young transcend individual identity by finding inspiration in the story of humanity.” As opposed to ethnic pride (or multiculturalism), this narrative encourages students to understand and appreciate the accomplishments and unique nature of other cultures beyond their own. It also, consistent with Postman’s primary goal for education, “places one’s own ethnicity in the context of the common culture.” Postman provides four major subject areas for the study of cultural diversity: language

(the wildly diverse continuing history of our own as well as at least one other to broaden one's worldview), comparative religion (highlighting not only the central meanings but the metaphors, art, literature and rituals of each important tradition, all with an eye toward tolerance), custom (anthropology and sociology), and arts & artifacts (as unifying forces of the human experience).

The final narrative Postman suggests to give purpose to public schooling is *The Word Weavers/The World Makers*. Here the author returns to what is for him the critical component of knowledge and understanding – language as the creator of perspective and meaning. As mentioned earlier, every subject has its definitions, symbols (objects and abstractions encoded in words or other forms), questions and metaphors – these are the building blocks of any worldview. Language is most often presented to students as a static truth (this is *the* definition as opposed to *a* definition). Students should be taught to ask essential questions regarding language: What *purpose* does this definition serve? Are there alternate definitions? What is the metaphor this scientist uses to understand how a molecule works? How does this metaphor define the way we think about molecules? What questions were asked to arrive at particular conclusions regarding the causes of the Civil War? What biases and perspectives exist in the story we tell ourselves about our past? The ability to ask questions through the use of language is how we transform the world around us. It “is what makes us smart, and dumb; moral and immoral; tolerant and bigoted. That is what makes us human.”

Postman closes the book with the observation that he is not hopeful about the future of public education. He is afraid that people with various agendas and perspectives believe that public schooling is an obsolete 19th century construct that has outlived its purpose for a variety of reasons. He believes, however, that the narratives he has offered can provide a “spiritual and serious intellectual dimension to learning.” He concludes that public schools *are* necessary in

creating a public that possesses not only common knowledge, but also common ideas, understandings and civic purpose.

Building a Bridge to the 18th Century

In this, his most recent work that concerns itself with education, Postman asserts that the 20th Century, with the exception of a few useful ideas, was an “unrelieved horror.” It gave us efficient genocide, Fascism, Nazism, Communism, nuclear weapons, unprecedented warfare, blind almost dogmatic faith in technology as progress and the morally vacuous, academically dominate philosophy of postmodernism and its “especially bleak subspecies,” deconstructionism. Postman suggests that even with our newfound “wisdom” (we can cure most diseases, can create spare human parts and talking appliances), we have taken apart the foundations on which our society was built. Borrowing from Auden, St. Vincent Millay and Vachel Lindsay, he writes that we have become a people with “No loom to weave facts into fabric, people with no god to serve, hollow and anxious, distrusting of language, uncertain about even the most obvious features of reality, lacking conviction, suspicious of truth.”

Postman is particularly troubled by the modern emphasis on technology. He resists the notion that *progress* and technology are synonymous. He suggests that higher education (and other social sectors) rely heavily on technology to hide the fact that professors and students have few new, creative or interesting ideas. So what *is* progress, where is the future and how do we instruct the young to get them there? Part of Postman’s answer lies in the rearview mirror:

What I’m driving at is that in order to have an agreeable encounter with the twenty-first century, we will have to take into it some good ideas. In order to do that, we need to look back and take stock of the good (...useful *and humane*...) ideas available to us....Let us turn not to the 18th Century in order to copy [it] but....[to] look to it for instruction rather than models. Let us adopt the principles rather than the details. (p. 16)

The 18th century (the Enlightenment) gave us two great enduring and (for the most part) opposing philosophical traditions – rationalism and romanticism. Postman celebrates the ascendance of reason over dogma and theology and he recognizes the advances made in medical, economic, political, scientific, social and other domains due to this shift. He insists, however, that most thinkers of the 18th century did not reject the role of ethics, spirituality or God in defining progress. Progress must have a *purpose*. The lineage of Rousseau argued, “Reason itself was insufficient to produce moral progress.” Scientific and technological advances could proceed without an ethical basis. But that is not the case with social progress. Indeed when science and technology claim to provide ethical imperatives, we are led to moral catastrophe (The Terror of the French Revolution, The Holocaust). Romanticism insists that it is the “poetic imagination, not scientific accomplishment, that is the engine of moral progress.” There must be a balance of these traditions for progress of any kind to be human.

Postman points out that childhood as a definitive stage of life or “social construction” was developed and accepted during the 18th century by thinkers and writers such as Locke, Rousseau and Swift. Postman points out Locke’s recognition of the developmental and psychological aspects of education – the importance of physical health in learning, using reward and shame as motivation. Locke also asserted that education *is the responsibility of adults* – if a child does not learn or is undisciplined it is the fault of the instructor, the parents and by extension the government not the child. Rousseau identified and celebrated the naturalness and virtue of childhood. Children need to be nurtured and valued for what they are. According to Postman, although these two opposing views developed into different schools of thought and tradition, they have an important common concern – the future. Postman goes on to discuss Freud and Dewey’s roles in “crystallizing the basic paradigm of childhood” in the early 20th century. Individuality, energy, spontaneity, curiosity and wonder of children needs to be valued,

but adults need to introduce and *teach* self-control, delayed gratification to children and give them the knowledge they need to. . . need to what? Survive in society? Be successful in the existing one? Revolt against it? Remake it?

For Postman, all of this becomes moot in the late 20th century with the “information revolution.” Ubiquitous media and the recognition of children as insatiable consumers, indeed a market or demographic, has made childhood obsolete. There is no way to keep the adult world from them. Therefore, it cannot be as early educational thinkers (regardless of their philosophical perspective) recommend – ideas and information introduced gradually, purposefully and with guidance. First television, commercial music, movies and now the Internet are surrogate parents and teachers. In this context, Postman argues, the purpose of education in our culture is to create workers who are voracious consumers. [Had this book been written in 2002, I think Postman would have included President Bush’s plea during his State of The Union Address that year for all Americans to fulfill their patriotic duty by buying things.]

Consistent with his analysis that childhood is a construct created by society, Postman asserts that childhood is most likely “a transitory aberration in cultural history” of the past two hundred years that is disappearing. Postman clearly believes that childhood should be reclaimed but recognizes the great odds against success given modern, particularly American, culture. He addresses the three relevant institutions that could effect such change: family, the school and government. To protect children from, or even try to guide them through media is an extremely difficult task for any parent. Additionally, Postman says that to do so is to defy culture (as it is to remain married). With regard to schools, Postman laments the devaluing of education that does not help one find and keep a job (“art, science, literature” and other subjects needed for true “socialization”). He hopes that schools will teach children not how to use computers (they already teach themselves that), but teach them how computers “do different things...impose a

particular world view...change our concept of information and judgment” and have become not just a “tool but a philosophy of knowledge.” Because of First Amendment concerns and the enormous impact of corporate money on politics, Postman holds out little hope that the government would have much impact on protecting children from the eroding effects of media and commercialism.

The concept of a “child-centered” education comes from the 18th century. Modern educational theory recognizes the “transactional” nature of learning (“Can you say that you sold something to me even if I didn’t buy it?”). Additionally, the Enlightenment gave us the idea that education (“an educated populace”) is a national resource. A democracy, as we have come to define it, cannot survive without an informed and knowledgeable citizenry. Thirdly, according to Postman, the 18th century gave us [here’s that word again] *purpose* for education. The very definition of the Enlightenment was skepticism (in modern parlance, “critical thinking”), the need to systematically question existing ideas and assumptions.

Postman says that schools do not teach children how to think critically. He points out that by definition, skeptical students may no longer obey their teachers, parents or government. This could be seen as a threat to authority and the status quo. He goes on to say that skepticism is a difficult thing to teach. Teachers are not really trained to do it and “the very structure of school – its grading system, its course requirements and its tests – militate against it.” However, since Postman believes that skepticism is the great gift of the Enlightenment, he gives five suggestions for teaching it. First, “actually teach children about the art and science of asking questions.” Why isn’t this done? It’s hard. Teachers didn’t learn how to do it. Its results are generally not measurable. It’s politically difficult for schools to implement. It goes against “subject-centered” learning recommendations like those from Alan Bloom and E.D. Hirsch. Second, teach not just grammar but the whole “Trivium.” “These subjects are about the relationship between language

and reality...about the ways in which we search for truth.” Postman discusses semantics and perspective extensively in explaining the importance of arming children “against propaganda in all its varieties.” Third, teach a scientific outlook. This is a logical continuance of the first two suggestions and is about process and method (“knowledge is a quest, not a commodity”). Students need to be taught how to examine, evaluate and compare theories and ideas. Fourth, don’t teach technology (i.e. computers) – teach *about* technology; its history, its principles of change, the economic and social alterations it imposes, its psychological, social and political effects. Fifth, teach comparative religion. History, philosophy, language, art, literature even science is difficult to teach without an understanding of religious traditions and their “role in the formation of culture.”

Diagnosis

Although Postman has identified a variety of ills afflicting public education over the past 35 years, several consistent concerns can be identified. He clearly believes that education is largely directionless and serves too many masters. Even when subject-centered, objective-based, standardized test-focused curricula are created (now even at the national level), there does not seem to be a coherent logic to what is taught, or more importantly, why it is being taught. Without a clear purpose for education (beyond the creation of extremely productive and efficient consumers/workers), the entire process is trivia at best and dogma at worst for him.

I find four central issues at the heart of Postman’s diagnosis: a lack of fundamental questioning (on the part of both teachers and students), a lack of true reflection (on the part of both teachers and students), cultural blind faith in change and technology for their own sake, and the loss of language and story as the foundation of meaningful knowledge. Obviously, these are, for the most part, difficult cultural constructs that cannot not be fundamentally altered by any traditional reform efforts.

Perhaps the most important element of Postman's analysis is teacher's lack of appreciation (and even love of) language and its power to create meaning. Education is too often concerned with the mechanics and technical aspects of language and does not guide children through the process of construction, context, nuance, denotation, connotation, etc.

Postman's diagnosis clearly extends to the wider culture and education's transactional/dialectic relationship to it. We have asked our schools to do too much in ways that it is not organized to do it. Additionally, he believes that, as a culture, we have embraced change and technology as inherently valuable without questioning or challenging the usefulness of it. Finally, our cultural deconstruction of traditional ideas and paradigms have left us without any meaningful foundation on which to build our individual or common lives.

Remedy

The approach suggested in ...*Subversive*... is to make education student-centered (in that they really do the majority of the talking, thinking, analyzing), question-centered and language-centered. Rather than concentrating on imparting large amounts of specific information (although he clearly believes that certain information is essential as a foundation for real learning), Postman advocates the development of the skills necessary to create productive skeptics. A large part of this process must include the extensive study of language and how it contributes to the development of knowledge, understanding and meaning.

Children inherently question everything. It is a profound irony that schools are designed in a way that, in many ways, actively erases that innate ability from students. Teachers need to be taught about the benefits, rewards of techniques of questioning and be allowed to use it a primary tool for most activities. Postman believes that this is a critical remedy in making schools a truly useful tool in improving the lives of individuals and society.

I resonated with Postman's assertion that children can be excited by ideas and do not/should not have to be constantly entertained to maintain their attention. This remedy, as most of Postman's, runs counter to a culture of short attention, instant gratification and constant sensory stimulation. Additionally, such an approach requires excited teachers and process that allows for active discovery and challenging of ideas – a tall order in the age of standardized testing.

Way

Simply put, “knowledge is a quest, not a commodity” for Postman. It must be allowed to be a living, breathing entity that is not restricted by confused, overbearing standards. It must have a purpose that is productive and understood by all parties. It must be open to change, but not driven by it. It must examine past experience as a way to go forward consciously and not blindly.

In *Subversive*, they take what could be described as a deconstructionist approach to knowledge and language. Everything is defined through perspective, therefore the concept of what can be “known” is slippery. Terms, assumptions and perceptions need to be discussed and defined to create a shared understanding. There are no simple or easy answers. Their purpose for education is to “help young people master concepts necessary to survival in a...world of constant, accelerating, ubiquitous change.”

For the rest of Postman's work, there is a greater focus on our democratic community and the need to identify and utilize a variety of constructs and tools to help maintain it and keep it as vital as possible. He makes a poignant observation about the nature of school and its role in creating citizens by reminding us that students are learning how to be themselves and to interact with others throughout the school day – school itself, not just curricula and lesson plans, is the training ground for life (a thought certainly reminiscent of Dewey). Therefore every aspect of school should be consistent with the ideas we want to foster.

