

From: Marion Brady mbrady2222@gmail.com
Subject: Re: A: State of the Union
Date: March 9, 2024 at 8:58 AM
To: dick.bernarddt1878@icloud.com

Thanks much, Dick.

Below is a draft I'm working on. It touches on the matter, but not very directly. I'm trying to decide where to submit it when I think it's finished.

Marion

Beyond the “Core” curriculum

By Marion Brady

On a Friday before Labor Day in 1952, I stopped at a small rural high school in northeastern Ohio to inquire about substitute teaching. I had a good job in mid-level management in industry and worked an evening shift that left me free during the day. The school was within sight of my rented farmhouse, just across what was sometimes pasture, sometimes corn. I had a wife and three kids to support, no medical insurance and little savings.

The school didn't need substitutes, but was short a teacher. I had a college degree with a major in political science in return for service in the U.S. Navy, but wasn't certified to teach. “No problem,” the school system secretary said. “If you'll sign and be here Tuesday morning at 7:45, I'll take care of the rest.” I signed.

Three high schools later, in 1962, I was asked to join the faculty of Florida State University, thanks to a reputation made possible by the fact that when I began teaching seventy-three years ago, most teachers were respected enough to be left alone. No clipboard-equipped administrator ever sat in the back of my high school classes checking boxes on a form. My near-zero recollection of anything I had studied at the secondary level, and my reluctance to be considered an “authority” led me to minimize teacher talk and try instead to create memorable experiences, problems, puzzles, projects—hands-on activities that made kids give serious thought to matters of consequence and maximized my preference for listening.

Florida State's College of Education was deeply involved in curriculum reform in general and the “inquiry” or “discovery” movement in particular—a good fit for me because I believed the curriculum adopted by America's secondary schools in 1894 that came to be called “core” was the main reason for decade after decade of basically flat academic performance.

I wrote the first of dozens of journal articles criticizing the core and outlining an alternative organizer of general knowledge in the spring of 1966. Faculty friends advised mailing it to the academic journal, *Phi Delta Kappan*.

“Expect a polite rejection,” they said, but about three weeks later a letter from *Kappan* editors said it would almost certainly be published. However, what I was advocating was so far outside mainstream thinking they had sent it to a highly respected but retired *Kappan* editor for his opinion. If he approved, they'd publish.

He approved. My article appeared in the October 1966 issue of the *Kappan*, preceded by rather lengthy editorial comment that said in part:

“Mr. Brady has devised organizing principles which give [content] a unity, coherence, and comprehensiveness far superior to any traditional course or combination of courses...”

Certain my departure from tradition would meet resistance, I hoped I was starting a long-overdue dialogue about the curriculum I believed was wasting kids’ potential and failing America. Not only was my alternative organizer of knowledge much simpler, easier to teach and easier to learn than the core curriculum, it was free of that curriculum’s theoretical and practical problems. A panel of experts —*Kappan* editors—had given it enthusiastic approval, and it was moving along with equal smoothness with sixth graders in FSU’s small, on-campus demonstration and experimental school and students in my 200-level interdisciplinary social science classes.

As far as I know, no critic, no letter to editor, no article in an academic journal, has countered my criticisms or found fault with the alternative to the core I began advocating in 1966. On the other hand, no foundation, no Regional Education Lab, no research university, no state, no county, no school system, has ever examined the lessons and other instructional materials I give away.

Which raises a question. Why does institutionalized schooling in America have no system for evaluating innovations and promoting those that show promise? Healthy social institutions improve from generation to generation as each, “stands on the shoulders,” of the preceding generation, learning from failures and building on successes. Secondary-level schooling in America has yet to demonstrate that process.

America needs a counterpart to the Center for Disease Control, with its mission considered no less critical.

The situation

About a century ago, H. G. Wells wrote that civilization is a race between education and catastrophe. As catastrophe erases doubts about the likely winner of that race, I thought threats being created by the accelerating rate of environmental, demographic, technological, social and cultural change would open doors to long-overdue dialogue about curricular issues.

