The Way I See It

ARNOLD M. GALLEGOS

We Must Decide What Not to Teach

There is a comedian now making the rounds who enjoys reminiscing about what he learned in high school. He boasts about completing a "college prep" course and as evidence informs his audience that he knows how to do geometric proofs. The only catch, he points out, is that he's been waiting since high school to do one.

The comedian's point, though funny, is not really a joke. In fact, it's an indictment of what too many students are required to learn for reasons steeped in traditionalism and plain old mythology.

A common complaint of teachers is that the social sciences, mathematics, the sciences, and humanities are so replete with subject matter that time becomes a major determinant of which aspects of a subject are studied in depth, which are touched on lightly, and which are practically ignored. This condition is an outgrowth of the direct and traditional influence publishing houses have on curricular content and structure in our schools. Tradition dictates a basic text in most classes from the middle school and beyond. The contents of those texts don't differ significantly from one publisher to another in the same subject areas. Consequently, U.S. history texts, for example, usually take teachers and students from the early colonial settlements on the east coast through a brief sketch of World War II and a mention of the Korean conflict. Unfortunately, the most important and recent historical events that still directly affect the lives of our students are often untouched or, at best, hastily reviewed.

If tradition and business practices weren't such influential determinants on how and what we teach and learn, perhaps publishers and teachers would have long ago begun to write and teach history beginning with the present and linking it only to those events in the past that help clarify present conditions and provide insights into the future. This means that textbooks as we know them would probably become obsolete.

Extreme justifications for learning useless or irrelevant behaviors are familiar to all of us. Latin, we've been told, helps us to better understand and use English; mathematics and its derivatives (such as geometry) help develop our thinking processes, and so on. Certainly the ends are legitimate, but there is little evidence that indirect relationships in learning really contribute anything to the objective at hand. In other words, if students are to learn how to communicate effectively and to think logically about everyday events, the time and relevant training necessary for actively and directly carrying out the intended behaviors must be provided.

Thirty years ago Ralph Tyler, in his influential *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (1950), proposed the use of philosophical and psychological screens to determine what should be taught. John McNeil added to this concept in his book on *Curriculum Administration*: ". . . any board of education and faculty would do well to examine their stated objectives in light of a number of assumptions. . . . these assumptions will help determine alternatives which should not be taught in school. A good school is known by what it refuses to teach as well as by what it does teach" (McNeil, 1965).

Unfortunately, the screening devices proposed by Tyler and McNeil led only to discussions at the general levels of required subject matter (math, English, vocational training, and so forth), and never provided any fodder for questioning components within subject matter fields themselves. As a result, little has been done to systematize and legitimize screening devices for use in traditional subject areas, which continue to expand and occupy all available curricular space. The time is ripe for much needed research in specific fields of study on the retention, transfer, and usefulness of the various knowledges and skills taught in each area, to determine what subject matter could be eliminated or delayed until actually needed, and to identify better ways for students with different abilities and interests to approach each area of study.

Subject matter "experts" will argue that all this has already been done and that they know what should be learned and when. This self-serving approach has never been seriously challenged; consequently, subject fields continue to expand, and curricular space for new and perhaps more appropriate learning opportunities never becomes available.

Little change will take place in our schools until teachers, administrators, and parents recognize that not all students need to learn everything about a subject, and begin to consider alternative curricular patterns using less time in required subject areas. Some definitive work must be done to expand on the theories of Tyler and McNeil. We must screen out what shouldn't be taught. ■

Arnold M. Gallegos is Dean, School of Education, Western Washington University, Bellingham, Washington.

References

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