DUMB IDEAS WON'T CREATE SMART KIDS

Straight Talk About Bad School Reform, Good Teaching, and Better Learning

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Hawker Brownlow
EDUCATION

Contents

Introduction

If you are reading this book, it is very likely that you work in education, and so both within and outside your work, people probably need or want to know your opinion about the latest reforms. What's your reaction when somebody asks for your opinion about how schools and students are doing? How do you feel about reports about the poor achievement of U.S. students, from low international rankings among industrialized nations on the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) test (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013a)[1] to graduation rates of only 62% and 51% among African American and Native American students, respectively (Swanson & Lloyd, 2013),[2] to percentages of college freshmen taking remedial courses as high as 40% in Ohio (Ohio Board of Regents, 2013) and 51% in New Mexico (New Mexico Higher Education Department, 2014)?

Which education reforms first came to your mind when you saw "Dumb Ideas" in the title of our book? What do you say when a family member wants to know your ideas about the new Race to the Top reform, the Common Core State Standards, computerized standardized tests, using test scores as significant factors in teacher and principal evaluation, and laws that encourage the rapid growth of charter schools? What is your opinion about other reforms, such as alternative teacher certification and longer school days? How do you react when you are first approached to work on these issues as part of a school, district, state, or national committee to improve student achievement?

Some of the typical responses we encountered are:

"These changes are wonderful. It's about time."
"Idiotic. It will never work."
"Yuck. It's unfair."
"Of course. Duh."
"What a dumb idea!"
"What a smart idea!"

prototypes parallel two metaphors for understanding how people learn and should teach: the predominant Conduit and Empty Vessel metaphors and the secondary Growth metaphor. We will describe these two education models, including the linked groups of metaphors and prototypes in turn, starting with the currently predominant one built on the Conduit and Empty Vessel metaphors for learning and teaching. After we describe each education model, we will explain why we believe that the one based on the Conduit and Empty Vessel metaphors is the predominant model underlying our current educationalese.

The Empty Vessel and Conduit Metaphors for Teaching and Learning

The predominant mental model for learning and teaching has many labels, including "factory," "transmission," "traditional," "mechanic," "authoritarian," and "banking." All these labels refer to a model composed of two sets of primary metaphors: the Conduit metaphor for communication and the Empty Vessel metaphor for the brain or mind.

The Conduit metaphor for communication was most likely first named and described by Michael Reddy in 1979, and developed in detail by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their books *Metaphors We Live By* (2003) and *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999). It has been applied to teaching and learning by many people, including the authors (see, e.g., Haas, 2007a, 2007b, 2008; Haas & Fischman, 2010). Possibly the most notable description of this type of schooling is Freire's criticism of the banking model of education in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1993), though his book precedes the work of Reddy and of Lakoff and Johnson, and does not name the Conduit metaphor explicitly.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) describe the elemental metaphors that together make up the Conduit metaphor of communication this way:

> Ideas or Meanings are Objects
> Linguistic Expressions (such as words) are Containers
> Communication is Sending.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) explain the process this way: "the speaker puts ideas (objects) into words (containers) and sends them (along a conduit) to a hearer who takes this idea/objects out of the words/containers" (p. 10). Applied to education, an additional elemental metaphor is added to the list: The Brain (or mind) is an Empty Vessel.

Freire (1970/1993) does a good job of describing how the Conduit metaphor, with the addition of the Brain is an Empty Vessel metaphor, have impacted education: In his critique of "transmission" teaching, he

StudentsFirst created 24 policies of interest, of which 12 are anchor policies that receive more weight in the Policy Report Card. The 12 anchor policies include the following high-score criteria:

- Teacher and principal evaluations of which at least 50% is based on meeting specific student growth targets
- That evaluations are not subject to collective bargaining agreements
- That states allow alternative certification for all grades and subjects and the demonstration of "subject-matter/content knowledge in the area(s) taught through a content exam" (p. 57), but does not require any knowledge of child development or pedagogy
- Merit pay
- Annual school report cards based on student achievement scores and parent triggers to take over what are determined to be low-performing schools
- Student vouchers and supports for charter school expansion
- Direct state and/or mayoral control of what are determined to be low-performing public schools
- No class size limits on grades 4 and above
- Replacement of educator pension plans with "portable retirement benefits" (p. 64)

The StudentsFirst policy agenda fits perfectly with the factory model of schooling and its underlying Conduit, Empty Vessel, and Freedom is Lack of Constraint metaphors. For example, the proposals for alternative certification, removing evaluations from collective bargaining agreements, increasing vouchers and charter schools, and replacing pensions with "portable retirement benefits" are all forms of removing restraints from the education system. Further, the emphasis on content knowledge over pedagogical and child development knowledge and the proposal to remove class size limits makes sense if teaching and learning are merely the delivery and direct storage of timeless, universal, capital-T Truths. In Chapter 5, we will discuss the current state of research evidence linking these reforms with improvements in student achievement. But for now, let's make an easier comparison. How do the StudentsFirst state policy rankings compare with the readily available results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013b)? And, further, how did StudentsFirst react to the comparison?