It hasn’t. What it seems to have done instead, starting forty or so years ago, is allow influential leaders of business, industry, finance, foundations and other high-profile non-educators to shove professional educators aside and work through politicians at state and federal levels to promote education “reforms.” Propelling most of those reforms is a theory: Poor academic performance is a “people” problem. Good schooling is rigorous, and too many teachers and kids lack rigor. They need to be motivated, and competition motivates. That’s assumed to be proven by America’s market-based economic system, its thriving amateur and professional sports leagues, its booming entertainment industries and long history of collecting more than America’s share of patents, international awards and other evidence of excellence.

Billions have been spent to promote academic competition—high-stakes testing, schools graded A through F based on test scores, pre-test pep rallies, retention in grade for failure, teacher pay based on learner progress, No Child Left Behind, Race

to the Top, vouchers, school choice, charter schools, new ways to credential teachers, on-line schooling, publicized performance statistics.

Wrong theory. Academic performance stays basically flat. Poor performance isn't a *people* problem, it's an unaddressed *system* problem—the taken-for-granted core curriculum. Academic performance isn't going to significantly improve until the problem is satisfactorily addressed.

What's wrong with the core?

The universe that schooling is supposed to explain and help the young understand is a seamless, *systemically integrated whole*. As Leonardo da Vinci insisted hundreds of years ago, "everything connects to everything." The stand-alone subjects of the 19th Century "college prep" curriculum that continues to schedule most of the middle and high school day break that whole apart and examine some of the parts in great and useful detail, but ignore other parts, ignore how the parts fit together and ignore how they interact to create a whole far greater than their sum.

Those not-taught "ignores" aren't just important, they're absolutely essential. We generally act with good intentions but, lacking the "big picture," fail to see unintended consequences of our actions, fail to see consequences of unintended consequences, fail to see possible, probable and preferable futures.

The core curriculum's disconnected stand-alone subjects build in those problems. We've been generating electricity with nuclear energy for decades but still haven't figured out how to safely dispose of spent fuel rods. The Cross-Florida Barge Canal was 28% complete before someone realized it passed immediately over the underground river that delivers fresh water to millions of people in heavily populated south Florida. Costly dams are being removed when unanticipated environmental costs become evident.

Is my criticism of the curriculum that educated me, most readers of these words and millions more too harsh? Take a few minutes to skim [comments](#) of nationally and internationally known and respected experts.

The problem is fundamental and existential. Institutional inertia and ignorance are locking the core in ever-more-rigid place, preventing adoption of a curriculum that models the universe correctly and holistically, costs nothing to adopt, is free of the core's problems, builds on the information organizers all normal humans begin using at birth, stays within existing bureaucratic boundaries, is easily understood and put to useful work by adolescents, and enables and maximizes the relating process that continuously expands individual and collective knowledge,

An alternative organizer of knowledge

Change—environmental, demographic, technological, social, cultural—is inevitable and inexorable. To survive, societies must control change they can control, adapt to change they can't control, and anticipate probable and possible directions of change.

All three require a continuous flow of new knowledge and new uses for existing knowledge, a requirement traditional core-based schooling can't meet. It emphasizes and rewards mere learner recall of existing, standardized, secondhand information, to the neglect of the dynamic, knowledge-creating process essential to

adapting to change.

Fortunately, traditional schooling's neglect of the knowledge-creating process hasn't done us in. That's because all normal humans are born "prewired" to think systemically—to learn.

We're born. Confused and upset by the abrupt change of environment, we cry, and a nipple with food appears. We go to sleep, wake up hungry, cry, the process repeats, and *we discover a relationship*. Long before we're sent off to kindergarten, discoveries of relationships have taught us the countless details we need to live a way of life. If we're lucky and open, it can teach us several different ways of life.

That's it. Crying and nipples *relate*. Trying to crawl and parental approval *relate*. Bare feet, sand spurs and pain *relate*. Icy highway bridges and loss of steering control *relate*. Fear and racism *relate*. Solar flares and the quality of satellite communications *relate*. Customer spending and the layout of supermarkets *relate*. Societal stability and wealth distribution *relate*. Tectonic plate movement and earthquakes *relate*. Attached garages, automatic garage door openers and the decline of neighboring *relate*. Time and space *relate*.

