

Overview

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Beyond the Traditions of Our Craft

Some Americans may share President Reagan's fondness for education's good old days, but I hope others recognize that what used to suffice is no longer good enough.

I attended a one-room rural school taught by a succession of well-intentioned but relatively untrained young women. Our music program was an old Victrola donated by my family, a few rhythm band instruments, and *The Golden Book of Songs*. The only piece of science equipment I remember was a small mechanical model of the solar system. Not that I'm complaining; I learned enough to do well on the Antelope County 8th grade examinations.

What was adequate for my generation, though, will not prepare today's children for the complexities of tomorrow. And the crucial point, which some still fail to grasp, is that educating those who would have been—and often still are—the casualties of a simpler mode of schooling requires many more resources and much more professional knowledge and skill. To achieve *significant* improvement in student learning, as demanded by all the recent national reports, educators cannot just follow the traditions of our craft with a few minor embellishments here and there; we need substantial breakthroughs—which in most fields come through research and development.

Educators do not use research nearly as much as members of some professions. We may refer to it in a general way ("Research says student self-concept is related to learning"), but we seldom rely on particular findings to guide our practice.

One reason is that research results are often fragmentary or suggestive at best. Before the development of meta-analysis, it was difficult for reviewers to make sense of numerous studies conducted under diverse conditions. Herbert Walberg (p. 19) has now made dramatic use of this new technique to pull together

thousands of studies on various topics so as to identify the relative power of various factors affecting learning. His formulation adds conceptual clarity to our commonsense notions about the ingredients of quality education and reveals approaches that seem most likely to bring returns from investment of effort.

Another reason practicing educators often dismiss research is that, to gain precision, researchers usually focus on fairly minute matters. Not Benjamin Bloom (p. 4). He addresses such momentous questions as the extent to which the capabilities of human beings can be changed by their experiences (*the issue for educators*), and he gets answers by directing and encouraging a cadre of bright doctoral students who work on various pieces of the puzzle.

In recent years they have set themselves a clear-cut but awesome challenge: determine what conditions will bring the results of group instruction closest to those that can be achieved with individual or small group tutoring. On the basis of a series of related investigations conducted over the last four years, Bloom now suggests ways schools can markedly improve achievement. Not surprisingly, his recommendations include use of mastery learning (he has compelling evidence of its effectiveness), but they also include ways schools can influence variables other than instruction that help determine how much students learn.

Knowing the limitations and tentativeness of even the most authoritative educational research, we should not accept findings such as these uncritically—but if we think there is any possibility of significantly improving learning, we will not ignore them.



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