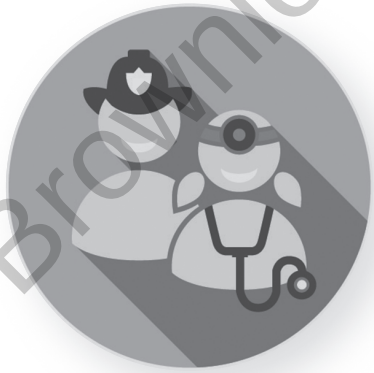
Solutions for Modern Learning

Make School Meaningful—And Fun!



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Thinking About Student Goals

Give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking; learning naturally results.

—John Dewey

In 1910, John Dewey tried to convince Americans that school needed to be more than the filling of an empty vessel. Many philosophers before him—Plato, Locke, Hume, Kant, and others—pushed hard for the idea that people learn by doing, not by listening. But unfortunately, at more or less the same time that Dewey was promoting his ideas about progressive education, far more powerful forces were at work.

In 1892, the president of Harvard University, Charles Eliot, and his friends decided to create a high school curriculum for the entire United States to follow. Dewey's ideas were ignored. The 1892 curriculum has now been around for so long that it seems there is no changing it. This is in part because many vested interests in education want the curriculum to stay exactly the same, except with more testing (Dexter, 1906; Hertzberg, 1988; National Education Association of the United States, 1894).

In today's schools, students do not learn by doing, and they learn exactly what Eliot decided that they should learn. Learning by doing requires something you are trying to accomplish (like riding a bike) and gradually getting better at it. Instead, as Eliot suggested, school is about academic subjects. Success means memorizing facts. There is no doing.

In *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) writes about the high school curriculum, which is dominated by facts and truths that all students must learn.

> There is no such thing as educational value in the abstract. The notion that some subjects and methods and that acquaintance with certain facts and truths possess educational value in and of themselves is the reason why traditional education reduced the material of education so largely to a diet of predigested materials. (p. 46)

The Common Core State Standards, the latest in reform/testing movements, is an attempt to ensure that the same 1892 curriculum is taught to every student, regardless of his or her interests, personal needs, or future aspirations. In the words of Bill Gates: "Common Core is 'a technocratic issue,' akin to making sure all states use the same type of electrical outlet" (as cited in Simon, 2014). Gates continues with this analogy:

> "Standardization is especially important to allow for innovation in the classroom," said Gates, who used an analogy of electrical outlets. "If you have fifty different plug types, appliances wouldn't be available and would be very expensive. . . . But once an electric outlet becomes standardized, many companies can design appliances and competition ensues, creating variety and better prices for consumers." (as cited in Layton, 2014)

In other words, Gates wants to plug every student into a place where he or she can work as an effective part of the machine. No differences will be tolerated. Curiously, this was exactly the plan in

1900 when United States schools were designed. The goal then was to create compliant factory workers.

In 1905, Ellwood Cubberley—the future dean of education at Stanford—wrote that schools should be factories in which raw products (children) are formed into finished products. Children should be manufactured like nails, and government and industry are the ones who provide specifications for manufacturing (Sears & Henderson, 1957).

Of course, Dewey was out of step with the forces of his time in education. This would be fine if we could say that was then, but education is different now. However, with the exception that we have no jobs for compliant factory workers, education doesn't look much different. Schools are still oppressive places, and the curriculum is exactly the same as it was.

What can we build to replace this ancient idea of education based on memorization, dull repetitive work, and testing? Why can't we build something new? Once again, Dewey (1916) sees the path: "Were all instructors to realize that the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked" (p. 207).

There is no reason to make students memorize historical events or physics formulas. There is no reason to teach them to balance chemical equations. They needn't read Dickens, and they don't have to understand Shakespeare. They don't need to know the Pythagorean theorem, nor must we ram calculus down their throats.

I know these are strong statements, and many who read this will find them objectionable. Many readers are likely to have graduated college and will have spent time doing everything I just said wasn't necessary. Of course, students gain knowledge from studying what we teach in high school. But what do they lose?

For one thing, students lose interest. They may like some of the subjects they study, but they rarely like all of them. They lose the possibility of attaining practical skills because no one ever teaches them any. Adults have plenty of time to discover Dickens. And if they become curious about the social conditions in England in the 1800s, they can always find out on their own. In high school, I was assigned to read *A Tale of Two Cities*. I had no idea what it was about. Wasn't there anything else, anything more relevant, that I could study?

We can help and encourage students to learn what they want to learn. We can offer choices and make them as appealing as possible, so students will want to try new activities and experiences. This is what education should be about. Now is the time. The technology we need to accomplish that goal is here.

If we are going to design new curricula for K–12, it is reasonable to ask what should drive the selection of those curricula. In 1892, the driver was the desires of elite universities. Unfortunately, this is still true today.

What Harvard Wants

The following excerpt is taken directly from the Harvard University (n.d.) website. You may choose to take the term *recommend* here lightly; you might get into Harvard without having done all that's described, but it would be a very special case.

> We hope you will read our thoughts about choosing high school courses that will provide a strong base for a liberal arts education. But in summary, we recommend:
>
> - The study of English for four years: close and extensive reading of the classics of the world's literature
> - Four years of a single foreign language
> - The study of history for at least two, and preferably three years: American history,

European history, and one additional advanced history course

- The study of mathematics for four years . . .
- The study of science for four years: physics, chemistry, and biology, and preferably one of these at an advanced level
- Frequent practice in the writing of expository prose

Children have goals of their own, of course. These goals don't necessarily include studying physics or learning European history. The goals children actually have develop over time in response to their reactions to the world around them. Very young children typically have the goal of taking shiny objects and putting them in their mouths, for example. They may learn over time that this is not a great idea, or they might continue to do this over their lifetime. But, one way or another, children observe the world and react to it. They develop new goals every day.

For example, a child typically only wants to play soccer if he or she sees someone (maybe an older sibling, a parent, or other children in the park) playing soccer or if someone encourages him or her to play soccer. These goals don't just spontaneously come to mind. The major determinants of a child's goals are his or her parents, who regularly try to set goals for their child partly based on their own basic desires and feelings.

This brings us to the great conundrum of curriculum design. Should curriculum designers be the ones to decide what students need to learn? As a society, this idea is never up for debate. *Adults know what children should learn, and children will be taught those subjects.* This simple sentence is what is wrong with today's schools. The idea is so taken for granted that you may never have heard anyone suggest that maybe the schools and the parents have no idea what they are doing.