Relating—connecting things not previously thought to relate—not recalling, is the process that makes possible an explosion of academic performance.

Accept that fact, delay teaching adolescents required specialized subjects, make middle schooling's role the steady improvement of kids' ability to expand knowledge by the relating process before sending them on, and the odds of their coping with the mess humans have made of the planet improve significantly.

Switching general education's emphasis from the single low-level, backward-looking thought process of *recalling* secondhand information to the knowledge-expanding *relating* process, fixes another major failure of traditional core-based schooling—its near-total neglect of improving the quality of the higher-order thought processes that make humanness and civilized ways of life possible.

Those processes—analyzing, abstracting, applying, categorizing, comparing, extrapolating, generalizing, hypothesizing, imagining, inferring and so on, are the tools that enable the relating process. They aren't being exercised because they're not being tested, they're not being tested because their merit depends on their quality in particular contexts, and test-scoring machines can't make qualitative judgments—can't evaluate the quality of an unanticipated but insightful hypothesis or an unusual analogy—products of deep, original thought.

The knowledge-expanding process

"Relating" is the beginning of learning, but the brain's built-in ability to generate new knowledge offers more. When attention fixes on a *matter of interest*, ("matters of interest" are essential but often missing in school), the human brain relates and simultaneously integrates, systemically, five kinds of information—the elements of "stories:"

- location/setting/environment

- actor(s) and/or object(s) involved
- action(s)/action patterns
- cause of actions/motivations/driving forces
- relevant time factors/systemic changes

Those five kinds of information, *not school subjects, not academic disciplines, not fields of study*, are our primary organizers of information. Already systemically related and integrated by the brain's attention, they structure a half-dozen word phone text to a friend about meeting for lunch, or millions of pages, words, diagrams, formulae, measurements, graphs, algorithms, etc., for building a colony on the moon or Mars.

The five are the "girders" of the structures of meaning, sense and language that all societies create. Cumbersome, idiosyncratic interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary strategies for describing or analyzing complex, real-world matters are unnecessary. The five organizers, continuously extended, elaborated and refined, do it all, encompassing every kind of *system*.

Learners attempting to understand x or y or z can use the five categories to define, elaborate and refine their questions. If, for example, they're investigating traffic patterns around their school, they know to ask, "Have they changed over the last five years? [Relevant time factors] If so, why? [Causes] What are relationships between pedestrians and vehicles during peak traffic periods? [Action] What controls each kind of traffic? [Causes] More examples.

The *simplicity* of the organizers—just five rather than subjects beyond count; *efficiency* stemming from automatic systemic integration; *comprehensiveness* stemming from removing the arbitrary, artificial walls that compartmentalize knowledge; *compactness* stemming from the above—all combine to allow systems-based instruction to do in a couple of hours or so a day what the core curriculum's stand-alone subjects can't do at all—*give every normal kid a working understanding of the knowledge-expanding sense-making relating process*.

Taking action

Unfortunately, the world is a heavily damaged planet with an ever-accelerating rate of change, populated by societies with differing, incompatible worldviews, technologies capable of destroying life on earth nearly instantaneously, and no agreed-upon plan to make humans wise enough fast enough to turn things around.

We need a plan to avoid catastrophe, and it's not necessary to start from scratch. The middle school movement of the 1960's offers the most direct path to meaningful, lasting improvement in academic performance, not just for middle schools but for all general education beyond the primary and elementary levels. It had just about everything known about effective schooling going for it—a commitment to active, cooperative *learning by doing*, stress-free small-group dialogue encouraging thinking "out loud," learner writing to clarify thought, team teaching, shared teacher planning periods, flexible scheduling, respect for learner differences, "communities" of learners, daily physical activity.

The movement understood the necessity of integrating information to deal with real-world problems but stumbled on the difficulties of integrating school subjects. That problem disappears when fields of study are modeled correctly as systemically integrated working parts of the structures of knowledge societies create.

