

Five Things That Have Never Made Sense to Me about Education

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I have been unhappy about America's educational system since I was a high school student, fifty years ago. While the situation certainly varies around the country, there are some fundamental things that just don't make sense to me.

Here's the first thing that doesn't make sense to me: *why do we use a bell curve instead of a standard of student mastery to evaluate student performance?*

A bell curve is a statistical description of a "normal distribution" used to evaluate data. It may indeed describe the range of student performances on a test. What is weird is using a bell curve to guarantee that only a few students can get high marks, and a few must get low marks, no matter how close the highest and lowest marks may be, and no matter how much the students have achieved. We say we are in education to help students learn and succeed. Why limit the number who can succeed? Even worse, why guarantee that a certain number must fail in order to fit the curve?

My reading of anthropology is that non-industrial tribes focused on teaching their young people (1) their culture and (2) survival skills. The identity of the tribe depended on all the young people mastering the culture, and the future existence of the tribe depended on all the young people mastering the survival skills. Not all young people were equally talented, but the goal was for all of them to reach mastery, even if it took some longer than others.

I have been told that we must use bell curves to sort out the best students from the worst students. This is what employers want to know. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that sorting students for employers is a function of educational systems, why couldn't we set a standard of mastery and let employers know who reached that standard and who didn't? The standard could be set high, and the student's progress toward that standard could be reported. One result would be that students would no longer be competing against each other on a curve, they would be competing against the standard of mastery. There would be no limit to the number of students who attain that level, and no requirement that a certain number of students fail. *That* would make sense to me.

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Here's the second thing that doesn't make sense to me: *Why do we emphasize the academic curriculum at the expense of "extra-curricular" activities?*

When I was in high school, I spent thousands of hours memorizing names, dates, facts, and formulas. I knew that I was never going to use all that information. It felt like a waste of time even while I was learning it. But I had to learn it in order to regurgitate it on exams, get good grades, and have a shot at going to a good college.

What I wanted to learn was not in the school curriculum. I wanted to learn how to do things. I wanted to learn how to speak, write, be a little creative, work with others on teams, and lead people. That kind of learning was only available in the "extra-curricular" program. I learned how to give a speech with the help of a substitute teacher who was willing to be my coach after school. I learned to work with others on teams in school clubs and drama performances. I learned to listen and coordinate with others in the band and the orchestra. I learned about leadership through experience in student government.

I should have been able to learn to write as part of the academic curriculum, but in our English classes we were busy diagramming sentences, documenting the occurrence of iambic pentameter in poems, and learning rules of writing that all great writers ignore. Writing was something that I had to figure out by reading other writers and experimenting on my own.

Fifty years later, I can confirm that I have never needed to know most of what was in the academic curriculum. I have never needed to recite the Periodic Table of Elements. Nobody has ever asked me for the dates of the Peloponnesian War. I am still waiting for the length of the Amazon River to come up in a conversation. By contrast, what I learned in "extra-curricular" programs I have used every day of my life.

High school leaders are fond of saying that they are preparing their students for life. I have never believed it. Very few students will end up doing academic work as professionals, and very few of us will spend our days memorizing and regurgitating names, dates, facts, and formulas. Meanwhile, all of us will be called upon to work with others and be good citizens. If we want to prepare students for life, the "extra-curricular" program must be a major part of the school curriculum, integrated into the school day, not just after school. *That* would make sense to me.

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Here's the third thing that doesn't make sense to me: *why do we have grade levels in our schools?*

Why do we have grade levels? Most schools in the early years of our country were one-room schools where students of all ages learned together. Then, in the nineteenth century, with a new commitment to universal education in America, education leaders tried to figure out how to manage the massive influx of new students. They looked at the military, the post office, the railroads, and factories as potential administrative models for organizing school systems. They chose the factory. Then, if I recall correctly, they imported the Prussian idea of grade levels.

Certainly, children should be given materials in a sequence that challenges them to keep learning. The problem with a set curriculum for each grade level is that students do not develop evenly—and do not have the same aptitudes—in all subjects. John Goodlad argued years ago that in any given class, only a few students may be working at that grade level in *all* subjects. In a sense, only a few of the students may be in that grade. The range in reading development, for example, could be from first grade to sixth grade or higher.

The strange thing about grade level curriculum is that you can be held back if you are “behind” in a couple of subjects, or you can be given a “social promotion” and move to the next grade level without learning the assigned subjects. Even stranger is the fact that a student can be held back if the student is *ahead* in one or more subjects. Once the student has mastered what the curriculum offers that year in that specific subject, the student can go no further. The student has to sit and wait until next year.

