



# General Education— An Antidote to the Patchwork Curriculum



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*General education and the use of imagination can give unity and coherence to the overall design of education.*

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The revival of interest in general education is a promising antidote to the patchwork curriculum. And, indeed, we do confront a patchwork curriculum dating back, Cremin reports, to the 1870s in St. Louis. The massive reforms efforts of the 1960s were "micro" in nature, simply replacing "old parts with new." Little, if any, attention was given to education's overall design in a "macro" sense. When such attention is given, the general education component comes to the front.

The concept of general education is characterized by simple solutions to complex problems. A current example is the "back-to-basics" — "minimum-competency testing" movement. The popularity of this movement is obvious with the widespread mandating of minimum-competency testing by state legislatures. These popular

efforts represent yet another micro approach to the curriculum design problem. We still are left with no theoretical or practical basis for helping students unify their learning experiences.

## Promising Alternatives in Higher Education

The recent revisions of undergraduate general education requirements at Harvard University introduce a promising alternative to the patchwork curriculum. Although not highly innovative, Harvard has initiated widespread interest in the reformation of general education programs. It is too early to know the results of this effort and how it might indirectly affect curriculum developments at other institutions and in secondary schools. Thus far, revisions in general education

programs at the higher education level do not have a good track record for integrating learning. Grant and Riesman describe the intellectual tenor of many so-called interdisciplinary efforts:

... the conversation is a sandwich with little interpenetration among the layers of sociology, philosophy, or economics. And like a sandwich, multidisciplinary occasions are usually short meals for transitory gatherings.<sup>1</sup>

Other efforts in general education turn from reorganizing curriculum materials to coordinating the various modes of inquiry that characterize the several disciplines. Riesman criticises these practices as parochial. "They (students) may still go through their four years with limited exposure to the variety of styles that exist in the world from which they as individuals could profit."<sup>2</sup>

### A Modest Proposal

Though a few general education programs show some promise, another approach — a genuine antidote to the patchwork curriculum — remains to be conceptualized and demonstrated in practice. Extending the idea of "modes of inquiry," there is a cognitive process — a manner of perception — that suggests unity for the curriculum and for the general education component. This process, which is more aesthetic than academic or cognitive, involves a fuller development of imagination. When developed, one's imagination can bring the curriculum into a coherent, cohesive whole. Dewey elaborates this fundamental relationship:

Yet if we judge its (imagination's) nature from the creative works of art, it designates a quality that animates and pervades all processes of making and observation. It is a way of seeing and feeling things as they compose an integral whole. It is the large and generous blending of interests at the point where the mind comes in contact with the world. When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination. When the new is created, the far and strange become the most natural inevitable things in the world. There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe, and this adventure is, in its measure, imagination.<sup>3</sup>

Norman Cousins also underscores the potential of imagination as a unifying element when he describes the way it functions in understanding history:

This gift of imagination, combined with knowledge, enables you to do more than to participate only theoretically in the lives of those who have lived before you. Through the art of creative reading, for example, the panorama of history can be spread before you. The grand individual experience in history can be reborn and fulfilled in your imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Like curriculum materials or cognitive styles as integrating elements in the general education component, the role of imagination in developing an effective alternative causes difficulties. But imagination is a cognitive "activity" that can be refined. Association with imaginative individuals is crucial to such development. The arts and the humanities serve as major resources in nourishing this kind of association.

In effect, this alternative places great emphasis on the need for teachers to be prepared in ways that produce highly imaginative individuals. The implication for teacher education now caught up in PBTE programs is apparent. Whitehead acknowledges the relationship this way:

Imagination is a contagious disease. It cannot be measured by a yard, or weighed by the pound, and then delivered to the students by members of the faculty. It can only be communicated by a faculty whose members themselves wear their learning with imagination.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gerald Grant, David Riesman. *The Perpetual Dream: Reform and Experiment in the American College*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978. p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> David Riesman. "The Search for Alternative Models in Education." *The American Scholar* 38 (3):378; Summer 1969. Richmond, Virginia: William Byrd Press, 1969.

<sup>3</sup> John Dewey. *Art As Experience*. New York: Capricorn Books, 1958. p. 267.

<sup>4</sup> Norman Cousins. *The Celebration of Life*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred North Whitehead. *The Aims of Education*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1929. p. 145.

Our modest proposal, then, is that general education is an effective antidote for the patchwork curriculum, the curriculum of students as well as the curriculum of teachers. But the general education design must foster curricular experiences that use the imagination. When the use of imagination becomes a "way of life" that no longer needs to be labeled or "done," then truly we have overcome the influences of the patchwork curriculum. [FT]



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