Middle schooling hasn't escaped the damage done by the last forty or so years of simplistic reforms, but middle schooling's position paper, "This we believe," remains the most sophisticated foundation for building a healthy institution that produces what's essential for humankind's survival—generations each of which is wiser than the generation that taught it.

Stop dumbing America down with standardized testing or any other activity that privileges recalling over other thought processes. Make the discovery and exploration of relationships between and among aspects of reality middle schooling's primary aim for an hour or so a day. Use the remaining hours for identifying individual learner potential and devising ways to develop it. Do those three doable things and the greatest teaching and learning resource available—what's in the heads of millions of non-standard kids—can be put to real-world work.

Help the young identify and develop what they possess. From that huge store of varied experience and perspective will come the ideas that pull humankind's fat out of the fire, if that's still possible. It will also help us understand, accept, appreciate and capitalize on a major issue that currently divides us—human differences. We fear what survival requires us to embrace.

How do I know?

"Far outside mainstream thinking," said *Phi Delta Kappan* editors when they were trying to decide whether to publish my 1966 article. Decades of failed efforts to get schools to pilot instructional activities that actually require kids to *think*, say it continues to be true that my views are considered too far out to take seriously.

In the late 1980's, I sent a book manuscript titled, "*What's Worth Teaching?*" to the State University of New York Press. They gave blind copies of the manuscript to reviewers along with a three-page form asking for opinions and a recommendation: Publish? Don't publish?

When the forms were returned to SUNY Press, they forwarded them to me with reviewers' names removed. The reviews were inconclusive. One answered none of the questions on the form, simply wrote, "Almost pure shlock," in longhand on the last page. Another reviewer said not only should my manuscript be published; it should be read by every schoolboard member in America.

SUNY Press published the book in 1988 as part of Philosophy of Education Series. A couple of years later, Books for Educators bought rights to co-publish it, then in 2019, that publisher offered to give me copyrights if I would agree to revisit the book, change anything I felt might improve it, then submit it to a publisher better equipped to promote it.

I did minor editing, changed the title to "*What's Worth Learning?*" submitted it to Information Age Publishing, Inc., and they published the book in 2011. A few years later I bought back copyrights from Information Age for \$3,000 and put it online as an E-Book, free for the downloading, along with links to hundreds of "active learning" lessons consistent with the views I've expressed above. all downloadable

learning lessons consistent with the views I've expressed above, are available free for teachers and mentors to use with their own students.

Those hundreds of active learning activities come free, courtesy of Prentice-Hall, Inc. (P-H). I'll explain:

The late Michael McDaniell, once head editor of P-H's K-12 Educational Books Division, read my 1966 *Kappan* article and contacted me to ask if he and James Guiher, Vice-President of P-H's Educational Books Division, could come to Florida for talks about a possible project. They came, and about a year later, a project began that would last for seven years and involve all of P-H's subject-matter specialists, their college-level anthropology and history authors, thirty-nine competitively selected middle school teachers and their students from coast to coast, my younger brother, Howard, and me.

Dozens of working professional educators, working full time, created, tested, revised and refined the "active learning" instructional activities for *Idea and Action in World Cultures*, and *Idea and Action in American History*.

Mr. McDaniell, aware of institutionalized schooling's resistance to change, planned to restrict sales of the books to schools and school systems agreeing to week-long workshops for small groups of three or four teachers. The long-range aim: Cope with change by creating generations of learners who, as adults, would consistently be wiser than those who taught them.

Health problems required McDaniell to resign and move south, and P-H's Marketing Department, unprepared to follow through on his plan of required workshops for book buyers, assigned all copyrights for lessons and supporting materials to my brother and me. To encourage their use, we organized the lessons by school subject but kept the "active" emphasis unchanged and the lessons free for downloading by teachers and mentors to use with their own students.

The lessons can be accessed here:

marionbrady.com

On Fri, Mar 8, 2024 at 4:53 PM <dick.bernarddt1878@icloud.com> wrote:

Here's my blog about State of the Union, which I watched last night in it's entirety: <https://thoughtstowardsabetterworld.org/the-state-of-the-union/>