But where do these ideas come from? Narratives. We need gods to serve, which will in turn serve us. Throughout his writings, Postman constantly reminds those involved in education to remember why they are doing things. Beyond Madeline Hunter's useful format of connecting meaning of a lesson to the objective, he suggests connecting the objective to the greater story that helps students understand the human condition.

Analysis

The concept of teaching students to take an anthropological perspective seems profoundly challenging. In ...*Subversive...*, Postman and Weingartner are asking that students (with limited knowledge of the world and life experience) critically and objectively evaluate the social, economic, political and technological systems with the goal of maintaining a "viable democratic society." I agree with the validity of such an approach but I believe that it would very difficult for most teachers (including myself) to get their arms around it in a way that would make it truly educative to students. Conceptually, however, the focus on questioning and the development of skepticism seems undeniably correct, particularly in today's culture. True skepticism (history and language in all subjects, real relevance and purpose for students, questions produce knowledge) should be the goals of all teaching.

For many educators, perhaps the most controversial suggestions made by Neil Postman is the idea of having teachers teach subjects in which they have little or no training. This runs severely counter to accepted practice (Know your subject area/content knowledge first!) and to the beliefs of most all of the other authors read in this review. I would like to take a moment to defend this proposal because I think it may be easily misunderstood. I believe that Mr. Postman's idea goes to the core of one part of his beliefs about education; namely, the intellectual skill of asking questions, which in an expanding context includes questioning accepted language, existing premises, creating relevant and meaning-making questions. Postman believes that

questions are the greatest tool we have; yet students are not really taught how to do it. By learning a subject from scratch with ones students, the teacher has no alternative but to ask the necessary questions (many of which may not be answered) to move forward. Certainly one criticism of this approach is that children will subsequently not sufficiently learn the subject taught by the unknowledgeable teacher. This may be true. Postman would counter that a more valuable commodity has been produced through the active modeling of the process and skill desired. With this skill, the subject in question (and countless others) can be explored in more productive ways. This is not process for process sake, but a belief in an intellectual tool that encourages and rewards curiosity, self-reliance and the acquisition of future knowledge.

Postman is, in many ways, a traditionalist and conservative. He believes that there are values and information that must be passed on to future generations because these things will be useful. However, any information or ideas are only valuable understood in some kind of meaningful context and rigorously, intellectually challenged. This can only be done if the learner knows how to ask productive questions.

With regards to New York State standards, Postman is generally in left field. It would be very difficult to justify or align his conception of a curriculum with that of the current scope and sequence in most content areas. However, many of the skills identified by the standards can only be taught (at least effectively) by the approach suggested by Postman. The fact that this can not be done in New York State schools (because of the extensive breadth of material to study and the construct of standardized testing) reflects the confusing and conflicting goals of modern compulsory education.

E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

Summary

Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (1987)

Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (1987) is a treatise on content-based education reform and a rejection of what Hirsch calls “educational formalism” in the tradition of Rousseau and Dewey. Although some specific recommendations are made, the primary objective of the book is to change the basic philosophical assumptions behind why and how elementary and secondary curricula are developed and implemented as well as to generate discussion among all stakeholders in the educational process regarding the need for increasing cultural literacy on a national level.

Hirsch defines cultural literacy as the shared or common knowledge (in domains such as history, science, politics, sports, the arts, et al) a culture uses to communicate and to perpetuate itself. This shared knowledge is the background information that creates context for more advanced reading and writing skills – information that is above that required for activities of daily living but below that used by experts in any given field. We use this information as a common framework of references and ideas to help us understand each other; it is what Hirsch describes as our “common ground.” Children, Hirsch notes, are *provincially* knowledgeable within their own experience and social circles, but rarely beyond that. He cites high school students’ lack of knowledge regarding the most basic facts of American history (e.g., when the Civil War was fought, what the Brown v. Board of Education ruling entailed, who Winston Churchill was). This general information is necessary not only to communicate with others, but as a foundation on which to build further knowledge.

Hirsch goes to define the purpose of cultural literacy in practical, economic, social and political terms. Without it, he argues, any communication outside of our immediate social groups would be cumbersome, time consuming and ultimately ineffective. Every allusion, detail and perhaps some vocabulary would have to be explained to order to be clearly understood. He uses the analogy of how one would give directions to a person familiar with an area as opposed to one unfamiliar with it. He reports that American business executives lament the decline of cultural literacy in their junior associates: lacking shared “literate background knowledge is a chief cause of [middle level executives’] inability to communicate effectively.”

With regards to politics and social class, Hirsch asserts that cultural literacy is not elitism, but indeed the opposite, suggesting that since democracy is based active participation and informed communication, “universal literacy is inseparable from democracy.” The Black Panthers used Jefferson’s words from the Declaration of Independence as well as quotes from the bible, The Gettysburg Address and other canons of American culture as part of their political platform knowing that these sources were well known by their intended audiences. Hirsch uses this example to illustrate his point that traditional education, one primarily of *shared/essential information*, does not mean preservation of traditional or conservative values. On the contrary, he argues, it allows those outside of the elite and those of minority subcultures to understand the traditional rules of the existing culture so that they can affect it as they choose. With regards to multiculturalism in education, Hirsch concedes that it is a good thing in that it “inculcates tolerance and provides perspective on our traditions and values,” but it should not be a primary focus.

Hirsch points out that schools can’t do everything they are asked to do (traditional content, state and local priorities, critical thinking skills, vocational skills, et al) by all the different stakeholders in the educational process. Therefore, Hirsch believes, we must prioritize

and focus on national information. The specific national information that should be taught must be the facts, historical figures and important ideas that make up our “universally shared national vocabulary.” How this list is to be compiled, according to Hirsch, should involve as little ideological bias as possible. Much like standardized language, we may not always agree with what is on it, and it may not always make sense, but it *is* the common tool we used to communicate. Inclusion in this list (described interchangeably as an index, dictionary or encyclopedia) should occur by “cultural accident” and should not be based on inherent merit. Knowing a little about the people and items on Hirsch’s list is the important thing so that there is a starting point to begin a discussion between any two individuals or groups in the common culture. Expert knowledge or minutiae is not necessary.

Hirsch believes that young children have a natural ability and desire to accumulate, indeed to memorize, facts on all sorts of topics. Memorization of information (by age 13) happens in most cultures and this need to catalogue information seems innate – kids are eager to do it at an early age. Because of this natural ability and interest as well as the reality that knowledge is cumulative, Hirsch recommends that cultural literacy be taught as early as possible (he says several times that by 10th grade, it is too late).

Hirsch asserts that teaching cultural literacy is more important than developing abstract or critical thinking skills. He allows that the “progressive” Rousseau/Dewey approach encourages independence of mind. The drawback, in his view, is that children will not thrive, like the acorn of the famous analogy, if left on their own. They need the traditional information of the society into which they were born in order to be successful in, or even to successfully rebel against, that society.

To support his thesis, Hirsch references experiments by many educational researchers, developmental psychologists, and psycholinguists (among those cited are: the author himself;

R.C. Anderson, who is credited with the concept and term *schema*; Eleanor Rosch; Dr. Robert Glaser; George Miller; T.G. Bever; Jacqueline Sachs; W.F. Brewer; Bransford, Barclay & Franks; F.C. Bartlett; Ross & Bower). The research discussed in this chapter involves short-term memory, language processing, semantic relationships and the construction of meaning. Taken together, this research suggests that we make inferences and create context through use of prior and background knowledge. Rather than remember every detail of, say pieces on a chessboard, we gather information into chunks, using “past knowledge to interpret this window [short-term memory] of experience” and making “primary associations” between new information and existing knowledge.

Hirsch employs Anderson’s term, schema, in explicating this idea. Schemata are a kind of “mental shorthand. . . abstract mental entities rather than concrete images” that makes the best use of limited short-term memory space. This is a systematic way for the memory to store knowledge in a retrievable form and to organize it in an efficient and accessible way so that it can be used. This ongoing process allows the mind to go beyond detail and literal memory and on to the *construction of meaning*. The research of DeGroot suggests that there may be no such thing as “general” or “transferable” cognitive skills: “All cognitive skills depend on procedural or substantive schemata that are highly specific to the task at hand.” Therefore, skills are the product of cumulative knowledge.

Hirsch goes on to discuss this concept in the context of literacy. Schemata are necessary for humans to use information on their own, but communicating with others requires a shared verbal schemata. This creates the imperative for a system of shared common knowledge:

The patterns of association in the verbal schemata of one person must approximate those of another....Words and idioms therefore represent systems of association that belong not just to the individual mind but to the than language community as a whole. Words, idioms and grammatical systems represent shares systems of association – cultural literacy. (p. 89)

Hirsch takes an historical perspective on the development of and need for national languages and cultures. Prior to the Industrial Revolution in Europe, provincial cultures and dialects were the rule and defined by the ever-changing “natural law of oral language.” One could understand the speech of nearby villages, but not of those further away. Similarly, one could not be understood across many generations in their own village, if such a conversation hypothetically took place. As economies and political systems became larger and more national in nature, the need for a common, standardized language and culture was evident. An important characteristic of an industrial society is an adaptable workforce that can “communicate with a wider economic and social community. Achieving wider communication requires literacy and a common language.” This can only be achieved through centralized education. The author quotes Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism* to underscore this critical circular relationship between nations, economies, and common language and culture.

Hirsch breaks the modern national vocabulary into three domains. The broadest is international. This includes generally shared information from world history, culture, geography as well as the physical and biological sciences. The second domain (for Americans) covers the English speaking world and its traditions. The third domain is one’s own country.

The formation of a formal national culture begins naturally but at some point becomes formalized and necessarily more resistant to rapid change, much like the standardization of language. It is, according to Hirsch, a product of “arbitrary historical inventions” (Gellner), made from a variety of folk materials, “selected and reinterpreted by [nation building] intellectuals to create a culture upon which the life of the nation can rest.” The end result is a combination of the previous high and low culture – an invented “local high” culture that becomes the shared national culture.

To propagate and perpetuate this national culture requires the teaching of a national vocabulary. Hirsch discusses two examples of early national textbooks, *Johnson's Dictionary* and *Blair's Rhetoric*. He identifies Blair, a Scot, as the first definer of cultural literacy. He stresses that these were “socially progressive instruments” in that they gave provincials an introduction to the specific traditions of written and spoken English. Hirsch asserts again that although the material in question may have been “traditional” in content, its effects were liberalizing and democratizing by giving all English speaking people access to the same information.

Hirsch is concerned that we are taking our national literate culture for granted. He believes that since the people of the United States have never experienced a bloody civil upheaval over language or majority culture dominance, we are nonchalant about the movement toward multilingualism and lingual pluralism (defined as the effort to “encourage rather than discourage competing languages within our borders.”). He asserts, using primarily China as an example, that “mutlilingualism enormously increases cultural fragmentation, civil antagonism, illiteracy, and economic-technological ineffectualness.” He emphasizes that this is different from multiliteracy, which is laudable if attempted *after* everyone were literate in their own national language and culture first.

Hirsch asserts that he is committed to pluralism and local control in education and discusses our national traditions of cultural, political and religious tolerance, pluralism and localism. The argument between pluralism and assimilation has always been a moderate one: “Shall we aim for gradual assimilation or all into one national culture, or shall we honor and preserve the diverse cultures implicit in our hyphenations?” Therefore, an approach to cultural literacy must be moderate and balanced: “The larger national culture must be extremely capacious and somewhat vague.”

The United States was founded in part on a “civil religion” (which is “big-tented and tolerant”). The founders were aware of the paradox of this concept but knew that if the “people are to govern themselves, they must govern on high, broadly religious principle for the larger public good as well as for their own private good.” Hirsch goes on to list these general American values and beliefs: “a vaguely defined God, altruism and self-help, equality, freedom, truth telling and respect for the national law.” In addition to these values, we share cultural myths – the frontier spirit, inventiveness, resourcefulness, practicality, independent-mindedness, and beneficence in the world. What makes these ideas part of the national culture and vocabulary for Hirsch is that they have been durable principles throughout our history.

The documents that promote these values, myths and principles represented what Hirsch calls the “American Bible” or “sacred texts.” He again insists that this canon of American culture is not one of philosophical or political design but of historical accident: “It is chauvinism and provincialism to believe that the content of our vocabulary is something either to recommend or deplore by virtue of its inherent merit.”

Hirsch talks again about the need for general literacy by all (including shared scientific and technical knowledge) as well the failure of universal education to “produce a truly literate...and informed citizenry.” Public discourse cannot take place without it. He closes the chapter by evoking the founder fathers admiration of Cicero’s notion of universal public discourse.

