

# Letters

## A Political Process or A Way of Life?

James C. Schott proves the point of the opposition ("Holy Wars in Education," October 1989) in his conclusion when he "places our democratic institutions and processes above our moral beliefs." To me this sounds like making a god of a political process, termed by some as secular humanism. Would Schott have placed Nazi political institutions and processes above moral beliefs in 1939? Does he advocate placing political institutions and processes above moral beliefs today? I hope not!

As we hear about the need for ethics in government and moral and value education for our children and society, we must be careful as we make decisions about what is of greater importance, a political process or a way of life. To me the way of life will ensure the continuance of the democratic political process.

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## Private vs. Public Schools

After reading "What We Know About What Students Don't Know" (November 1989), I was left with the uncomfortable feeling that educational research is caught in a circular pattern of hand-wringing. We compare ourselves unfavorably to achievement levels in other countries where cultural standards and structures are so unlike our own that no practical applications can really be implemented.

In all the statistics about national achievement, no mention was made of the high achievement scored by American Catholic schools, especially from the fourth grade on. And yet, our own nation's Catholic schools in urban, suburban, and rural communities are outperforming public schools, and some researchers have speculated intelligently on why this is so.

If educational research (and your

journal in particular) is truly aiming at meaningful reform and progress, why not look at the ways independent schools operate for some answers? Public sector myopia is a terrible thing, whether it be in the ignorance of a high school student or in the ignorance of the professional world.

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## Too Far On the Side of Process

I feel compelled to make comments about Grant Wiggins' "The Futility of Trying to Teach Everything of Importance" (November 1989).

Grant Wiggins' article moves too far to the process side of learning. He says that content is important, but I don't believe he means it. I agree that we have to teach students how to learn so they can continue to grow for the rest of their lives. Yet we have to give them a solid base from which to start as well. Knowing how to ask questions is great, but students also need a base of information to push against when they ask their questions. They need a structure into which to fit the answers they discover and some basic information in order to understand the answers to their questions.

Wiggins undercuts himself in two ways. First, he bases his work conceptually on the myth of Sisyphus. If I were not familiar with this myth, I would have lost a central aspect of Wiggins' message. Does he want me to ask someone about the myth, or does he want me to understand his article as I read it? One vote for cultural literacy.

Next, he gives an example of an 8th grade student's asking an excellent question in response to a history lecture. Once again, knowing how to ask the right question is great, but the student needed the stimulus of the lecture to work with.

Wiggins is not advocating a curriculum without content; but he still does not give content its due. We need to use all the methods, theories, and in-

formation that we can muster. Process and product, questions and content, all combine to inform the endless unfolding of the human being in what we call education.

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## Wiggins Replies

I am puzzled by Heller's letter since my explicit intent was to overcome the false dichotomy to which the author alludes. (I suspect that as an English teacher he has not seen history, science, and mathematics classes where one can regularly see students studying lots of "important" content but having no idea what is important and why.) The "futility" the article spoke of has to do with freeing ourselves from the delusion that important content seems important *prima facie* to the *student*.

My point was to help teachers find ways to prune the content so that intellectual priorities might finally be grasped by the student—given the important content that now overfills the syllabus. The questions are content. They are deliberately chosen or encountered because they bind the content together into recurrent ideas and issues—that is, intellectual priorities. One reads deeper into *Catcher in the Rye* because the question of who is and isn't "phony" is of interest to kids and illuminates a central issue in the book. Grappling with that one question and its implications while reading "only" three good books would be a better education than what we often do now: cover 20 important issues superficially through excerpts from 20 books.

The essential "content" is thus perceived as essential when it answers important questions and provides meaningful links across assignments, and when questions compel the student to dig deeper into texts, facts, and those links.

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