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ABSTRACT

The basic skills of reading, writing, and performing simple mathematical operations are not adequate for the non-college bound high school graduates to be fully prepared to enter the job market. Businesses today require employees who can communicate effectively, solve complex and unanticipated problems, and exercise tact and judgment. If the workplace requires that the majority of high school graduates be creative, intellectually flexible, team players, strong communicators, and steeped in a core of common knowledge, then schooling will have to change radically. The old literacy has a mechanistic quality; it can be broken down into little parts and taught one part at a time. The new literacy or thoughtfulness is organic and can only be acquired in social contexts and through social interaction. From the perspective of current educational practice, this new literacy appears to be very difficult to manage or measure and impossible to individualize or standardize. Restructuring of the current school system offers little hope, if society does not believe that the characteristics of the new literacy are essential to education. (DJC)

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Introduction

The Fruits of Learning

Measuring student "outcomes." That's a battle cry in vogue. As if one could pour a beaker of this, a smidgen of that, (all carefully pre-packaged so teachers can't bollix the brew), and forth from what had been an empty vessel (a student, mind you) would spring an educated creature—at least one able to fill in dots on a page, identify great quantities of trivia, sit passive and immobile for hours on end.

Such concern with outcomes is, of course, a necessary spawn of the demand for accountability. What have we to show, what is the concrete product of the resources committed to the schools in recent years? Such calls for displaying outcomes ring false because they invariably rely on skills that are reducible to quantitative measure. And that devalues, in turn, human judgment.

The impulse is a stunted version of a more reasonable, indeed critical, question: what is it we wish for our young; what should they know and be able to do on leaving mandatory schooling; what humane qualities should they have?

It's from that angle that **Basic Education: Issues, Answers and Facts** addresses the question of student outcomes. Eloquent and penetrating, Rexford Brown, Director of the Policy and the Higher Literacies Project at the Education Commission of the States, reveals the complex, often baffling demands on young people as they try to take part in the Conversation of our society—how the very notion of what it means to be literate has changed so profoundly in little more than a lifetime.

Rex subsumes all the talents and abilities necessary to the great Conversation within the concept of THOUGHTFULNESS. To be truly thoughtful, to be self-conscious of one's own historical place, responsibilities, opportunities in our society: thoughtfulness may well be the richest distillation of what we believe is the goal of a basic education. An outcome, I fear, beyond simple measure.

A. Graham Down
Executive Director
The Council for Basic Education

Schooling and Thoughtfulness

by Rexford Brown

1.

Thoughtful, a. Full of or characterized by thought, in various senses.

1. Given to, disposed to, or engaged in carefully reasoned thinking
2. Disposed to think about or consider matters; prudent; reflective
3. Showing thought or consideration for others; heedful; selflessly concerned with the needs of others.

Schooling, The maintenance of a child at school.

2.

Recently, I asked a group of Denver business people what kinds of things they think about when they're hiring, firing, and promoting employees. The first word spoken was creativity. Then someone mentioned flexibility. Then came problem solving and skill in dealing with people, adaptability, innovation, and a capacity to change. Several people stressed responsibility, teamwork, loyalty, and good work habits and attitudes.

Eventually, someone mentioned basic skills. What he meant was some minimal, threshold capacity to read, write, and perform simple mathematical operations. The group said it was important for workers to have these basic skills but none of them seemed interested in hiring or promoting anyone who had *only* these skills.

What they want most, they said, are thinkers, people with judgment, people who are thoughtful—about the jobs they are doing, the people they are doing them with, and the people they are doing them for.

In this desire, they echo a growing chorus of people whose expectations for young people—and for the education system that prepares them for adulthood—are higher than they have ever been. Although business people may well have once preferred compliant workers skilled primarily in following directions, many find they can no longer afford drones. Business is changing rapidly. The burgeoning service sector requires people who can serve—who can communicate effectively with varied clients about complex, often unanticipated problems; who can imagine the needs of other people, that is, and exercise tact and judgment as often as expertise. The competitive edge in the service sector belongs to the considerate, the thoughtful.

Changes in the manufacturing sector are also changing notions about labor. While mass production in the interest of lower product costs remains a desideratum, market conditions around the world are forcing manu-

facturers toward customization, tailoring, creating diverse product lines, and making shorter production runs. Mass production techniques are giving way to "flexible" ones, which create more dynamic work places with more complex intellectual and social demands upon workers.