School is the traditional place for acculturation. Hirsch believes that its failure is due to “faulty theories” and not to social changes, television, disorientation of the American family, bad teachers or bad schools. In an almost dialectic fashion, Hirsch discusses the research and arguments over which effects student achievement more – family and socioeconomic background or schools.

Hirsch investigates the lack of success on the part of disadvantaged students and suggests that black students do so poorly on standardized tests due, in some part, to a lack of prior knowledge. The work of Dr. Jeanne Chall demonstrates that reading skills of disadvantaged children seem to diverge from their peers around age six chiefly because they lack elementary cultural knowledge. Instead of identifying and address these deficits, schools focus on general skills like “language art skills.” Consistent with his analysis in chapter two, Hirsch states “Every text, even the most elementary, implies information that it takes for granted and doesn’t explain. Knowing such information is *the* decisive skill of reading.” Further, Hirsch criticizes the trend towards student self-selection of material for mastering decoding skills.

At one point, Hirsch suggests that family background may be too strong of a factor for cultural literacy to be successfully taught in schools. He cites some research that demonstrates a correlation between background and achievement but adds that schools have not done enough to compensate for this. He then cites the success of disadvantaged children in private schools as evidence of this as well as research identifying time spent studying the material to be mastered as another success factor. In any case, students of all background require the proper curriculum for cultural literacy to be achieved.

In discussing the historical struggle over defining such a curriculum in the United States, Hirsch compares the 1893 *Committee of Ten Report* to the 1918 *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education*. The Committee of Ten recommended a traditional humanistic curriculum that included a modern conception of the various subjects. It did not reject, but was very skeptical of, a skills based approach (Hirsch calls this *romantic educational formalism*). It also stated that all students should get the same educational foundation (“an ideal that needs to be renewed”), which Hirsch points out is a more democratic view than simply universal education. The 1918 report, reverses the previous recommendations based upon Dewey, Rousseau (according to

Hirsch, less so upon Piaget's research in developmental psychology) and others who believe that each child has a "inborn, instinctive tendency to follow its own proper development." Hirsch labels this supposition a "half-truth" then states, "half truths, because of their plausibility, are frequently more dangerous than downright mistakes." The 1918 report is based upon these ideas as well as Dewey's "pragmatic emphasis on social utility as an educational goal" and his belief that education should be child-focused, not content-focused. This concept has an inherent emphasis on diversity and formalism – unique individuals pursue their own strengths and interests utilizing content of their choosing to develop skills – which Hirsch firmly opposes in the context of curriculum content development.

Hirsch identifies some positives in the 1918 *Principles*. It addressed the doubling of the school population every ten years as well as the challenges of immigration. It was clearly committed to educating every American, which the 1893 report did not. On the whole, however, Hirsch believes this influential report had an erroneous underlying philosophy that had "disastrous consequences" that are still with us today. He identifies intellectual inconsistencies in its support for "specific content knowledge for vocational courses, but de-emphasized content in language arts courses." Hirsch also criticizes its emphasis on accommodating individual differences which has led to the tracking of students and "horizontal fragmentation – the shopping mall high school." With specific reference to the concept of social studies (as opposed to a more traditional focus on history and geography), Hirsch finds particular fault with the *Principles* approach to studying the "activities of life" as opposed to imparting shared historical information. Additionally, he believes that this overall educational philosophy has left disadvantaged students even further behind, for reasons addressed in previous chapters.

Hirsch discusses how this progressive approach continued as the predominate educational philosophy throughout the 20th century. He quotes Charles Rathbone and Roland Barth who, as

“open education” advocates of the 60’s and 70’s, held views diametrically opposed to Hirsch’s. He asserts that utilitarianism is impractical in the modern world due to constant and fast changes in economies and vocations. Additionally, the individuality aspect of formalism is unrealistic. Hirsch seems to accept accommodating individual differences in *how* things are taught, but not regarding content. He suggests that the generation of high school age in the mid-eighties, brought up under these theories, are not less conventional than other generations, just less literate and, subsequently, less able to express individuality.

Hirsch then asks the question: How do we fix a system based upon and entrenched in such incorrect assumptions? Extreme views on either side are not the answer. He suggests a compromise – “a curriculum that is traditional in content but diverse in its emphases, that is pluralistic in its materials and modes of teaching but nonetheless provides our children with a common core of cultural information.” He borrows Dr. Patricia Graham concept of “commonality and flexibility.”

At this point, Hirsch offers an educational proposal – dual *extensive curriculum* and *intensive curriculum*. Extensive is the general knowledge all students must have to communicate and for the understanding of other information obtained. Intensive, as the name implies, is the more intense study of a specific example of the larger topic. This curriculum help to develop schemata and is driven by individual interests, as well as local communities. For example, if we want students to have an true understanding of Shakespeare, we provide general information about his life, historical times and many of his plays (extensive curriculum). Students then could study a particular play in depth (intensive curriculum). Through this more intensive study, they would have a deeper understanding of how the other plays, introduced in the extensive study, are constructed. There is a clear interrelationship between the two kinds of curricula in that they build upon one another, consistent with the concepts of schema and prior knowledge. As an

aside, Hirsch points out that the inclusion of the intensive curriculum is consistent with Dewey and resists the lure of “an arbitrary core curriculum.”

Hirsch emphasizes that the elementary curricula should capitalize on the fact that children memorize easily and “pick up adult information long before they can make sense of it.” As previously established, they need to establish the majority of their schemata early on. Textbooks at this level should be designed to incorporate cultural literacy, surveying “large movements of human thought and experience” in lieu of material advocated by the newest version of educational formalism, “the critical thinking movement.” Hirsch finally argues that “The polarization of educationalists (sic) into facts people versus skills people has no basis in reason. *Facts and skills are inseparable.*” These camps should join forces.

Hirsch asserts that a dictionary of cultural literacy should be published (there is an appendix in the form of an index that is a provisional and preliminary list of “must know” items for inclusion in such a dictionary). The information suggested for this source was compiled primarily by the author and two colleagues at the University of Virginia (James Trefil and Joseph Kett) and was then critiqued by more than a hundred consultants outside the academic world. The list was designed to represent, not to alter, current American literacy, with the exception of scientific literacy where the three professors felt there is a pressing need for increasing current common knowledge. Hirsch concedes that there were, and will continue to be, disagreements on what to include, as well as how much and how little to include under each entry. The list must be small enough to be practical which Hirsch sees as an advantage to its acceptance.

Hirsch believes that an extensive curriculum should not be mandated, but hopes that the discussion of cultural literacy may provoke a grass roots effort on the part of students and parents (and perhaps teachers and administrators) to change the focus of their own local district. How will this actually change what is taught? Hirsch advocates for an agreement between publishers

and educators “about the content of the national vocabulary and a good sequence for presenting it.” He suggests that general knowledge tests be given at fifth, eighth and twelfth grades, but again states that decisions on such testing should be left up to state and local discretion.

The Schools We Need (and Why We Don't Have Them) (1996)

Ten years after the influential *Cultural Literacy* and subsequent *Core Knowledge* curriculum project (and schools), Hirsch returns for another critique of educational reform. He is still concerned with the need for a common knowledge base, but approaches the issues from a somewhat different perspective. In *Literacy*, Hirsch was concerned with the tradition of formalism – the emphasis of formal skills over specific knowledge. In this book, he turns to the “intellectual error” of naturalism; the romantic 19th century tradition that gave birth to progressivism in education.

Hirsch begins by invoking Jefferson and Dewey regarding the need for common knowledge and understanding in a healthy democracy. Intellectual capital is necessary for economic and social mobility as well as political ascendancy. “All-purpose tools” are not adequate, according to Hirsch. Learning how to learn is a myth. He argues that such a skill does not exist – all knowledge, including skills, are based on previous knowledge. Hirsch suggests that a myriad of problems – fairness gaps, lack of motivation, truancy, discipline problems – are due in large part to this lack of shared knowledge because without it, children immediately and continuously get left further and further behind. Initial information about a topic increases natural curiosity and creates building blocks for future knowledge acquisition.

Certainly some of this can be blamed on socio-economic conditions of different children. The more controllable common factor is the school curriculum. Hirsch bemoans the lack of not only a national curriculum (although he doesn't overtly support such a thing) or even coherent local curricula. He is deeply concerned with the inconsistencies that exist *from classroom to*

classroom and grade to grade within schools. Written district curricula tend to be vague, albeit voluminous, so that there is flexibility. In reality, this often leads to incoherent instruction using unrelated information from year to year. Additionally, the pervasive concept of “spiraling” curriculum (building new knowledge upon previous information and concepts) leads to redundancy and boring repetition for students because the *specific* information to be learned is not spelled out. It also leads to significant gaps in knowledge because there is no plan for inclusion of all necessary content.

As further evidence of the need for consistent national content standards, Hirsch briefly discuss the ever-increasing mobility of Americans in general and migrant populations in specific. If a child is required to readjust to a new district without the even playing field of the same background knowledge, they are not only at a disadvantage, they may not recover at all. Hirsch acknowledges here (as elsewhere) his debt to William Bagley, an educational researcher and writer who expounds many of these ideas in the 1930’s. As always, Hirsch is especially concerned about the impact of education on disadvantaged children. He believes that Head Start should also have consistent, specific, rigorous curricula nation-wide. It should continue to provide the broader supports (health, social, emotional, etc.) that children need but it must also prepare student better for school – particularly with regards to language.

So why aren’t their national standards? Why isn’t there stronger opposition to current educational practices and philosophies that have not succeeded even though they have been the dominant ones for eighty years? Hirsch suggests a list of “isms” and a rethinking of the history of educational reform that he believes answers these questions.

He begins by pointing out the misconception that progressivism (reliance on “the project/hands on method” as opposed to rote learning) is still reform and not the de facto (perhaps even dogmatic) status quo. He supports this assertion by describing the culture of 20th

century pedagogy and teacher education beginning with *The Cardinal Principles of 1918* and the work of William Heard Kilpatrick, which was widely used from the teens to the 1940's in most teachers' colleges. This line of thought has continued throughout the century in teacher preparation. Hirsch, therefore, finds it difficult to argue against the fact that progressivism, and not content driven "traditional, rote" teaching methods, is the dominant paradigm in education. And, according to the data, it is not helping students of a variety of backgrounds to achieve higher standards. Therefore, to fight against this tradition is to fight for true reform. Hirsch supports the concept of charter schools as long as they are consistent with his philosophy of specific, grade appropriate and coordinated content that is shared with parents (his *Core Knowledge Schools*, for example). He is concerned that, in general, there is no *real* choice with regards to most charter schools because the dominant paradigm (progressivism) and directing individuals have an "intellectual monopoly...on the institutions of the educational world." This monopoly teaches and certifies teachers, accredits schools and programs and controls organizations and associations. It is a self-perpetuating culture (traced back by Hirsch to Teachers College, Columbia University) that sees itself as the reformers and not the establishment. In reality, the intellectual monopoly of progressivism (and its intellectual mother Romanticism), according to Hirsch, leaves little room for dissent or independent thought regarding educational theory.

Hirsch believes that there are inadequate challenges to this intellectual monopoly, or "Thoughtworld." The press, parents and teachers need to more actively question the assumptions of contemporary educationists. He concedes that it is difficult to argue with the rhetoric but, he insists, it is easy to refute the logic, particularly given the evidence. However, the indoctrination of "antifact, anti-rote-learning, antiverbal practices" is so deep and so pervasive that alternatives are unthinkable to the educational community. Although Hirsch acknowledges that there is

“partial truths” in Romanticism, developmentalism (the appropriate introduction of certain information or learning techniques based upon cognitive or psychological readiness) and educational naturalism (allowing students to “discover knowledge” on their own and at their own pace as suggested by Rousseau) but laments that they have become fallacies by being taken to extremes.

Another misinterpreted concept that thwarts educational consistency is the belief in American exceptionalism. People used this narrative [to borrow an idea from Neil Postman] to rationalize why American test scores or other standard measures cannot be fairly compared to others. We are too unique and too diverse as a people to be judged against more homogenous, traditional and less individualistic cultures, they say. Additionally, our society is too fluid and changes too quickly for our young to be inundated with static content. Hirsch finds all of these arguments unfounded. Specifically, he states that many school districts in European countries are quickly becoming as culturally and socio-economically diverse as many of ours and they have successfully implemented standardized curricula.

The dominance of localism (the tradition of local control of education) seems to be one aspect of this intractable problem that Hirsch is unwilling to fight. He strongly believes that it is a major obstacle to fairness, consistency and to his goal of common knowledge for all citizens. Rather than disparaging this tradition, however, he blames the followers of Kilpatrick and other progressivists who insist on the sanctity of autonomy in the classroom for preventing the universal disbursement of content knowledge.

