

L. Thomas Hopkins

The WAS vs. the IS Curriculum

The IS curriculum celebrates the experiential. The WAS curriculum relies on book learning. Which is better for today's learner?

In 1922, after receiving my Harvard degree, I was teaching in the summer school at Chautauqua, New York. That summer, Harry Barrett, Director of the University of Colorado's School of Education, offered me the position of Associate Professor at the university and my former professor and good friend, Alexander Inglis, advised my acceptance with the following words:

"Today all educators are lost in the forest of tradition. You are a way-out radical in your thinking both in psychology and education. You have found a path out of the woods into the sunlight of reality with a

vision of how to provide a better educational opportunity for everyone. Don't explain too rapidly your sunlight world to those who are in the wilderness and have no exit path. You must stay in the forest with them and blaze a new trail together. You know the direction and I hope they will follow you. If you try to move them too rapidly they will persecute you. Your purpose is to help pupils obtain a better education so you cannot afford an emotional, nondeliberative fight with the powerful, conservative opposition."

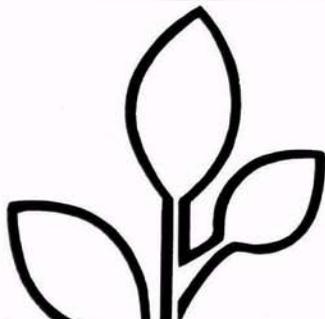
I never considered myself a radical, but rather, only a realist who was trying to explain the evolutionary, inherited life process to traditionalists whose psychology was a nonliving atomistic approach to learning and teaching. But I accepted this good advice and tried to follow it to the best of my ability. The great problem

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was to find a satisfactory approach for traditional educators. But with a master's degree in history, I knew how thinking people or unbelievers were persecuted during the Middle Ages, so I decided to follow my convictions so directly and confidently as to entice the scouts of the conservative opposition by their own personal growth and liberation.

During the 1920's, when many school systems had curriculum revision programs, I was invited by the superintendent of a large midwestern city to give an address to his school personnel at a Friday evening dinner meeting. I arrived the evening before so as to meet him the following morning and visit some schools during the day.

He greeted me affably then sat at his desk while I took the visitor's chair. Soon he began to explain how efforts were proceeding to revise the curriculum in the city's schools when

I interrupted to ask the question, "What is your curriculum?" He pressed a button and an alert secretary rushed in. He said, "Get me a copy of the curriculum in arithmetic we just published." Soon it was on his desk. Handing it to me he said, "This is our latest course of study." I examined it briefly, noticed it was an excellent job produced in his high school print shop, then laid it—without comment—on his desk.

Shortly, he looked at me and said, "We have a more recent one." A push on the button and a word to the secretary, "Get me that mimeographed course in science that was just finished." I examined it and laid it beside the other one without comment. Finally he said, "We have some courses in the production stage." Again responding to the pushed button, the secretary produced rough outlines in three other subjects. I looked them over

and laid them on the table with no comment. Now his agitation had reached the point where he heatedly said, "Don't you like these courses? What is the matter with them?"

"Oh, yes I like them. Nothing is wrong with them that I can see but they have nothing to do with my question," I replied. "I asked you what IS your curriculum—which is what takes place in *live* pupils—and you show me *dead* subject matter."

"What do you mean?" he asked, as he paced the room. "Haven't you produced revised courses of study for Denver, Long Beach, and many other places?"

"Certainly," I replied, "but I knew they represented a WAS not an IS curriculum." So, I explained the difference to him and he agreed that I should repeat my explanation that evening to the staff.

The WAS curriculum is centered in *book learning* or acquiring from books the now dead knowledge of formerly live people. This is rearranged to suit the value judgments of those who reorganize it in textbooks or courses of study. The IS curriculum is centered in or *is* the study of the firsthand experiences of pupils. This can cover a broad or limited area and may be examined by open or restricted communication to locate many or limited possibilities for creative self-selection by each pupil of knowledge valuable to him or her. So, the IS curriculum is what the teacher causes pupils to do to themselves while they are associated together. In other words, it is what each pupil can take from the teacher-pupil relationship to help him or her better understand and develop the self, for growth toward the highest possible maturity is the direction of all living organisms.

Schools have always been and are now promoting a WAS curriculum since it is based upon a mythical,

metaphysical, mentalistic, externally controlled philosophy of life that denies rather than promotes normal pupil growth and development, for that was its original traditional purpose that has never been changed. The IS curriculum is biological and holistic; it deals with the *whole pupil* who develops through internal control of the learnings that he or she self-selects to recreate into the self for personal growth. These two concepts are so different as to not move in the same life orbit.

The WAS curriculum was promoted during the 1920's by persons who concentrated on revising or

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bringing up-to-date existing subject matter (mathematics in 1920, classics in 1925, modern foreign languages in 1928, social studies in 1930, and others). Most persons who were prominent in curriculum revision programs in school systems at that time were subject-matter oriented. Yearbooks of national committees, research studies by national organizations, and other publications of this period were similarly oriented. All such revisions were improvements, since the looser, more flexible subject matter allowed each pupil to self-select more fully what he or she could use regardless of what the student returned to the teacher for credit. Thus, the damage to students inflicted by rigidity was slightly reduced.