Both mass and flexible production expose workers to new technology, of course, so both require greater sophistication in keeping complex machines running, diagnosing problems and fixing them. But flexible production also requires more frequent retooling, more varied use of machines and people, and a greater range in the jobs any single worker performs. The work place is less predictable, more open-ended, more strategic.

Although particular tasks may be rendered simple by new technology, the more fluid environment requires workers to be more sensitive to context. They have to understand relationships of part to part, part to whole, and task to overall purpose. Job descriptions tend to be vague and workers tend to collaborate more. People have to think more about what they are doing, whether they are on the line or on the board of directors.

Both the manufacturing and service sectors are highly dependent on information and its associated technology. Acquiring information, sifting through it, synthesizing, analyzing, interpreting, evaluating, communicating it to different audiences for different purposes, using it to plan—these kinds of thinking and thoughtful action consume a large and critical proportion of a company's resources.

In more and more jobs—not just the professions, which have always put a premium on thinking and judgment—the requirements for success and satisfaction are going up. Basic skills are not enough—because they're too basic and because they're too focused on skills, not on knowledge, habits, dispositions, values, judgment, sensitivity to context, flexibility, creativity, responsibility, or the other components of a successful and happy adulthood.

And a solid education for an elite isn't good enough anymore either. A higher standard of literacy, of which thoughtfulness is a key component, is an agenda for the non-college bound, for butcher, baker, or candlestick-maker as well as for doctor or lawyer.

In many ways, the present structure of American education was shaped by the labor needs of industry during the first half of this century. What is happening now is ir nic: students who are products of the system business created are no longer acceptable to many businesses; the system of schooling itself is perceived by many business leaders as dysfunctional, bankrupt, unable to provide the right kind of graduate because it is so good at providing the wrong kind.

3.

Thoughtfulness is more than a state of mind. We also use the word in the sense of being heedful or considerate of others. In this sense, it has a moral dimension. Recently, concern about citizens as moral agents has been as great as concern about laborers as thinkers. Consider the last year: Ivan Boesky was indicted for insider trading, Gary Hart's sex life eclipsed his political one, Jim and Tammy Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert fell from grace, US Marines were accused of betraying national security, and the entire country argued about the ethics of trading guns for hostages.

Major columnists and editorialists wondered what had gone wrong with the moral sense of Americans and not a few turned their attention to the schools either as culprits or saviors or both. It appeared to many that the schools' "value-neutral" approach to education was somehow to blame.

It is fair to ask whether we can teach students knowledge and skills without conveying or helping them develop any moral purposes for which they might employ them. Does pluralism in our schools necessarily entail a relativist ethos there too? Somewhere along the line a generation decided that secular institutions must be valueless by definition. The pervasiveness of such confusion about secularism, pluralism, religion, and morality in a democratic society argues powerfully that these concepts must be central elements in public schools.

Does pluralism in our schools necessarily entail a relativist ethos there too?

To be thoughtful socially means to consider others, to have the moral grounding and the ethical responsibility it takes to live among other human beings with rights and needs as compelling as one's own. To be a thoughtful citizen is also to help define, change, and protect the public good without which individual rights and purposes have no meaning. Finally, it is to be thoughtful about *something*, and to share a common core of facts, concepts, understandings, and rules of operation with others in order to communicate with or persuade them. Thoughtfulness, in other words, is inescapably bound up with culture. Ignorance of culture is ignorance of self and absence from the Conversation that constitutes and changes culture.

As with values and workplace requirements, the nation appears to be in flux about what knowledge is appropriate and sufficient for a fulfilling adulthood. The success of recent books about cultural literacy and what students should know about science, mathematics, history, geography, literature, and the arts, testifies to a vigorous debate.

Measured against all these new, high expectations, the education our children now receive looks thin, even though it may in some ways be better than the education any previous generation has received. If workplace and social needs really do require that the majority of graduates be creative, intellectually flexible, careful thinkers and problem solvers, team players, strong communicators, well grounded ethically, and steeped in a core of common knowledge—then schooling as we know it will have to change radically, not modestly.