Hirsch then turns to the myth of Romantic individualism and laments how this has played out in the classroom. Since the differences and uniqueness in every child should be celebrated, according to the Rousseau [and, most would argue, Dewey] tradition, grading and other objective evaluations become irrelevant. Self-esteem is a greater good than specific knowledge, therefore

children are not held back even if they can't read or write. Hirsch suggests that there is even an element of racism in such thinking; even though the grade gap has narrowed between white and minority populations, the achievement gap has not. This myth is deepened by additional "scientized" romantic notions – multiculturalism, "individual learning styles," and the concept of multiple intelligences – which fit the existing ideology. Hirsch's concerns here are simple and twofold: 1) teachers cannot provide individualized attention at the expense of all other students [Barzun would agree] and, 2) the development of learning styles and special talents should not be at the expense of "developing standard academic competencies such as reading, speaking, mathematics and general knowledge" needed for all children to "become politically functional, economically successful, and autonomous citizens."

Anti-intellectualism is also born out of the American romantic spirit and finds a place in the construct of progressivism: doing over thinking; books conjure the corrupt tradition of older, less successful cultures; intellectualism is elitist as opposed to democratic. On the contrary, Hirsch argues. Knowledge and discipline are the true keys to equal opportunity in a pluralistic society. Additionally, progress can only be made if there is a foundation on which to build. In the end, "practical skills" and "critical thinking" (a skill Hirsch insists does not even exist) have "turned out to be highly impractical and inequitable."

The final ism of progressive dogmatism that Hirsch addresses he calls "professional separatism." Hirsch suggests (without irony I believe) that professors of education as a group suffer from an inferiority complex and are held in low esteem by their peers. To make themselves equal to others in the university community, they needed to create their own discipline and identity. Hirsch states that early in the 20th century researchers/educators like Horace Mann and Dewey understood the importance of integrating pedagogy with subject-matter disciplines; there was no distinction between what should be taught and how it should be taught. Hirsch blames

(once again) William Heard Kilpatrick for distorting Dewey's ideas at Columbia and disseminating them to a "lineage" of educators across the nation, resulting in today's "uniformity of current American educational doctrine." Hirsch sees Kilpatrick as a misguided "militant separatist" who believed that "The new professorial army had the strength of ten because its principles were the best ones -- socially, scientifically and philosophically." He laments that the contemporary William Bagley (clearly Hirsch's forerunner in this debate) did not receive the same level of recognition. But Kilpatrick won out by presenting a more dramatic case for his position and creating a distinctive discipline that is isolated, viewing other professions as threats.

Hirsch sums up his critique of the history of progressive/Romantic education by dubbing it "antiknowledge extremism." He suggests that a middle ground that includes "skepticism, openness and practicality" would be the preferable course but accepts that a "countervailing extremism" of knowledge over process would provide better educational results than the system we have today.

The remainder of *The Schools We Need* focuses on the importance of research in supporting or refuting educational claims and the validity of testing. Hirsch disparages the selective use of research to support the predominant educational philosophy [or as Paul Simon once wrote, "All I suggest is a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest."]. He insists that most progressivist claims are not based on credible mainstream research but on questionable and incomplete studies that reinforce their pre-existing ideology. He goes on to compare and summarize a number of major classroom, psychological and international comparative studies. Many of these provide conflicting information and Hirsch mainly discusses (it seems) that which primarily support his position of traditional instruction (whole classroom, clear objectives, repetition/overlearning, nonjudgmental and brief feedback).

Hirsch concludes (somewhat poignantly) that most credible research supports the approach of “teaching as drama, storytelling...or focused narrative.” Stories have themes, precepts, clear plots, challenges, details and a moral. This analogy works in the context of traditional as well as Hunter teaching models. It does not prevent the inclusion of repetition (traditional) or investigation (progressive). Hirsch points out that subject matter as well as important virtues can be taught this way.

With regards to testing, Hirsch reminds the reader of the educative value of testing as assessment and as motivator. Although all teachers would like students to be interested in learning for its intrinsic value, the reality is that most students work harder when a grade is at stake. Additionally, most people seem to accept a lack of “*substantive equity*” (different grades) as long as there is “*procedural equity*” (a fair process). Hirsch believes that fair testing can only be achieved through objective measures and not through the current progressive trend of portfolios or other “authentic, performance-based” assessments that are subjective and even arbitrary. To insure the highest possible validity of tests, Hirsch suggests, based upon the research, that both multiple choice and essays be used (as is the case in the New York State system).

“Core Knowledge” Website review

Because the word “cultural” in the term “cultural literacy” proved to be too controversial, Hirsch and his associates changed the name of their organization and website to Core Knowledge. This site is an introduction to the schools program and sequenced curricula based on Hirsch’s writings. Unfortunately, the site presents as more of an advertisement for the books and materials that can be purchased through it than as an academic or non-profit site for research. All information is provided in limited way and viewers are encouraged to purchase the complete version online. Understandably, the explanation of the goals and method of this program are very

simplistic and slogan-like. The overview breaks Core Knowledge down into the “Four S’s:” Solid (knowledge that has consistently been found to be important across generation, regardless of cultural changes), Specific (unlike the vague and general standards, outcomes and objectives of most states and districts), Sequenced (organized by grade level to avoid repetition and omissions) and Shared (common knowledge that all citizens need to be understood and to understand others).

Diagnosis

For Hirsch, the problem with education is flawed thinking, misunderstanding, excessive pride and misguided social engineering. Progressivism and the bastion of higher education have perverted the admirable concepts of Dewey into functionless and confused pedagogical dogma that does not make sense and does not broaden democratic ideas or opportunity.

Hirsch directly attacks the notion that children can develop critical thinking skills without strong foundational knowledge on which to build such skills. Because of his assumptions regarding language and knowledge, Hirsch (as well as Barzun) cannot accept “jumping” steps to deeper understanding through process – it is simply not possible to expect a productive outcome from children who don’t have requisite knowledge and skills. Additionally, educators sublimate basic functional competency in necessary skills to more generalized but romantic and attractive activities. Finally, the advent of concepts such as multiple-intelligences and individualized learning have sapped the teaching process of its energy and focus.

Remedy

On the surface, Hirsch’s remedy is simple – structure schools so that clearly identified content knowledge can be imparted to all students gradually, building upon prior knowledge until a satisfactory and agreed set of knowledge and skills are obtained. Such a plan is designed to create opportunity for all in a capitalist and democratic society. Conceptually, it is well organized

and provides clarity, common language and a common context. Hirsch provides not only a philosophical and sociological justification for his ideas, he offers a system, including the specific information he believes should be taught at specific grade levels and strategies for teaching. Many of the other ideas by other authors discussed in this review remain in the abstract and do not suggest clear paths to their stated goals. Hirsch certainly stands out in this regard and has continued to work actively with individuals and districts to implement his program during the past 15 years.

Way

A writer like Hirsch can be easily misunderstood and he knows it. Suggesting a traditional, sequenced, organized, nationally standardized, specific content driven curriculum sounds reactionary in a system dominated by rhetoric that off-handedly dismisses such thinking. However, Hirsch believes that the principles and methods he espouses are empirically the best way to achieve what he believes to be the goals of education. The *purpose of education*, for Hirsch, is to create “universal competence...universal communicability and a sense of community within the public sphere.” He uses the term “common school” very purposefully – the place where we are all given the same opportunity. For each individual student, the purpose of education is to provide the necessary skills and knowledge to participate actively and competitively in that community.

To achieve this goal, Hirsch wants all children to be provided with the same, clear (Solid, Specific, Sequenced and Shared) curriculum, no matter where or how they live. He believes this curriculum should include the generally accepted ideas and information that people use to communicate in our society. This can only be done when teachers use truly (not trendy)

educationally sound techniques. Toward this end, the minds of professors, superintendents, bureaucrats and administrators need to be wrested from the indoctrination of progressive/Romantic ideology.

Analysis

Neil Postman criticizes Hirsch's ideas on several grounds. He finds "the list" (as manifested in the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* arbitrary in the sense that for every item on it, an argument could be made for ten others that should be added (Barzun expressed this view as well). Additionally, Postman believes that Hirsch's list is not a solution but an "unintentional expression of the problem." Knowing the *what* of human history and endeavor is pointless without the *why* and the *how*. Worse, the insistence on certain accepted facts as truths can lead to dogma and "justificationism" – my version of the story, right or wrong. Both authors are concerned with creating a common culture, but Postman believes that more important than knowing certain facts is understanding from where those facts came. I appreciate that both of these thinkers recognize the importance of having a narrative or story that gives *meaning* to those facts.

I do not understand why Hirsch insists on the "sanctified arrangement" of local educational control. Unlike most of his assertions, he gives no research or evidence to support this claim. He insists on fighting other harmful dogma, why not this one? At times, he is surprisingly politically uncourageous.

There is something intellectually, perhaps emotionally, unsatisfying about Hirsch's basic premises for the purpose of schools. Common knowledge for personal success and greater opportunity is certainly *one* reasonable outcome of education, but it hardly seems like enough to sustain a society's commitment to improving their schools or culture.

The examples of core knowledge curricula on Hirsch's Core Knowledge website are surprisingly vague, as are the examples of alignments to state standards. This underscores, I believe, the difficulty of creating such a curriculum that satisfies a broad, ideologically and culturally diverse population as exists in the U.S. The information in the cultural dictionary is certainly more detailed, but again, there are endless opportunities for argument regarding such a list.

Hirsch's work is reflected clearly in much of New York State's standards and scope and sequence, particularly in social studies. He might argue (as might Barzun) that too much is introduced too early, making it difficult for students have a solid grasp of certain knowledge before expanding that knowledge. He clearly agrees with the process of rigorous, frequent standardized testing as it exists here.

Jacque Barzun

Summary

Begin Here: The Forgotten Conditions of Teaching and Learning

Schooling No Mystery/Teacher in America: What He Found

Barzun asserts that teaching is not a “set of complex problems to be solved.” It is an ongoing series of difficulties; it requires constant effort. It is an art that has various tools at the artist’s disposal, but cannot be reduced to an easy method or science. Therefore, there is no one right or wrong way to teach, only most desirable options for given pupils (the term “student” for Barzun is inaccurate for school age children) and given situations. Teaching is an “unnatural life...like governing, teaching is telling somebody else how to think and behave; it is an imposition, an invasion of privacy. That it is presumably for another’s good does not change the unhappy fact of going against another’s desire.”

Barzun also states here that true liberal arts and knowledge of subject matter is more important for new teachers than methodology or strategy. Those who have learned something and experienced it are the best teachers, as is the case when older students tutor those younger than themselves.

The Alphabet Equals the Wheel/The Centrality of Reading

Barzun believes that motivation exists in most every student. In his view, schools have started to believe that all kids can’t learn. To facilitate success, a culture has to be created that says “of course learning is what is suppose to be going on in school.” If this were the case, according to Barzun, boredom and discipline problems will be minimized.

Because teaching is such hard work, he believes that teachers should be allowed to teach. They should not be burdened by meetings and paperwork. Reform programs only make more bureaucracy.

For Barzun, reading is power and is the only way to communicate knowledge and ideas through time. In *Centrality*, Barzun attacks whole language teaching (described as the “look and say method” and analphabetism) as the product of “sophisticated mind[s], that is, part-educated and full of unexamined ideas...” It is “preposterous” in that it puts the “beginning before the end.” He believes that American illiteracy is not a product of poverty or other social issues, but one created by the elite in society out of a desire to free children from rote learning. Barzun supports the goal but laughs at the process suggested to get there. Specifically, he argues that phonics have proven their worth in addressing illiteracy and therefore should not be abandoned for more fashionable approaches.

Barzun further defines the cultural forces he believes are responsible for this critical change in educational philosophy. He blames “scientism,” or the preference of numbers over words, doing over thinking and pseudo-science or anecdotal evidence over real objective data. Additionally, he blames the last wave of liberalism in the early 20th century that bred an extreme egalitarianism – everyone is human, everyone makes mistakes and that is ok. Therefore, it is wrong to correct or push or challenge a student. Thirdly, the broken educational system that needs fixing is teaching the people who are the next generation of teachers – illiterate and unprepared in their subject areas. Finally, our culture has embraced “art as a way of life,” preferring that which is novel, obscure or implausible over “logic, order and precision.” With regard to any educational approach he says, “No principle, however true, are any good when they are misunderstood or stupidly applied. Nothing is right by virtue of its origins, but only by virtue of its results.”

Middlemarch Is _____?

