

Avoiding Battle at Curriculum Gulch: Teaching Thinking AND Content

We need meaningful curriculums that relate process and content.

A recent report from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1987) is a major challenge to the teaching of thinking. Historian Lynne Cheney, author of the report and chair of the National Endowment, suggests that the movement to improve students' cognitive and metacognitive performance is a misguided, process-dominated approach to schooling that aims to teach children how to think without providing anything worth thinking about. Before we go to battle over process and content in the curriculum, let's make sure the combatants clearly understand the issues involved in the "war."

The goals of the movement to teach thinking are relatively clear. In a society engulfed in information, the ability to reason is essential to make the decisions and solve the problems we each face daily (Costa 1985). Further, the individual's powers of understanding and reflection—particularly as a basis for action—appear to be both modifiable and susceptible to instruction (Feuerstein et al. 1985).

Skeptics such as Cheney are asking



whether this movement is based on a view of curriculum and instruction that requires the subversion of content and the denial of subject disciplines. To ask that question implies a lack of understanding of the essence of the thinking skills approach. For the question is not whether we should focus on process or content but on *how to relate content and process* for the creation of meaningful learning.

The Problem of Knowledge

Herbert Spencer's age-old question, "What knowledge is of most worth?" continues to plague educators. Every age has its list of facts. Hirsch's (1987) appendix of "what literate Americans need to know" joins the many catalogs of information that have sought to summarize important knowledge. While it is debatable whether any list is adequate, our most demanding—and a perennial—problem is how to make such a summary meaningful to the learner. That is *the* cognitive task, the basis of the student's knowing, and the primary mission of education in a democratic society.

The danger of reliance on any list of facts is that it can become a dead end for the thinker: information committed to memory, of and for itself, is soon forgotten. Dewey (1956) emphasized the need for the child's action on what is to be learned; he underlined the gradual development of the learner's understanding through directed, organized *use* of information in the course of the child's activity. Contrary to the way Hirsch depicts him, Dewey

ey's (1964) orientation was process; his subject was democracy and education, and he countered Rousseau's view of "pouring in" static knowledge as the basis of instruction.

In the movement to teach thinking, the emphasis is on presenting knowledge so that it is useful and usable to the learner. According to Bransford and his colleagues (1987), the teacher's major challenge is to manage the complexity of working in subject matter disciplines while transforming content into instruction that will stimulate students' thinking. Through the problems posed by "anchored instruction," Bransford and his colleagues see specific contents as becoming tools of thinking, which lead students to new understandings, both of the problem itself and of their capacities to solve it. Even Beyer (1984), a strong advocate of direct teaching of thinking, emphasizes that the focus of skill instruction should be on increasing students' awareness of the various ways content can be approached and of the criteria that must be met to perform any skill effectively. The contents and the methodology of a particular discipline can and do influence such criteria.

The Importance of Context

Facts or information are not learned in a vacuum. New ideas need to be related to other knowledge students already possess or can recall. According to Glaser (1984), cognitive skills should be taught during the teaching of particular subject matter, as they are part of the acquisition of the specific knowledge. Researchers like Ennis (1985) and Lipman (1987) have long advocated that certain "dispositions" are as important as specific skills in developing critical ability. These *contextual* aspects of learning are often colored by affective conditions, are sometimes absorbed from the example of teachers and others, and frequently occur through unconscious influences or subliminal experiences. Marzano and Marzano (1987) characterize contextual thinking as the most basic of cognitive skills. To teach knowledge without attention to context, they insist, is shortsighted and inadequate.

Context is an important consideration in the potential war between the *allies* and the *enemies* of teaching: thinking. When we strive for the autonomy of the learner rather than—as the "humanitists" suggest—when the goal of instruction is merely to pass on a heritage, to nurture an intact past, the context of learning differs radically. Kamii (1984) maintains that Piaget's major goal of constructive education was autonomy; the learner must feel free to make mistakes, try new ventures, see alternative structures that can explain new phenomena. Only through such open restructuring of ideas, and through analyzing alternative experiences, do learners explore the different aspects of context and determine for themselves the full meaning of the new information. Advocates of teaching thinking skills suggest that it is in mediating the *relationship* between context and content that teachers make their greatest contribution to student learning and advancement. Mediation, maintains Feuerstein (1985), is the heart of teaching. Such mediation, it would also seem, is the "humanitists'" major purpose for studying the great works of a cultural heritage.

Let's Talk, Not Fight

Advocates of teaching thinking and those who seek to teach content have more to share than to fight about. Educators who want students to learn to be independent thinkers certainly do not want to drive out content-oriented instruction. Thinking, we hope, provides a scaffolding upon which a historian or a philosopher, a geographer or a biologist, can mold the teachings of his or her field. Plans for coursework of this sort already exist (Preseisen 1987).

Let us avoid the battle; call a truce. Let's move from the "either-or" notion and start a dialogue about content and process in the curriculum. □

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