The instinctive response to such a goal is simply to say it can't be done; to say that no one who has spent any time in today's schools with today's students, no one who understands the realities faced by educators day after day, no one who grasps the complex social and economic problems education cannot possibly mitigate because it is enmeshed in them; no one who understands intelligence or bureaucracy or the class structure in this country—no such person could entertain the possibility that more than a handful of graduates will ever reach that goal. Our problem, it is tempting to say, is not with the schools but with all these overblown expectations.

Expectations, however, are not so easy to deflate, especially if these are widespread and inseparable from deep rooted ideals, as American expectations for education have always been. It may be easier and better for the country to improve the education system—however quixotic that may seem—than to go back on long-standing promises. To say that, however, is not to say that schools alone should be charged with a task that is clearly beyond their scope or that reform must necessarily proceed as it has to date.

4.

From reading the various calls for higher literacies now being advanced, one gets the feeling that a literacy of thoughtfulness is categorically different from the literacy now being cultivated in most schools. Let me oversimplify and dramatize the differences in order to bring out some essential contrasts. Critics are saying:

- ☐ We have a literacy useful for assembly-line, low-tech, mass production jobs; but we need a literacy useful for information-oriented, high-tech, service-directed, flexible production jobs.
- ☐ We have a literacy useful for top-down, bureaucratic decision making and problem solving; but we need a literacy useful for horizontal or bottom-up decision making and problem solving, where people closest to problems can diagnose and solve them.
- ☐ We have a literacy focused primarily on schoolwork (concentrated, symbol-based, "unreal" work); but we need a literacy that transcends and outlasts school work.
- ☐ We have a literacy based on individual mental performance; but we need a literacy based on collaborative learning experiences.
- ☐ We have a value-neutral literacy; but we need a value-laden literacy.
- ☐ We have a literacy that does not guarantee access to the cultural Conversation; but we need a literacy that *is* the cultural Conversation.
- ☐ We have a literacy that need not lead to inquiry; but we need a literacy that inescapably leads to inquiry.
- ☐ We have a decontextualized literacy; but we need a context-sensitive literacy.
- ☐ We have a literacy unconnected to democratic principles or institutions; but we need a literacy inseparable from the practice of democracy and support of democratic institutions.

Thoughtfulness is inescapably bound up with culture.

Critics of education have argued for years that our system of education cultivates by design the first literacy described in each contrast above, but not the second. The first can be mass produced through a technology not unlike early assembly line production. The critical question is whether this technology can manufacture students who are thoughtfully literate.

Several things suggest that thoughtfulness requires a different approach. First of all, a literacy of thoughtfulness is primarily a process of making meaning (not just receiving it) and negotiating it with others (not just thinking alone). It is fundamentally constructive, which is to say it derives from a different set of notions about the nature of knowledge and the process of human learning.

The old literacy, if we can call it that for clarity's sake, derives from the assumption that knowledge is objective and can be drilled into passive, blank-slate brains; the literacy of thoughtfulness derives from the assumption that we are all creating knowledge all the time through social interaction, and the nature and uses of that knowledge constantly shift. The old literacy has a mechanistic quality; it can be broken into little parts, taught to individuals one at a time. The new literacy is organic and can only be acquired in social contexts and through social interaction. That is why it can develop both moral and democratic habits in people while the decontextualized, individualized, and skill-based literacy need not do so.

5.

Look at the contrast another way. Consider the optimal conditions for making a person think hard or creatively about something. An air of mystery will do it; a lot of us instinctively try to solve mysteries or puzzles. Uncertainty causes us to think. So do ambiguity and unpredictability and open-endedness. Disagreement (and the tension and frustration it creates) can force people to think hard. An atmosphere conducive to questioning and inquiry really helps; being around curious people who inquire and question can really get us going. It helps, too, if we're presented with a problem that is important to us, has some bearing on our life, puts some urgency in the need for resolution or deeper understanding and provides a personal payoff.

Of course, it's nice to have sufficient time to reflect, too, and the freedom to make mistakes, but often time pressure and high stakes spark creative ideas that careful reasoning could not have brought to light with all the time in the world. Most helpful, of course, are opportunities to read and write at length and argue with people about what we're discovering.

Now ask how many of these conditions a normal, sensible teacher would allow to exist in a classroom of, say, 30 students. See the problem? People charged with controlling 30 kids are not likely to consider mystery, uncertainty, ambiguity, unpredictability, open-endedness, and relentless questioning their friends. These are, in fact, the *enemies* of traditional instruction: conditions that must be controlled through routines, standardized materials and procedures, discipline and rigorous time management. Nor can we expect a teacher to be able to find the personal motives that will trigger thoughtfulness in 30 students at the same time or to deal with the results of their thoughtfulness in a 40-minute class period. Or to find time for their reflection (who's got time to reflect in a school?) or, under current practice, to reward mistakes.