Students must write in order to learn how to organize their thoughts and express themselves intelligibly. “Reading, writing, speaking, and thinking are not four distinct powers but four modes of one power.” Fill in the blank and multiple choice tests are useless in developing this power. Additionally, students who are talented writers often suffer on tests because they don’t get the trick of deciphering the question. Numerical evaluation is easy and comforting, even if it is an inaccurate measure of value. Barzun values letter grades, although they are subjective, because they are better than standardized scores or psychological descriptions.

Reasons to De-Test the Schools

This essay is a short and direct condemnation of multiple choice tests which echoes Dewey’s (among others’) assertion that scattered knowledge is useless if not applicable to future purpose and experiences. Additionally, according to Barzun, this kind of testing does not promote good learning or good teaching.

Barzun goes further to say that multiple choice tests are actually harmful to teaching and learning. They are convenient and they secure some degree of fairness. However, this is the main assessment tool for our nation’s schools and it indicates failure. These tests actually contribute to that failure by testing for nothing but recognition knowledge. It is difficult to remember things when they are not connected to other facts and are not in context (a concept made explicit by Hirsch’s use of schema). But if you are asked to *use information in a functional situation*, it becomes active, usable knowledge. Preparing for and taking essay tests reinforce patterns in the mind and demonstrate “coherence and verbal accuracy.” The process of answering multiple choice questions is confusing and requires specific instruction that is not transferable to other things.

Yes, essays are much more time consuming. But Barzun argues that using a short cut such as multiple choice testing is only excusable in emergencies. Therefore, it could be said that we have been educating Americans in such conditions for a hundred years. Learning is an individual activity. The teacher must truly get to know each student and essays allow that to happen. “The truth is, when all is said and done, one does not teach a subject, one teaches a student to learn it.” Teachers must do the hard work of preparing students for and creating essay tests that demonstrate their knowledge and provide more insight into the skills, talents, personalities and needs of their students. We have become “content to substitute the mark of an indefinite performance for the assessment of genuine ability.”

Textbook into Scrapbook

This speech is a call for “parental involvement.” Barzun suggests wryly that since their children go to school, one would assume their involvement already. He cites that existing parent organizations do good work but often are either intimidated by the education professionals and bureaucracy or expected to give rubber stamp approval. Additionally, Barzun points out that parents don’t have a clear idea about what schools can or should be because they are products of the same “ineffectual and incoherent” schooling system.

Television and the Child – But Not What You Think

Barzun posits the questions: Does television negatively affect children in their schooling? His answer is a complicated yes. He starts with its reliance on “discontinuity” and sound bytes. However, Barzun argues that since compulsory schooling came first, the influence may be more the other way around. Kids get bored every 17 ½ seconds because everything done in public schools over the past fifty years have conditions them to become so. The people who make television are products of these schools and therefore are already conditioned to create a product

consistent with their experience. Barzun gives the example of an 8th grade social studies textbook. It is flashy, bright and full of graphics and short blurbs of information. The text gives a smattering of facts, opinions and concepts, “at the expense of pursuing one line of thought...nothing must look systematic.” Schools became this way so that school would be less stuffy and more lifelike. Additionally, scientific studies that ran counter to practical experience and common sense suggested endless novel approaches to teaching that were not supported by clear results. Preferred activities were disjointed and devoid of context.

Schools put too much focus on self and not enough on subject matter. This makes children even more self-conscious; another agent of discontinuity. Finally, the curriculum and schedule of the school day creates great discontinuity in the guise of trying to offer flexibility and excitement for students. Keeping things exciting is not necessarily the way to develop true interest in a subject – it requires some boring work to understand order and logic. Again, for Barzun, the crime here is that students can’t read, write or count.

To fix this, schools need to be more formal environments. Workstation type activities should be eliminated so that all children should can work on things at the same time and benefit from each other’s mistakes. The goal is to increase the attention span. Variety is good of course, if it has purpose and moves the student toward developing their own ability.

Barzun asserts that critical thinking and problem-solving cannot be taught in schools particularly since children do not have the basic tools they need to learn and think. Thinking is more like art than science – it is not always perfectly organized; life is full of difficulties that call for “endless improvisation;” not problems that can be definitively solved. Therefore, teachers must be artists: “The art is that of understanding and persuasion, so as to carry the listener toward the same understanding.” Modern children are energetic, worldly and intelligent. We need to harness these strengths and teach them so as to “let loose the effort.”

Ideas versus Notions/Where the Educational Nonsense Comes From (1971)

Learning is reading, writing and counting. Schools are asked to do too many things by too many people that have nothing to do with learning or the core subjects. To be teachable, a subject must be made up of facts that can be organized, as well as have rules and principles that make it systematic. Hundreds of topics are interesting and important, but cannot be scholastic subjects for lack of the above characteristics. According to Barzun, good educational reform plans must:

- ◆ be workable in groups (not for one child and a tutor)
- ◆ not rely on extraordinarily talented or devoted teachers
- ◆ be based on definable subject matters, not “vague activities copied from life.”

The primary goal of school is the removal of ignorance; any plan that doesn't do this of course misses the point and is useless.

Barzun warns those interested in educational reform not to blame Romanticism, Rousseau or Dewey. The ideas of these writers have often been misinterpreted, fragmented and misunderstood. The task of the reformer is to 1) observe current practices and identify where previous good intentions become meaningless, rote activities: “Originally they were sensible devices; now they are administered in a dull mechanical way, because the teacher has lost the sense of their novelty and difficulty. Few things retain their significance when they done without difficulty or at least a dash of *in*experience.” 2) propose an ideal model that cannot be implemented but suggests a desirable frame of mind. Reform is always necessary – “ossification is an ever-present danger.”

Those guilty of making nonsense out of educational reform ideas are 1) literalists (turning a philosophy into a recipe – administratively looking for certainty, consistency and ease of implementation in the classroom, 2) those who turn common sense or simple, sincere ideas into dogma (“preposterism”), and 3) the cult of the new or, faddishness.

Barzun's believes the underlying problem is this: "The purpose of the school has been lost and buried under a multitude of secondary aims." Learning is no longer the primary goal.

Subjects Dead or Alive/History is Past and Present Life

History is taught in bits and pieces without continuity. Geography is neglected on a big scale. If taught well, geography could help to explain to students the diversity of the world and the adaptations and resourcefulness of its different cultures as well as the resources and obstacles the natural environment presents to people. Social Studies is a "useless catch-all" phrase that is a "dumping ground" for anything special interests believe should be taught. Trying to include everything that is asked for is impossible and confusing to both teachers and students.

History defined is the account of human actions in the past. Real history, not anecdotal, but continuous, should begin with American history in the 7th and 8th grade because it requires the least amount of explanation and the details of the culture. History should be integrated into all subjects at this level. It is time for pupils to discover not "bits & pieces" but the "essence of history – *continuity* and the *combination* of acts, plans, hopes. . . failures, triumphs. . . greed, ignorance, ambition, revenge, habit, idealism, practicality and impracticality interact" – all arising from the behavior of persons living at a certain time and place. Students should leave with a feel for the "logic of events" and a "permanent possession of a sense of time." Dates should be "pegs on which to hang clusters of events that share. . . related significance." Teachers need to help students to create "vivid mental associations" and model how the historical mind works.

Barzun is explicit in his desired demonstrable skill: Pupils should be able to "recite and write about [history] in well-organized consecutive portions and with a sense of their continuity; a prime coating" for future history courses. How should this be achieved? "Read, first and last." Pupils should read out loud, in small groups, and summarize. In this way, they can learn how to

be critical readers and discover the concept of perspective. The teacher should be a coach pushing students, asking questions that require thoughtful responses.

Barzun has great contempt for “methods.” He insists on no play acting or irrelevant field trips. He wonders if the discontinuity and interruption created by such activities is more for the bored teacher and not the pupils.

The Urge to be Pre-Posterous (1969)

Barzun opens with a quote from the Roman teacher Quintilian “...most teachers, through ostentatious haste, begin where they ought to end.” This is often the result of reform or new paradigms, or new administrations, or new teachers because results need to be demonstrated NOW, so the cart gets put before the horse. Additionally, because of a desire to make learning more engaging and interesting, curricula emphasize the “why” and “how” of subjects (Barzun focuses on “conceptual work” in math and science) which also leaves out *rudimentary* knowledge and skills, which create the necessary foundation for future learning. In a desire to present the Big Picture, the basics, on which more complex future learning can be built, are lost.

Barzun suggests that the progressive movement and its emphasis on the child being “equal” to adults early on (including their right to decide what and how they should learn) is “pure preposterism.” He concludes that this lack of structure and authority in schools has robbed children of discipline and real responsibility. This shift, reasons Barzun is largely responsible for the boredom, disrespect and even violence present in schools.

Barzun scoffs at “developing the powers of inquiry” and “problem solving.” Due to the complexity of most social and historical problems requiring extensive knowledge in a variety of different disciplines, Barzun argues that it is absurd to expect children to do such a thing. He gives multiple choice tests actually as an example of that – “They are a piece of subtle deception

practiced on minds that have just begun to acquire the outlines of a subject...the students have no sizable store of details with which to surround and defeat the falsehoods.”

The Art of Making Teachers

Good teachers are rarely natural phenomena. Therefore, we have to “make due with talent, that is to say, fair material properly trained.” Unfortunately, Barzun believes, those who train teachers are not interested in learning and have no capacity for it. They are more interested in social work than instruction. Examples of the educationist mind include “abstraction instead of direct naming; exaggeration of goals and results;. . .taking indirect means in place of the straight one; and finally mistaking words for facts and good intentions for hard work.” “The educationist spirit is that of *bureaucracy* – marks on paper take precedence over facts.”

In Barzun’s view, what natural traits are required for good teachers? 1) “Brains enough” to detect educationist crap “and courage enough to admit it,” 2) a strong interest in a genuine school subject, 3) interest beyond his or her own specialty, 4) a mental life and a true appreciation for books and ideas. Barzun sounds almost romantic or Socratic in making this fourth point: “To think, not with the aid of books or articles or studies, but with the bare mind; and again to think not lofty thoughts in big words . . .but think plainly and privately. . .Sit on the ground and tell yourself what you know . . .about art, about teaching, about people young and old.”

With regard to training, good teachers must have master of the subject to be taught. Additionally, their training should be supplemented by courses in other fields for a complete liberal arts background. Finally, new teachers should study the history of educational theories. Child psychology is not necessary – “There is no such thing as *the* child at any age. Teaching is not the application of a system, it is an exercise in perpetual discretion.. . .Intuition is the true guide.”

Of What Use the Classics Today? (1987)

Barzun grants that it is hard to define what is “classic,” so instead he suggests criteria for what makes a possible classic: 1) density of discourse, 2) adaptability (going beyond its initial purpose or intent allowing people of different times and beliefs to find different things in it that are relevant to them), 3) it must “gather enough votes” to be deemed classic. So of what use is classic literature in education? Classics can be a “live link” to the past – a glimpse into the lives of people of another time who are at once very much alike and very different from us. Second, it teaches us how to really *read* – it takes work, makes us stop to think hard, to wonder. The benefit of such an exercise, according to Barzun, is to help us to live in a wider world. The classics give us a valuable vicarious experience.

They also have the practical advantage of aiding communication through the understanding of literary and historical allusions. As our society has become more pluralistic, such a common foundation is even more important. Ironically, it has in fact become less so. Even the most common references, say from the Bible etc., are not commonly understood or are even misunderstood. One would be correct in assuming that Barzun approves of Hirsch’s attempt to correct this grave deficiency. Barzun praises the effort, but “the remedy seems more mechanical than educative.” The items listed should not be factoids to be memorized. Through reading the classics and true study of history, Hirsch’s list should become part of one’s memory of regular use, like streets where you live. They are *functional* and a normal part of your life.

Classics must be read in their entirety to be beneficial, not summarized. It should help students truly *imagine* another time and place (“make a successful effort to reconstruct past lives, feelings and circumstances”) and finds ideas, realities and emotions that are transferable to today. The classics, thoroughly read and contemplated, help strengthen judgment.

Diagnosis

Barzun believes that the overall approach to schooling in America over the past hundred years has been misguided and unfocused. And since those responsible for improving the system are products of that same broken system, they should not be expected to know how to fix it. In Barzun's view, educators have been seduced by child psychology, 20th century liberalism, the progressive movement, the discountenance of discipline, pedagogical experts who rely on anecdote for evidence, overbearing self-perpetuating bureaucracies and just plain dumb or absurd reform ideas. To conclude that he believes our schools to be way off course would be a monumental understatement.