It turns out that there were advantages to the one-room schoolhouse. If Jimmy was doing poorly in math, he didn't have to flunk, and he didn't get a social promotion, he just had to keep working on math—and older students might be able to help him. If he was doing well in reading, he didn't have to stop, he could keep going—and interact with older students who were reading the more advanced material. However informal it may have been, students tended to link up by the level of their mastery in each subject, rather than by grade level.

Some of these benefits can be achieved today in multi-grade classrooms that combine, for example, grades one through three, and four through six. Students have more time to catch up in areas that are difficult for them, but are less likely to be held back in areas in which they excel. It may be harder for teachers, because they have to keep track of each student's progress in each subject. However, research suggests that multi-grade classrooms can have beneficial effects on student learning. It certainly makes sense to me.

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Here's the fourth thing: *why are teachers also judges who grade their students' work?*

Teachers have the power to inspire and help their students to learn, and they have the power to give out grades that define how much or how well the student has learned. This doesn't make sense to me. Those two functions, together, constitute an immense amount of power— power than can easily be misused.

For example, when I was in high school, I had a social studies teacher who believed that the Soviet Union and communism were superior to American democracy. (Yes, it was the sixties.) When I spoke up to disagree and defend my country, she angrily attacked me, calling me lots of names that will not be repeated here. Once she threw an eraser at me. Another time she threw a book at me (not metaphorically— she *really threw a book*). What was clear was that she had the power to flunk me, and was inclined to do so, because by her definition, which she gleefully shared with the class, I was stupid.

I wasn't too stupid to understand that an "F" on my transcript would sink my high school GPA and raise an awkward issue when I sent my transcripts off to colleges. My parents and I went to see the school principal, who transferred me to another class whose teacher, fortunately, was not offended by my views and welcomed me as a sort of political refugee.

My social studies teacher was noticeably prejudiced on a political issue. But what about other kinds of prejudice— including some that are more subtle? What about the attitudes of teachers toward girls, toward minority students, toward students with a different sexual orientation, toward introverts, toward a student who stutters? Yes, teachers can inspire and teach all of those students. But when it comes time to grading, it's hard to keep one's prejudices in check. I think it is better to have the grading done blindly by another teacher who doesn't know the gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, physical appearance, or any other personal characteristic of the student whose work is being graded. This has the benefit of allowing the teacher to focus on learning instead of grading.

By the way, this separation of roles has been going on at Oxford University for centuries. Students are taught by tutors who do not grade their final exams. This means that tutors are coaches. They are there to guide, provoke, and inspire students. When the exam results are made public, they affect the tutor's own

reputation as well as the student's. Students and tutors are in it together, with a shared goal: student achievement. *That* makes sense to me.

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Here's the fifth thing that doesn't make sense to me: *why do students go to college immediately after graduating from high school?*

Why do students go to college directly from high school? Most 18-year-olds are still growing up, focused on their relationships with their peers, and more influenced by their peers than their professors. They are not truly ready to make the most of the academic offerings on campus. Will they learn anyway? Of course. Would they learn more—and would it mean more to them—if they had life experience? Yes. Given the cost of higher education, it would make more sense if they showed up on campus when they are ready and motivated to make the most of it.

Over the last thirty years there has been a vast increase in academic programs for older and working students. The increase in the average age of university students is strong testament to the importance of these programs.

Yes, many universities do an excellent job of helping their 18-to-24-year-olds grow up personally and socially while on campus. But young people need experience in the world *outside* of academe to find out who they are, discover their talents, learn what the world is really like, and decide what they most want to do with their lives. They can get a start on those questions in college, but college life, though real in its own way, is not the same as the world of work that exists off campus. Part-time jobs can help give students a good glimpse, but a glimpse is not enough.

When I think about the favourable impact of life experience, I immediately think of the generation of soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen who came back after WWII and went to college on the GI bill. They may have been the most focused, high-performing group of students that higher education has ever seen. Many of them went to college after growing up the hard way, fighting for their country and seeing their friends die on the battlefield.

I am encouraged by the more recent generations of older students, in their thirties and forties—often older—who are going back to school to get a college degree. They may have had low GPAs in high school, low SAT or ACT scores, and be the first in their families to go to college. But their experience and motivation often result in their doing better than the typical 18-to-24-year-olds whose high school grades and scores are much higher. I have had the privilege

of teaching classes to older students, and each time, I found that their desire to learn was deeply touching as well as highly productive.

High school graduates should take a few years after high school graduation to get a job, serve in the military, do community service, travel, live in another culture, or any combination of the above. If these students then go to college, it is likely that their college days will not be primarily about growing up socially, their college days will be about understanding the world better, making sense of the life experience they have already gained, and preparing to re-enter the off-campus world to do new work and launch new adventures. *That* makes sense to me.