"The WAS curriculum is centered on book learning or acquiring from books the now dead knowledge of formerly live people." Photo: The Rouse Company.

The Progressive Education Association (PEA), so prominent in the 1920's, developed only a very human form of the WAS curriculum directed toward new methods of teaching revised subject matter, with a hope for the concomitant outcome of character education as designated by so-called cultural controls.

The Eight Year Study group of the PEA refused to abandon emphasis on subject knowledge for purposes of college admission, even though some of the college presidents and a few other representatives were willing to experiment with self-development criteria for college admission. So, the possibility of an IS curriculum sponsored by a national organization was lost through the early conditioning by parents and teachers of the attending representatives, who wished to maintain their status as academic scholars at the expense of the development of students.

In this century the IS curriculum was first promoted by John Dewey in his elementary school at the

University of Chicago. While the practice of the IS curriculum was difficult, he explained its underlying theory in 1902. In 1888, Lucy Wheelock founded what later became Wheelock College, an institution to educate teachers for nursery, kindergarten, and elementary schools in the approach of the IS curriculum. Hopkins (Denver in 1923), Cocking (St. Louis in 1925), and Emil Lange (Long Beach in 1925) were some of the earlier adherents to the ideals of the IS curriculum.

Many progressive educators of this period were biconceptual, using the subject-matter concept in all regular school subjects and personal growth as the direction in other activities. The foremost advocate of this practice was Harold Rugg of Lincoln School and Teachers College, who revised the content of history, geography, and civics to become "social studies" and expected pupils to meet his new demands presented in his way, in his textbooks, and to his standard. Yet, in the so-called

creative arts, he gave pupils freedom to express themselves in their own ways through the materials, toward their own growth, by their own standards. And he never would admit, to me at least, the inconsistency in his viewpoint. Yet, I would concede that the "feeling maturity" students developed through the arts would enable each pupil to reduce—with old or new material—the damage inflicted by the subject-area demands.

While advocates of the WAS curriculum emphasized methods of teaching each subject, the underlying psychology of learning was designated as reductionism, since desired knowledge was broken down into small units or atomistic fragments to be pressed into the cortex of the brain by conditioned response, connectionism, behaviorism, or other forms of external control. The development of a sound emotional base to support normal creative activity of the cortex was ignored. Pupils sufficiently disturbed by such teaching methods were classified as slow learners or nonconformers, to be subjected to more penetrating mistreatment. Thus was the growth to maturity of everyone, teachers and pupils alike, powerfully curbed.

The psychology underlying the IS curriculum is the inherited *biological growth, development, and learning process* all in one, and the same for all life purposes. It begins with the fertilized egg and is used by "the life" to cope with all problems until life ceases. Since this psychology is dynamic and emergent within the whole life, it is frequently called organismic or holistic, but if one looks toward the outcome, it is sometimes designated as self- or personality-psychology.

"The IS curriculum is centered in or is the study of the firsthand experiences of pupils."



The chief characteristics of this inherited, normal process—expanding, differentiating, and integrating—are best studied in prenatal life where they operate with the least interference from outside persons. Immediately after birth, each neonate begins to lay down in his autonomic nervous system the feelings or emotional tendencies to action that later affect greatly the operation of the cortex of the brain both in need for thought or willingness to think, as well as in the quality of the deliberative judgments or actions.

When signs of mental functioning appear, the child should be guided in managing *whole life*



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experiences so as to increase perception, locate hidden factors, and create new meanings. The child should examine experiences carefully with the help of sympathetic self-others—agemates or adults—to make the best possible critical choices of behavior. As soon as the consequences of his or her actions appear, the child should reexamine behavior with the understanding adults, who encourage and guide the learner toward sounder future judgments. Thus, does the young individual act as a whole person in resolving his or her whole life experiences and in making the ever wider, sounder developmental decisions necessary for maturity. Moreover, the quality of the life process that adults help

the child understand, examine, accept, and improve is the determining factor in shaping his or her positive growth level.

The central internal control in this growth process is the genetic pattern or codescript that is different for every individual life, except in the case of identical twins, who develop from the same fertilized egg. This pattern sets individual limitations in the area of expansion, limitations that affect the types of differentiations and the levels of wholeness or integration which the life can attain, with the aid or hindrance of the external environment.

The genetic pattern of the WAS curriculum—which controlled education from elementary through graduate schools—is not capable of educating people to differentiate the quality of self-development necessary to prepare them to manage successfully the affairs of an overpopulated world. We have always had in America a frontier type of democracy, that is, a rugged individualism that allows us to dominate others and exploit the resources of the physical environment. These are normal differentiations from the traditional genetic pattern—differentiations leading toward a foreseeable end: the inevitable destruction of man and his present world.

A new social and educational codescript is necessary if man is to differentiate his cooperative interactive potential and thus achieve the level of self-development necessary to see his world as a unitary wholeness in all of its human and material aspects. This can come about only through the IS curriculum, with its normal process of learning. Let us hope that educators can furnish the leadership to redirect the existing curriculum through the new codescript. It is not yet too late. [F]

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