In terms of pedagogy, Barzun believes there is too much emphasis on social-emotional considerations and methodology and not near enough on subject matter. Additionally, he finds that new teachers are woefully unprepared to teach in their purported specialties. With regards to methods, Barzun is concerned that good ideas and approaches (particularly thinkers like Dewey) become misconstrued, dogmatized and reduced to workshop handouts that lose their original power and purpose. He believes that teaching must be viewed as an art and not routinized labor.

With regard to curricula, Barzun believes that it is preposterous to expect children to learn how to think critically or to do meaningful problem solving. These skills require extensive knowledge in a specific area, broad experience and maturity. The litany of subjects to be taught and issues to address are too long, unnecessary and unrealistic. Beyond reading, writing and counting, Barzun laments the loss of geography for the vague catch-all of social studies (though one could argue that the NYS standards attempts to address this concern since this was written).

Remedy

- ◆ Above all, children must be taught to read and write well. In Barzun's view, these skills are vital in creating and sharing knowledge.
- ◆ Curricula must address traditional subject matter and be designed so that rudimentary skills and knowledge are taught early. These can then be used as a foundation for broader and deeper learning.
- ◆ Teacher preparatory programs must be more rigorous and concentrate not on methodology but on content. Teachers should, however, be instructed on various educational theories and their histories. A broad liberal arts education is also necessary to provide sufficient depth and breadth of general knowledge and understanding.
- ◆ Teachers need not be geniuses, but they should have some brains, common sense and experience beyond school. They must also be individuals who are able, willing and enjoy actual thinking "with the bare mind."

Way

The purpose of education is to remove ignorance. It is "...to make persons whose understanding of what they see makes them feel more at home in our. . . environment." The role of school toward this end is to "...begin at the beginning and not set out with hopeful ends; that it should make use of reasons and ideas, but not neglect memory and practice; that it should concentrate on rudiments so as to give a body of knowledge to some and the foundations of higher studies to others."

Teaching is an art that requires well-prepared and well-educated practitioners who are self-disciplined yet flexible in their ability to adapt to the constant changes in the classroom.

There are no set formulas or easy answers.

Analysis

Barzun's observations, particularly in his article on *The Classics*, are very relevant to the current focus on primary sources (read DBQ essay assessment). It is critical, if one is consistent with Barzun's reasoning, that districts create a realistic plan that can be turned into a *spiraled integrated curriculum* from the elementary grades through 11th. The NYS standards attempt to provide a road map for what the state believes student should be able to do at each level, but it does not offer specifics on how to get there. To a large extent this needs to be assessed and addressed constantly in each district. Teachers (this is a very hard one) need to work closely together in order to create a consistent linear process for teaching the skills and content required at each level to insure that students are building on previous knowledge. I would suggest that this is not done in most districts – in my limited experience I have found that students feel like they are starting over every year: the new teacher has his or her own way of dealing with primary materials and teaches the process of answering DBQs and writing essays differently. This assessment becomes a new (and to some, excruciating) hoop to jump through every year, not a way to make history meaningful. Most importantly, information and skills, *rudiments*, in each subject area must “hang together.” Another glaring example I found in helping students prepare for DBQs is their limited vocabulary, which made reading let alone understanding, the chosen excerpted “documents” impossible. Juniors in high school did not recognize the word “factions” in the Federalist.

Seymour Sarason

Summary

The Predictable Failure of Education Reform (1990)

Schools have changed over the past thirty years, but these changes have been “cosmetic and not fundamental. Recognizing and trying to change power relationships, especially in complicated, traditional institutions, is among the most complex tasks human being can undertake.”(p.119) Schools are not unique complex systems. Therefore, schools need to look to other models (corporation, government) for ideas when trying to address intractability and power sharing. Changing power, however, does not ensure improvement in educational outcomes. “To confuse change with progress is to confuse means with ends...It is the rare revolution that has been true to its initial vision.” There is a critical difference between imitation (following the recipe for reform) and replication (thoughtful implementing theories or ideas is a way that demonstrates an understanding of the theory and your particular needs, power relationships and context). It is also important to be aware of the difference between “compromise and corruption in regard to goals.”

Sarason is not an idealist. He admits that what he suggests is difficult, if not impossible to achieve, but believes it has to be tried. To be successful, his approach requires people with fortitude – “Changing a system is not for the conceptually and interpersonally fainthearted.” Sarason suggests several fundamental questions that he believes must be asked (and is certain rarely are) before embarking on a proposal for education reform:

“In what ways do our recommendations differ from those made by comparable groups twenty or even fifty years ago? How do we account for what seems to be the universal conclusion that there has been a marked deterioration in the climate and accomplishments of our schools? Why should the solutions we offer make a difference?...Why should similar diagnoses and actions today be more effective?”
(p. 34)

Most reformers have little or no educational experience – they seek to correct parts, not the whole system because they have little understanding of how schools actually operate. Sarason is not suggesting, however, that reform be left only to educators and those in the system because they often can only see their own part in the overall system. Most have an adversarial view of those in other roles –“...like a mini-U.N....the pursuit of narrow self-interest is all-pervasive.” This results in blame assignment. Additionally, being part of the culture, or system of education, does not mean one necessarily understands it in a comprehensive way. He suggests a need for both an intimate understanding of the culture and processes of schools as well as an objective, anthropological perspective.

When new ideas, approaches or proposals fail, individuals are often blamed, not the system that forces them to play their particular role (“if we only had better, smarter, more committed people”). The concept of *system* defies simple cause and effect. You need to study and understand the different parts of a system (or organization), how they interact and the “permeability and strength” of the boundaries between them. System analysis change (if correctly implemented) should foster other desirable changes.

Toward this kind of perspective, Sarason outlines three kinds of understanding: 1) present and near past understanding of the cause of a problem (the most common approach to educational reform), 2) historical view – has this happened before?, If so, what was done and did it work?, Is it a cyclical or constant problem?, 3) understanding of the school system in the context of the larger social system (e.g., computer science industry taking math and science teachers, changes in family structures/divorce, deterioration of urban areas). Because it is a highly complex traditional social system itself, schools will “accommodate” these great social changes (and the ‘accompanying turmoil’) in ways that require little or no change.”

Education problems must be viewed holistically, including those people and systems outside of the narrowly defined school system. “Schools can be a vehicle for social change” but there are limits to what they can achieve. Schools need to stop “promising more than they can deliver; and ...increase public understanding of why the problems of schooling in our society are and will be so vexing.” Sarason blames the educational community for accepting the role of scapegoat. In advocating a systemic/holistic approach to education reform, Sarason uses the analogy of family therapy as opposed to individual therapy. He cautions that although the various models of family all claim to be near perfect, there is no evidence that they are. The result has not necessarily proven the theory.

Reform efforts rarely address the distribution of power. “...anyone who is affected by change should stand in some relationship to the formulation and implementation of that change.” If people have “voice in matters that affect them, they will have a greater commitment to the overall enterprise.” If people do not have a voice, they do not feel responsible and blame others for everything that goes wrong. Sarason points out that the issue of teachers having a greater role in school decision-making (and similarly, students in the classroom) is a “political-moral” one and should not be judged in the context of higher standardized scores. He admits that it may not even produce better decisions, but it is necessary. Additionally, Sarason points out that change can be painful and difficult. People unfamiliar with exercising power will have to learn how to do so and may even fear the responsibility.

Why didn't the altering of power relationships with the rise of teachers' unions demonstrably improve educational outcomes? They were/are focused primarily on “bread and butter” issues – pay, benefits, working conditions – in the tradition of other labor unions. They did not “challenge school boards in regard to educational policy.” Certainly, those in power

wanted to stay in power. However, recommending greater teacher participation in the decision-making process sounds much simpler than it would be in practice.

Sarason briefly discusses the ambivalent power relationship between schools and the universities that train teachers and other personnel. They are reliant on each other, have disdain for each other, and have little or no say in how the other operates. He returns to this issue in detail in *The Case for Change*.

Sarason uses the example of the U.S. Constitution as a model of power sharing and of the process of creating an effect system. He points out that the founding fathers were acutely aware of the problems that can be created by problem-solving. He also points out that it was a blueprint and a framework that expected to be altered as circumstances changed. He also references, in detail, the Scanlon Plan for Organizational Development. The Scanlon Plan was written for use with private sector companies but relevant for any organization: "...the formation of small groups given responsibility for formulating plans, advice, and goals, a degree of responsibility and power they never were accorded before." Like all of Sarason's recommendations, this is not a panacea, it is *a tool that needs to be used with a clear purpose in mind*. In this, Barzun, Postman, Dewey and Sarason (at least) clearly agree – don't confuse a change in policy with a change in practice.

Implementing reform requires not only a conceptual framework (the new idea) but a deep understanding of the dynamics involved in the "particular social-institutional context." In successful organizations, self-correction is a culture norm, not a "war." Real reform must include question-asking behavior on the part of the learner: "...question asking is not only a reflection of curiosity but also one of the royal roads to productive knowledge and action. It is surprising how little attention has been given to this characteristic in educational research and the preparation of educational personnel." Students are either afraid to ask questions or simply accept that they have

no right to do so. “One can change curricula, standards, and a lot of other things by legislation or fiat, but if the regularities of the classroom remain unexamined and unchanged, the failure of the reforms is guaranteed.” Children need to take real responsibility for their own learning (as well as being responsible to others), not as rhetoric but as a taught process where they have the *power to ask and find answers* to individually or group generated questions.

Schools should exist equally for teachers – the use of sabbaticals for intellectual and professional growth; better teacher training programs that are more than “programming” perceived as useless by many teachers; attracting brighter and intellectually curious people to the field; provide ‘case conferences’ as a way to help teachers address concerns regarding students and to decrease their working alone in a vacuum (this would also help to build community among staff). If schools are alive with learners, real professionals as teachers, it is more realistic to find students learning there.

The Case for Change

Sarason believes that teacher preparatory programs are inadequate. New teachers are not prepared to handle, or even creatively think about handling, the chasm between educational theories and the realities of the classroom and school culture. (Almost tangentially, Sarason states that teacher unionization has been responsible for creating opportunities for teachers to change the power structure of schools, but lack of proper preparation has left much of that potential unfulfilled).

Preparation programs should have two “difficult, even conflicting goals: to prepare people for the realities of schooling, and to provide them with a conceptual and attitudinal basis for coping with and *seeking to alter those realities* [my emphasis] in ways consistent with what we know and believe.” Teachers need technical skills and content knowledge, but they also need purpose and concrete experience to effectively employ these in “teaching children, not subject

matter.” Sarason agrees strongly with John Goodlad’s assertion that true educational reform can only come from individual schools with empowered teachers and administrators. Goodlad and Sarason assert, however, that these people need a clear mission and better preparation.

What do we expect of teachers? That they have experienced “the nature and context of productive learning and have taken on the obligation to create similar conditions for pupils....fostering a sense of discovery and growth....” Sarason points out, as he consistently does with most of the maxims he cites, that this is an ideal to aspire to, not a condition that can be perfectly and permanently maintained.

Sarason believes, in the tradition of Piaget, Freud and Dewey, that children are natural learners – inquisitive beings who search for answers through experiment and experience. To create a productive learning environment for each learner, teachers need to be a kind of psychological ombudsman [my term] or middleman [Dewey’s term], recognizing the assets of the learner, constantly evaluating and incorporating the broader context of experience and needs that impact the classroom. This is how relevance is found – a critical point for Sarason. Would-be educators need to learn how to utilize and capitalize on experiences and events that spark curiosity (their own and their students’) and create interest. According to Sarason, this is the only way to insure learning, with or without a formal curriculum

Sarason does not suggest specific changes to existing preparatory programs. He advocates a complete overhaul, based on a new rationale and set of guiding principles

In this book, Sarason returns to the issue of power in the classroom and the wider school community. He cites Edward Pauly’s book *The Classroom Crucible* (1991) extensively as supportive evidence to his own *The Predictable Failure of Education Reform*. Both authors believe that the complex social constructs involved in schooling pay a tremendous role in how learning takes place. There are dynamic processes and reciprocal relationships that involve all

members of the school community and have a variety of predictable and unpredictable consequences. Therefore, shared decision making is critical for real progress.

With regard to preparatory programs and power sharing, Sarason talks about classroom management and the emphasis on discipline. He suggests that investigating the nature of the student's power and finding ways to harness that power to achieve the overall classroom objectives would be more successful than traditional approaches to discipline.

Sarason points out that all players in schools – students, teachers, administrators, superintendents, parents – feel as if they do not have enough say in how they are governed. Everyone has to do what they are told by those who hold power over them. The issue of how power is divided and used, according to Sarason, derives from your values and goals: “In brief, governance is about respect for what you think the rights, obligations, and capabilities of people are as individuals and as members of a collectivity.”

