

“Reinventing the Education Wheel”
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Western Edition
February 2009

For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them. For example, men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts. . .

Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* (c. 350 B.C.)

Never tell a child what he can discover for himself; Activity is a law of childhood; Train the child not merely to listen, but to do. Educate the hand; Reduce every subject to its elements, and present one difficulty at a time.

[Some] Principles of the Oswego State Training School (1861)

Children were started on simple words and sentences, rather than the alphabet learned by rote. In place of time-honored texts, [teachers used] magazines, newspapers, and materials devised by . . . themselves [in] the classroom [G]eography began with a series of trips over the local countryside. Drawing was added to encourage manual dexterity and individual expression.

The Parker method (Quincy, Mass. 1874)

According to the *NY Times* (1/13/09), several top universities, including M.I.T., are “pioneering teaching methods drawn from research showing that most students learn fundamental concepts more successfully, and are better able to apply them, through interactive, collaborative, student-centered learning.” Instead of large introductory lecture courses, students at these selective universities are “learning by doing” in small groups with each other. This “new” approach is being adopted because research shows “[that the human brain] can hold a maximum of about seven different items in its short-term working memory and can process no more than about four ideas at once.”

When I read this NY Times article about this “new” approach, I couldn’t help but wonder at the appalling amnesia we have as a society. From the Greeks to mid-nineteenth century America (see above quotations), there is really nothing “new” about inspiring students to become fully engaged in their learning through small group discussions and hands on learning in the service of real, authentic problem solving (rather than task completion). The history of teacher-centered, rote learning is one of repeated failure, a history that our policy makers seem to insist upon ignoring. Is such a position one of willful ignorance or something more insidious? Why oppose or ignore a teaching method that has over a 3,000-year track record of success? John Dewey (1916) suggested one reason for failing to make student-centered, experiential learning a system-wide teaching method:

To oscillate between drill exercises that strive to attain efficiency in outward doing without the use of intelligence, and an accumulation of knowledge that is supposed to be an ultimate end in itself, means that education accepts the

present social conditions as final, and thereby takes upon itself the responsibility for perpetuating them.

Our schools teach students the behaviors and norms of the status quo and sort them into pre-determined roles in society. Lectures, rote-learning, and memorizing information as “an ultimate end in itself,” is not only boring and inefficient, it perpetuates the existing system. It doesn’t teach students how to think critically, develop the dispositions (e.g., perseverance, discipline, curiosity, patience) or engage the imagination necessary for real problem solving. If our schools really did this, graduates would be able to think for themselves, challenge authority, and create a more decent and just world. Or, at the very least, students wouldn’t be pushed out of school for failing to conform to a narrow and debased definition of what constitutes an “educated” person.