The new literacy is organic and can only be acquired in social contexts.

We already know that almost no intensive reading takes place, no extensive writing, and no classroom discussion or debate. There is simply no time for such things. Schooling places heavy emphasis on drill, memorization, recitation, seatwork, and teacher talk. Time is allocated in tiny bits. Knowledge is equated with seat time (so many hours of science, so many hours of English and—presto—a degree). Tests and assessments focus upon basic skills and seldom require students to write or perform or construct anything. Job descriptions and professional evaluations focus upon time management. The curriculum is so atomized and vast it cannot be covered in depth or comprehended in whole. Nor are the conditions for thoughtfulness likely to be spawned by an educational bureaucracy.

The institutional form in which we foster the current school literacy is just not very hospitable to thoughtfulness. Schools will tolerate a certain amount, but incentives aren't there and disincentives are everywhere. The type of rationality that undergirds the current system, like a type of machinery that supported old kinds of production, simply doesn't match that implicit in thoughtfulness. To say this is not to criticize the machine or the people working so hard to keep it going. It is to say that it may no longer be the right machine or the right way to get the new job done.

From the perspective of schooling as we know it, thoughtfulness appears very hard to manage or measure and impossible to individualize or standardize. It also unfortunately carries elitist baggage. Thoughtfulness is linked to intelligence, whether it should be or not, and intelligence is believed (in the USA) to be distributed on a bell-shaped curve; therefore only a few people are considered capable of attaining thoughtfulness. In some districts under some court monitorships or under threat of lawsuits, promoting thoughtfulness actually appears to be against the law. And finally, many adults do not want their children running around inquiring into things or making their own interpretations of the world or debating value-laden issues. Nor are students beating down the door for active learning. Many of them like things just the way they are.

6.

Some students in some schools are, in fact, learning to think as literate people do, learning how to attack problems, be creative, and take responsibility for their learning. So it can be done, even in the teeth of the inauspicious conditions that typically prevail. The question is whether it can be done on a sufficient scale under present conditions? And the best guess is, probably not. That is why so many people are talking about restructuring education.

Restructuring appears to mean many different things right now. It should mean starting out with principles of thoughtfulness such as those I've suggested here and working backwards to create the policy and then the schools within which thoughtful adult and student activity is likely to flourish. The first step is to create in the

public forum the very conditions one would hope to see in the classroom: bold, collaborative inquiry, honest exchange of views, creative exploration of alternatives, respect for the past coupled with imagination about the future, careful reasoning, heedfulness of others and trust in the democratic process. Thoughtfulness is taught by the "do as I do" method, not "do as I say"; it doesn't have a prayer in the schools if it isn't at work in the community.

The curriculum is so atomized and vast it cannot be covered in depth or comprehended in whole.

Restructuring should also involve a comprehensive view of the school as an institution that is far less learning oriented than we would like to believe. Simply to introduce better classroom questioning or begin a weekly seminar or buy a textbook that pays more attention to analytical questions will not change much because non-academic, bureaucratic, logistical, and political influences make or break all curricular innovations. Unless the institutional structures that support classroom learning are themselves the consequence of thoughtful, community-wide deliberation, restructured schools will not be very different.

I suspect that restructuring will not be done without more noise and more discomfort than we are experiencing at the moment. Fundamental change hurts. Fortunately, the pain can be mitigated by several realizations. First, there are many people in school after school, in the classroom or outside it, who are well disposed to this agenda. We do not have to convert everyone in a school in order to transform it; usually, just connecting the well wishers who are already there produces a critical mass for change. Pain shared has a binding quality.

Second, the kind of pain that lies ahead is good for us; it's the kind we learn from; it's a growing pain. Third, it's the kind of pain that democracy requires; if we're not feeling it, we're not really experiencing what is unique about the way this country was set up to run. And finally, it's one of those kinds of pain that is easily forgotten, as when we've finally figured out a puzzle or when, after all the digging and planting and weeding and worrying, the crop comes in, looking and tasting just as we imagined it would.

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