The power structure in schools is defined not only by the roles people play but also by formal training and certification. A teacher is more powerful than a student because they have a teaching certification. The administrator is more powerful because they have training to be one. The superintendent has a Ph.D. You don't have to be an expert to contribute. Conversely, the mob should not rule. Again, Sarason uses the example of the 1787 Constitutional Convention in demonstrating how a people created rules to govern themselves basis on common goals and values.

Sarason criticizes preparatory programs for perpetuating a belief on the part of new teachers that limited resources (usually a euphemism for money) is a constant that won't change. He grants that more money is needed, but it is not the panacea it is often perceived to be. He believes that schools and individual teachers have to look to, indeed actively ask, the community for support and resources. Educators need to take the responsibility to say to the community, “If

this is what you expect us to do, this is what we need to accomplish it.” The community is indeed *obligated* to help in any way necessary; they should not have to be asked. But to be successful in soliciting resources, according to Sarason, schools need to appeal to the self-interests of the people and organizations from whom they want help. “Bartering and exchanging resources... sustain satisfying and productive relationships.” This is a good example of Dewey’s notion, embraced by Sarason, that school is life. Implicit in all of this is the recognition of people, specifically all of those in the educational community, are resources.

Returning to the issue of relevance (“Why am I asked to learn this? What do I do with this? Of what use is this to me?”) Sarason suggests that extensive knowledge of subject matter is not enough; the material must be made “meaningful to the personal-experiential world of the student.” How is that done? By allowing students to ask as many questions as possible. [this echoes Postman and Dewey] “The overarching criterion by which to judge your answer to a child’s question is the degree to which it facilitates new questions, the pursuit of more knowledge.”

Diagnosis

Sarason believes that the primary problem with schools is intractability and the basic power relationships. He also believes that the very structure and organization of schools should be fearlessly and completely rethought. He finds that, 1) schools are uninteresting and intellectually boring to students, 2) because of access to the “real world” through mass media, the classroom cannot compete with other outside cultural forces, and 3) because of a variety of limitations (physical, bureaucratic, etc) it is very difficult for schools to encourage curiosity and the acquisition of personally meaningful knowledge.

Remedy

- ◆ Power in the classroom, the staff room and the district offices needs to be redistributed in a way that vests everyone.
- ◆ Communities need to more involved with schools in mutually beneficial. They also need to be more realistic about what they ask schools to do.
- ◆ Schools need to stop taking on impossible responsibilities and be more assertive about what they need to achieve clear objectives.
- ◆ An emphasis needs to be placed on feeding the teachers' minds first, making their learning a priority. Mentoring, sabbaticals, continuing formal education should all be common place.
- ◆ Children need to be taught how to ask questions and then be given the power, opportunity, confidence and encouragement to do so.
- ◆ Most fundamentally and profoundly, Sarason seems to suggest a complete deinstitutionalization of schools – get kids and teachers out of the classroom and into the real world. He grants that people and organizations are not, and may never be, ready for such a change, but it is necessary. He uses the analogy of creating community services for people with developmental disabilities; peoples weren't ready, the systems weren't in place and the results were (and continue to be) imperfect, but the time had come for change

Way

The purpose of education, for Sarason, is to "...learn about self, others and the world, to live in the world of ideas and possibilities, to see the life span as an endless intellectual and personal quest for knowledge and meaning." He embraces Dewey and insists on experience as the best teaching device. Sarason wants schools to be places where *everyone* is hungry to learn ("of course learning happens here," as Barzun would put it). He agrees with Postman in the assertion that education must develop interest and meaning over rote memory – to truly teach

students and not subject matter. To achieve this end, teachers need to see their primary task as helping students to integrate their own experience with the subject matter. Additionally, for any real change to occur, education and the organization of school must be centered around the needs of teachers and not existing administrative or bureaucratic processes and systems. Those who are the center must be given the power necessary to achieve any common objectives – teachers and students.

Analysis

He is most concerned with the structure of educational systems and the impact this has on the learning process. Traditional power structures in education (misguidedly borrowed from business) have resulted in a hierarchical system that is not coherent or responsive to the needs of those it was created to serve.

Perhaps the most interesting suggestion Sarason makes is deinstitutionalization, particularly in his use of an analogy to services for individuals with disabilities. Such a community based system seemed unthinkable, cost prohibited and logistically impossible 50 years ago. However, today it is the standard model for the provision of services. Although such a profound paradigm shift seems highly unlikely, it seems reasonable, especially given the ever increasing need for special education. Existing service models could inform school systems and processes, providing for more individualized services based on needs, interests and strengths.

Sarason's model does not seem lend itself easily to standardized systems or testing. He advocates real local control and a more fluid and natural curriculum. It would seem impossible to try and justify his approach to current New York State standards or testing.

bell hooks

Summary

Teaching to Transgress

This is a series of personal essays describing hooks approach to teaching (primarily at the university level) that she describes as “transformative” or “liberatory.” She defines it as interplay of anticolonial, critical and feminist pedagogies. For her, education should be transactional, indeed a dialectic. It is also the practice of freedom, a transgression against traditional personal and cultural boundaries.

hooks suggest that the teacher/professor should be the “self-actualized healer.” Not that the classroom can or should be a group therapy session, but the instructor must be an open, willing participant in a process of sharing not just knowledge, but life experience. In this context, knowledge can be critically analyzed for bias and usefulness. Teacher and student need to see each other as more than one-dimensional, unemotional beings that come to the classroom without histories or biases. Through such a holistic model, both teacher and students can grow.

Cultural diversity is often disparaged for trying to replace one dictatorship of knowing with another. Others discount it as a fantasyland where people smile at one another mindlessly and accept all differences without challenge. It should be, hooks insists, the very opposite of both of these. True cultural diversity should encourage differences and promote intellectual challenge in pursuit of greater understanding and collective dedication to the truth.

hooks is, however, frustrated by the marginalization of a feminist critique in scholarship on the black experience and as well as a lack of understanding of the black woman’s unique experience in the feminist mainstream. She argues that these radical perspectives create their own dominant paradigms that do not stay open to alternate perspectives and aggressive criticism. She encourages scholars to fight against such ambivalence. Teachers need to be willing to

aggressively and critically analyze their own personal and political biases to understand how those biases are manifested in the classroom, i.e., what we choose to teach and how. Teachers also need to learn (or perhaps create) new learning strategies (hooks calls these “cultural codes”) to make the multicultural classroom more democratic, creating an environment where all students feel they can actively participate and enjoy the process. It is important to note (and be prepared for the reality) that such an environment actually creates more tension or even conflict. Challenging long held beliefs and transforming consciousness is difficult and sometimes painful, but that should not prevent the implementation of such strategies.

In one essay, hooks argues with Diana Fuss regarding essentialism in the classroom. Fuss cautions that many students find empirical ways of knowing analytically suspect. For hooks, both theoretical/analytical and experiential approaches need to play a combined role in learning. Teachers need to be humble enough to accept their own limited knowledge and allow for the inclusion of personal experience without anyone becoming the dominant voice. They need to create an environment where critical thinkers engage multiple locations, address diverse standpoints and allow everyone to gather knowledge fully and inclusively. She seems to be suggesting a dialectical process for learning. Such a process must also disrupt existing disciplinary boundaries and centers of authority and power. To achieve this, hooks says teachers must engage in dialogue to remove differences of perspective, race, gender, and class, et al. However, those involved must go in to the process believing that change and progress is possible.

The tension between essentialism and existentialism in the classroom is further discussed as an erasure or rejection of body over mind by many professors and intellectuals. The argument is that traditional education and scholarship suspends cultural experience by insisting that history is objective. The status quo, indeed their own position, is maintained by the perpetuation of existing pedagogical practices and historical theories. They ultimately do not want to take the

risk that the classroom will change. Additionally, conservatives argue that changes in traditional formality equates with a lack of academic seriousness. Similarly, students may have difficulty adapting to a paradigm where they have responsibility to be actively engaged when they may be used to being passive receivers of information. Students may also perceive progressive approaches as empty gestures by the teacher and not real change.

It is difficult to create such an environment where students believe and act as if the classroom is truly democratic (and hooks is concerned primarily with the university level!). No matter how the process is designed, students ultimately think the teacher's voice is the only one worth hearing. Even though they may appreciate the opportunity to speak, they need to learn how to listen to and value the perspective of others. Students may even have difficulty accepting that they themselves have something of value to offer. Language itself can be a significant barrier to creating a balanced and democratic learning environment. hooks devotes one essay to the oppressive history of English and the importance of encouraging other languages and dialectics in the classroom to underscore the value of alternate perspectives.

Yet another deterrent to open dialogue and intellectual exchange of ideas in the classroom, is the dominance of bourgeois values. Hooks sees cultural affluence a deterrent to honest discussion, blocking productive conflict and dissent. There is a natural censorship created by peer pressure to not make waves. hooks argues that liberatory and transformative pedagogical strategies can only be effective when conventional classroom dynamics are abandoned. Additionally, students should not have to culturally assimilate in the classroom by denying their class backgrounds. The dialectic that hooks hopes for in the classroom can only be achieved when unique and distinctive voices are encouraged, facilitated, offered, heard, critiqued and transformed.

Does passion have a place in the classroom? When conflicting voices are present, certainly passions will be aroused. Consistent with hooks holistic approach to learning, she believes that one cannot separate the body from the experience. She suggests that love (of subjects, ideas, students and teachers) belongs in the classroom. To believe that education is something neutral and objective that can be administered dispassionately is simply not true.

Analysis

hooks believes strongly in the power of liberatory education to change individual lives and society in general. For her, the purpose of education is to get students to cross traditional boundaries and to question the belief that domination, in all of its cultural forms (racism, sexism, class exploitation, imperialism, materialism, et al), is natural and permanent. To achieve such an end, hooks utilizes a paradigm where traditional norms and biases are questioned, critiqued, argued and finally transformed.

Although she is concerned primarily with the university level, hooks premises, albeit somewhat radical for some, could clearly be a productive paradigm with younger students., particularly those with limited experience with people and cultures beyond their own.

John Goodlad
Summary

In Praise of Education (1997)

Goodlad starts this book by expressing his kinship to the ideas of John Dewey, but asserts that *In Praise of Education* is not a critique of his “voluminous work.” He is clearly concerned with the building, sustaining and nurturing of a healthy, vital democracy as a purpose of education. He is equally concerned with the importance of a democratic nurture the processes and institutions (formal and informal) of education. This book is ultimately a treatise on the critical symbiotic, perhaps dialectic, relationship between the two.

Education is pervasive – it is how we transmit our culture to the young and indeed sustain our society. It is also for Goodlad a constant balancing act between the autonomy of the individual and the realization of his/her potential and the role of responsible citizen (echoing the primary struggle inherent in democracy). Education (when defined as human understanding or reason) experiences a similar tension in its relationship with religion. In both cases, each plays a role in “the human drama,” but neither should dominate.

When leaders who impose dogma as a means of control overtake the society, education becomes “groupthink” – a tool of complacency, conformity, fear and intolerance. We usually see such threats. Goodlad believes that our society must also beware of less overt dangers that threaten democracy; namely the crisis of millions of citizens lost to poor schooling. If schools have failed us (or, perhaps, if the state has failed in its responsibility to educate), why is this so? And what can truly be done about it? What do we really want schools to do and who will decide such questions?

Goodlad begins his search for answers by better defining education. He reasserts that it is the development of the individual in the context of community and the historical morals, knowledge and virtues of that community. “Education – the cultivation of wisdom in the cultural

context – is a moral endeavor.” It is the evaluation and choosing of preferable alternatives using the collective experience of the past. Goodlad concedes that people bring negative connotations to the word “moral,” but he insists that the connection is unavoidable. *Education does not exist without a framework of values and beliefs*. This framework is defined by the cultural context and the “past and present hierarchy of dominance among the voices of reason, hope, faith and punishment.”

Goodlad accuses the current voices of educational reform of being outmoded, input-output industrial models that excite by promising quick and easy fixes but don’t address the complexities and intractable difficulties inherent in teaching and learning. Therefore, when predictable failure occurs (quoting Sarason), teachers and students are blamed and not the unrealistic expectations or new paradigm. Goodlad alludes to Barzun in identifying the environment and some of the conditions necessary for effective education to take place; “authenticity of subject matter, readiness of students, concept of prevailing authority” in the classroom, etc.

