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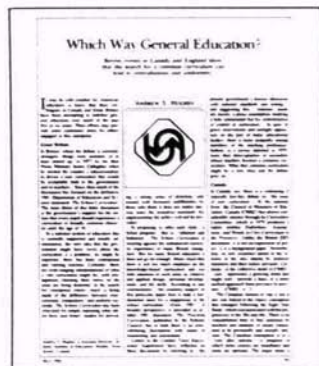
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Lessons from America: A Response to Hughes

American educators need not look to the other side of the Atlantic or to our neighbor to the north for cautionary or directional signs in the struggle for general education. The battle signs are clearly marked right here at home at every turn of the American educational experience. Witness the wave of educational retrenchment that gave us the narrow-minded, reductionist, "back-to-basics," skill-drill catechism. Witness the call of the late 1960s for "relevance," and "humanizing" the schools through vague prescriptions for student-centered pedagogy and *au courant* curricular cosmetics. Witness the discipline-centered reforms of the 1950s and 1960s that gave us the "new" math and puristic knowledge specialism at the expense of knowledge application—not to mention the curriculum imbalance as a result of Cold War priorities. Witness the "back-to-basics" syndrome of the early 1950s—a response to the tax conservatives of that era.

Over the early decades of the 20th century, progressive educators recognized the limits of a curriculum geared merely to basic literacy for the masses and a liberal education for the privileged. They conceived of general education as the means of providing the populace with the capability of broaching crucial societal problems and issues through reflective thinking for social power and insight. Many curriculum patterns for general education evolved in school and college, reflecting differences in educational philosophy and social commitment. But the movement was unmistakably evident, and a rich literature on general education emerged.

The contemporary scene is marked by a growing recognition of the failure of the basics as the guarantor trinity for an educated populace. Hence it is not likely that American educators and educational-policy makers will confuse general education with basic education.



The present danger is that we will not seek to benefit from our rich heritage in general education, that the schools will continue to succumb to the retrenchment syndrome (reflecting the wider social-policy situation), and that the colleges will regard general education as their own exclusive province while seeing the schools as properly limited to a curriculum focused on preparatory studies for the college bound and basic literacy for the masses.

The growing concern for general education in Britain came after a long and hard struggle to eliminate the class-divided dual system of secondary schooling in favor of the unitary comprehensive school model. However, the Thatcher government would prefer to have the clock turned back to the divided system where the "working" class would be limited primarily to the trinity of basics. As far as extended educational opportunity is concerned, the British tradition has held that "more means worse." The American tradition holds that "more means better." This is one of the lessons that our British and Canadian cousins might learn from America.

—DANIEL TANNER



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