Rather badly, on both counts. It turns out that the 2014 StudentsFirst Policy Report grades are in strong disagreement with the most recent NAEP test scores (NCES, 2013b). For example, the top five StudentsFirst Policy Report Card (2014) states—Louisiana, Florida, Indiana, Rhode Island, and

Figure 3.3. Levels of Progression from Novice to Expert

	Howell	Kelly
Unconscious Incompetence	This is the stage where you are not even aware that you do not have a particular competence.	You know what that is: You don't know that you don't know what it takes to win. You get that blank stare when you say, "Listen, pay attention to detail. Do this right. Go to class. Be on time."
Conscious Incompetence	This is when you know that you want to learn how to do something but you are incompetent at doing it.	You know what Coach wants from you on a daily basis. You now know what the formula is, but you can't do it yet, because you have so many bad habits. You can't seem to finish the drill. You can't seem to pay attention to detail.
Conscious Competence	This is when you can achieve this particular task but you are very conscious about everything you do.	You now know the message, you are able to do it, but it's really hard. It's hard for you to stay on task. That's where great coaching comes in and keeps you focused, keeps you involved in the process. It's not, "Hey, I want to be a champion." Everybody wants to be a champion. What are you going to do about it? Conscious competence is that area where coaches really need to remind their players every single day what it takes to be a champion.
Unconscious Competence	This is when you finally master it and you do not even think about what you have to do, such as when you have learned to ride a bike very successfully.	That's the habit forming; you know what to do, and you know how to do it every single day. You don't have to be reminded about what it takes to win on a consistent basis because it's been instilled in you. It's been instilled by your family, your parents. It's been instilled in this community. It's been instilled by your coaches. When you want to win the championship, when you want to win them all, you need to get to that level of unconscious competence because then it just happens naturally.

Source: Arnold, 2010; Howell, 1986, pp. 22–23

Base school structures on student learning, not vice versa. To support this type of individual, student growth–based learning—in this example, building a series of lessons upon an open-ended project—the structure of the school itself will likely need to change. Larry Cuban's promotion of non-age-graded schools can be part of this change. Another part of this change can be flipped classrooms and digital learning, where videos and other web-based content provide initial exposure to the subject matter outside of school, freeing teachers to challenge and guide students in group problem-solving activities when they are together during class time.[11]

The Lindsay Unified School District in California is currently working to implement this type of learning structure districtwide (Banchero, 2014). Lindsay is building a curriculum, assessment, learning activity, professional development, and integrated technology system designed to promote and enable each student to work at his or her own pace. The system includes interdisciplinary, open-ended projects and collaborative problem-solving activities, plus direct practice in developing specific disciplinary skills and content knowledge. The Lindsay Unified School District calls it their "Performance Based System" because "students work at their performance level and advance through the curriculum when they have demonstrated proficiency of the required knowledge or skills."[12] In essence, the district is working to enable all their schools from kindergarten through grade 12 to become non-age-graded. This is a daunting task, indeed, and one that the Lindsay Unified School District supports with near constant reference to individual student growth and how learning styles and timelines are different for every child.[13] There is, for example, a page on the district website devoted specifically to understanding education through a "growth mindset," with resources for teachers, administrators, and parents.[14]

To enable this individual student growth, schooling will likely no longer look like the predominant prototype of separate classrooms of single teachers standing by the whiteboard in front of a room of 30 or more students who are sitting in rows of individual seats doing more or less the same thing. Instead, there will be multiple activities occurring simultaneously that involve various levels of student choice, alternative learning spaces, collaborative work, and technology.

Require and provide in-depth, extensive, experiential teacher training. For teachers to effectively enable individual student learning growth when they are responsible for a group or groups of students within a mass education system and through multiple learning modalities, they must be experts in their disciplines, in learning, and in pedagogy. As we described in the previous chapter, great teachers are level 5 experts, the highest level of expertise there is, who work in a profession that David Berliner (2002a) describes as

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Conclusion

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We are the students of today
attending the schools of yesterday
being taught by the teachers of the past
with methods from the Middle Ages
to solve the problems of the future![1]

We present this saying, along with a photograph of some of today's students.[2] The saying's lament is apt: We teach today as if nothing has changed in the past century—not our students, not our society, and not our understanding of the human mind and learning. And then, we blame everything and everyone except the outdated policies and practices when they do not result in students who are economically successful, good citizens, healthy, and happy. How MAD is that?

Can't we do better? We certainly think so.

In this book, we have been making the case for improving education policy and practice by applying what we now know about how we learn and think in these ways:

1. Continually paying attention to the unconscious fast thinking dimensions of learning and teaching in promoting effective policies and practices;
2. Actively abandoning the Conduit and Empty Vessel metaphors for learning and promoting the Growth metaphors instead; and
3. Managing our tendencies toward the MADness of *rightly wrong* thinking that derives from presuming that the comfortable internal logic of a fast-thinking education model means that it is also an

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