Most people think that it is the job of schools to create society. Goodlad agrees but reminds the reader that societies create schools; therefore to create a good or virtuous school that creates good and virtuous citizens, you need a good and virtuous society to create a good and virtuous school.... This is consistent with the premise that education of the individual exists in the context of the larger community. It is a symbiotic relationship. In a nation where democracy and economic opportunity has (in large part) expanded, it is hard to make the case that the current system has utterly failed. But the case is made. Constantly. Why is this so? Goodlad cites a myriad of causes including the low status of the teaching profession, the rise of pervasive expertise (“we all know it all”), the vague constitutional role of the federal government with

regards to education, the power of special interest groups, politicization, arguments like those over the separation of church and state, etc. There is plenty of blame to go around.

Education is the responsibility of the whole of the society, not just schools. Goodlad is concerned that our culture has absconded this responsibility and has instead blamed education for its on shortcomings and failures. He suggests that we need to “make democracy safe for education...in fostering decency, civility, freedom and caring.” Creating this condition must be an ongoing and conscious process. Through the active, dialectical relationship between education and democracy, Goodlad hopes for a “common center” of inclusive interests and beliefs, which he sees as the essence of American democracy. If inclusion is part of education’s mission, it is made difficult when some of society’s members are isolated by choice (severe individualism) and others are isolated because of disadvantage and prejudice. But again, the role of education for Goodlad is to bring all of those on the periphery into the civic society. Organized education is just one way societies choose to negotiate disagreement and continue their own civilizations. Less complicated and quicker approaches like violence and dogma have also been used. Additionally, an educated citizenry alone does not insure a civil democratic society. In modern society, education competes with the marketplace, technology, media, disassociated familial systems and other factors.

A critical skill (perhaps process) needed to create, educate and maintain the kind of democracy Goodlad envisions is *disciplined conversation and civil discourse*. This is clearly not found in most media, work settings or even at the traditional haven of the family dinner table. For Goodlad, civility, morality and contextualization of social interactions can only be fostered through consistent, healthy family relationships which will in turn produce moral individuals and therefore moral communities. Children must come to school with the prerequisite skills necessary to function beyond their own natural self-interests. There has also been a loss of

“social capital” in our society. As our democracy has become more passive and bureaucratic, it has become unnecessary for people to gather and argue over policy and procedure – this is now left up to professionals. It is not necessary to interact meaningfully with others. This is perhaps the core of Goodlad's thesis – as in the philosophy of Dewey, *education and democracy are parts of the same organism that must be symbiotic*. Therefore, education as the creator of democracy (and vice versa) cannot be left to schools or bureaucracy; education is the responsibility of the entire community in all its facets of human contact. The lesson must be constantly imparted in a selfish (perhaps self-absorbed) society that the individual cannot survive without the healthy whole. Although this may sound lofty and academic, Goodlad argues that it is the opposite. For a truly sustainable democracy, civic mindedness and moral responsibility must be ubiquitous, actively and thoughtfully (*Why* are we volunteering at the shelter?) practiced and taught to the young through example. Goodlad breaks this "Educational Ecosystem" analogy down into three categories: formal (schools), nonformal (programs for specific populations) and informal education (media and interpersonal contact).

With regard to the formal, Goodlad discusses the history of the conflicting roles and expectations of schools and schooling and how these have been "reified" into the educational system. Prior to Sputnik, Goodlad argues that schools were still able to maintain their community character, allowing parents, teachers, students and administrators to interact, argue and come to consensus on priorities and pedagogy (even in the success conscious suburbs or the 1950's). After 1957, according to Goodlad, the political, market-focused, bureaucratic shift was so seismic that the educational system was fundamentally changed. Despite the appearance of local control, schools became more hegemonic and managed using business and military models (ones that Goodlad points out were ironically outmoded and discarded by their creators soon after their adoption by schools). The purpose of this shift was to return America to its scientific dominance.

Twenty-five years, later a similar call was heard but this time in hope of restoring the nation's economic superiority. With this new crisis of confidence came calls for greater local control, privatization, more focus on content and higher national standards.

Goodlad's critique of these events produces three lessons: 1) Our society tends to not learn from earlier eras and is quick to blame schools for failings of all kinds, 2) Reform movements, although perceived and sold as panaceas, cannot possibly be complete solutions in a complex society, and 3) since schools have largely become impersonal entities that cannot possibly respond to the "flavor of the decade" priorities present in political rhetoric, by the time the paradigm has changed and the next generation has graduate to the address the problem, a new one has arisen. And as always, schools have too easily taken the blame and responsibility for intractable problems that they can't possible address on their own.

All of this predictable failure of course leads to cynicism. So how can real change occur? One suggestion is to insist that proposals be removed from political agendas and that rhetoric and arguments be clarified so that people understand what they are supporting or rejected. Another is to move schooling away from its current "big business" paradigm and return it to its "cottage industry" roots. Goodlad cautions that such a decentralization may run counter to his expressed purpose of increasing tolerance, democracy and public morality. The hope is that the requisite *conversation* will occur at the local level out of necessity, even as the problems persist. Once again, changing the "locus of control" to "site-based" management should not be embraced as a magic bullet – power struggles will exist however decision-making is organized. "Humans are not endowed by nature with associational dispositions. These must be learned."

The culture and attitudes of schools teachers should not be ignored in all of this. They understandably feel under attack regardless of the nature of the charges against public education. They are forced to accept or at least adapt to changing priorities and paradigms that may run

counter to their own philosophies and practices. They are held accountable for things they cannot control. Consequently, many believe it is best not to rock the boat – "Innovation is condoned and even encouraged as long as it does not much threaten the way things are."

Goodlad uses input-output models to demonstrate the uncontrollable cultural factors that effect learning between teacher and students. The effectiveness of a single linear reform cannot be accurately ascertained, regardless of the research model. What do all schools have in common? The human connection. Goodlad suggests that the learning climate that is a "civil setting" with "caring connections" and an emphasis on the "democratic moral arts" may correlate to greater educational conditions and opportunities.

Goodlad compares education to a journey in the woods. Many, perhaps most, are looking for the shortest most efficient route out. Others look for new paths and, having enjoyed the experience, go back to explore even more. For both individual and societal gratification, the process of education cannot be sequential, progressive and down a single path. It must also give everyone the opportunity to make the trip. If the surrounding environment is imbued with a clear mission (and that mission is perceived as a journey and not a destination) is easier not to lose sight of it. This mission must be clearly stated and *maintained over time*, vaccinated from the harmful shifts in political interests.

In brass tacks terms, Goodlad turns to the "hard core of the school's ecosystem," the "classroom box." Because the primary inputs, teachers and students, take up almost all of the space, there is room for little else (although many other inputs compete for what space is left). To improve what actually goes on in the box, Goodlad reminds us of the necessary conditions of learning shared by many who write on the subject: 1. Teachers well trained in their subject area ("Once for themselves and once to teach" -- Barzun) with a variety of skills to teach in a variety of ways. 2. Successful schools tend to be small with caring relationships between all involved.

With regards to the purpose of schools, Goodlad believes that schooling must be public and compulsory. We have a common interest in creating a public. Schools must also have a clear and enforceable agreement with those who use them – students, parents and the community.

Goodlad identifies two main attributes of humankind: 1) fascination with complexity ("a major function of education is to increase our capacity to see, hear, smell and contemplate..."), and 2) "the seeking and satisfaction that arise out of identifying with and imagining about the universe" beyond ourselves. "It is the role of education in honing these attributes that inspires my praise. It requires a whole culture to teach the moral ethic of ensuring that each generation is a good parent to the next. Part of being a good parent to the next generation is being wise enough not to predict precisely the specific human attributes the well-being of that generation will require" instead of molding the young to look like the adults of today.

Diagnosis

Goodlad accuses the culture and its skewed societal priorities for blaming the failure of education on education itself. The larger ill is the lack of responsibility citizens take for maintaining critical family structures, moral virtue, civic discourse and finally educational goals. The people have given leave to the government to provide education without providing substantial and ongoing input into what is needed for children to be successful in the future. They have also given up parental responsibilities to other caregivers (including schools), the media and other cultural forces. Additionally, like Sarason, Goodlad places significant blame on schools for taking on responsibilities that they cannot possibly meet due to inadequate structures, time and resources.

Additionally, Goodlad is concerned that people do not see the value of public education and therefore do not support it sufficiently with their time, money and choices. He is concerned that the concept of a greater community and commonality is becoming lost in modern society.

Thirdly, like Sarason, Goodlad sees education as caught in a structural system not of its own design that clearly does not suit its needs. In fact, it utilizes bureaucratic and organizational structures that were created, then soon discarded by business and the military.

Remedy/Way

Education must be perceived and experienced as a journey. It is not linear, but its primary goal (of encouraging and expanding the journey) must be clear. The purpose of education must also include the very human elements of the experience. Teaching and learning are intensely transactional by nature. The most positive result of this reality is that it provides practice as well as the context for future interactions and relationships.

Additionally, education and democracy are symbiotic. They need each other to remain healthy and must actively support one another. Goodlad wants an educational system that 1) cultivates a civic-minded, democratic morality, 2) increases the capacities of future citizens to experience the world and find new ways to understand it, and 3) encourages and teaches children how to live beyond themselves.

Analysis

Goodlad is both idealistic and practical in his approach. He wants the dream of Dewey but knows, like Barzun, that the process of education, just like any human interaction, is not solvable, but full of intractable difficulties that must be addressed continuously. Although many of his approaches challenge the existing political and bureaucratic paradigms (as many of the authors' ideas do), many simply require a commitment on the part of parents, teachers and community to change that which is within their control.

Conclusion

Although the works chosen for this review discuss teaching methods, educational processes and organizational/bureaucratic systems, the central issue in all them is the *purpose* of education: Why (and subsequently how) should this society at this time in history teach its young the knowledge and skills it believes necessary for them to have? Specifically, what should that knowledge and those skills be? What should this society, at this period in time teach its children to provide them with the best opportunity for (as Neil Postman says) a productive encounter with the future? Once this is decided, how is it to be done? I believe the following list of goals (some of which conflict or are even diametrically opposed) could be culled from the authors read in this review:

- To create democratic social and economic opportunity for all by providing the level playing field of common knowledge and by promoting and demonstrating civility
- To broaden and deepen democracy through active learning and experience that mirrors the greater community
- To create a more diverse and tolerant society by valuing and teaching multiple cultural narratives
- To create a more homogeneous society by using primarily shared narratives of the American experience
- To develop true skepticism through the application of productive questioning and the examination of bias
- To challenge the prevailing cultural forces in order to maintain balance in the culture by teaching ideas contrary to those most pervasive and influential
- To develop a world view that looks beyond one's own needs by enlarging experience and understanding.

The impetus for this project was the realization that active public discourse regarding these goals is always implied but rarely had. Indeed, it is a topic that many educators themselves may not reflect upon because it is much easier to accept those goals when presented in complete form from others. Most people assume that school boards, administrators, professionals and politicians have already had this discussion, come to acceptable, reasonable and correct conclusions and have implemented policies, spending the necessary resources to accomplish the task. They then proceed to complain that kids don't learn anything in school (except for how to lie, as H.L. Mencken said) and that their property taxes are too high. Education is almost always at the top of voters' priority lists, yet schools never have the resources they need. Ambivalence reigns, but the central question remains: "If we can't agree on what kind of society we want, how can we agree on what kind of education we should provide to our children?"

Most of the authors read in this review seem to agree that all members of society need to take a greater role in the debate regarding what should be taught and why and a greater role in providing that education through a healthier cultural environment, increase civic participation, and actual substantive community involvement in the educational process. A truly functioning democracy is work. People with individual rights have a responsibility to maintain a healthy community so that their rights can be maintained. Part of that responsibility is education. However, the authors clearly do not agree on how to achieve this critical goal.

Perhaps an important element of this complicated discussion has not been addressed adequately – namely the role of children in defining educational goals.. What role should students play in defining the purpose of education? By definition, they need to be taught, instructed and introduced to the world, ideas and experiences beyond their own. Only they, however, can finally transform knowledge and experience into something constructive to them in a way that would begin to meet any of the purposes suggested above. At least, teachers, parents,

schools, communities should actively share with the young what our priorities are and why we create the schools we do. This would not only begin a dialogue with those who the system is intended to benefit, but it would also be an opportunity to demonstrate the underlying concern and commitment to children that the larger community feels for them.

Defining the true purpose of education is a difficult, profound and socially contentious undertaking. It raises the most fundamental questions of values, cultural priorities, ideology, epistemologies, fairness as well as practical issues of implementation and other concerns that accompany any great social institution. The lesson of this initial review, for me, is to remain open to the reality that the purpose of education cannot be simply stated or easily agreed upon. It must be viewed as an ongoing discussion between all shareholders that requires commitment and sincere exchange. As in democracy itself, it must be, by its very nature, a messy, uncertain, reflective, intractable, fluid, often contentious, slow, negotiated, ever-changing *experience*.

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