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A New Educational Paradigm

Audrey Cohen

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Ms. Cohen describes a new system of education that is in harmony with the way the human mind actually functions.

By Audrey Cohen

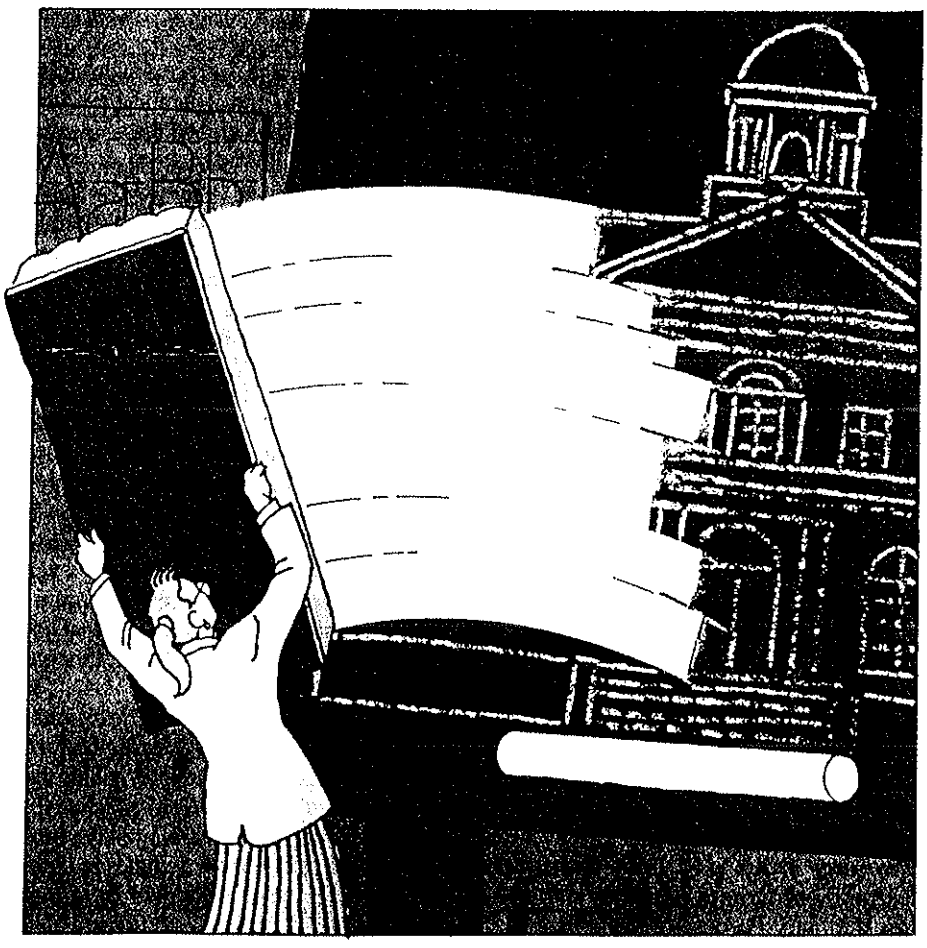

Illustration by Kerry Gavin

THE CURRENT reform movement in American education has received its primary impetus from the realization that many schools are not managing to achieve what they set out to achieve. High dropout rates, legions of bored students, massive behavior problems – these conditions, once considered shocking, are commonly accepted realities today. In principle such conditions should generate an in-depth exploration of what we are seeking to accomplish in our schools. Only recently, however, have critics begun to suggest that, if we are to generate any lasting reforms, we need to examine not only our educational methods but also our ultimate educational aims.

Today, with parts of the American education system in disarray, the entire nation is politically, socially, and economically under siege. How many of our current problems, we must ask, derive from too many years of a bankrupt or nearsighted approach to learning? The focus of education – elementary, secondary, and postsecondary – has steadily narrowed decade by decade. The commitment to education as a training in character has vanished. And, despite the lip service paid to the ideal of creating a spirit of inquiry, education is increasingly directed toward teaching students not how to inquire but rather how to digest the results of other people's inquiry. Current methods of assessment focus on the most superficial aspects of learning. Students are rarely, if ever, exposed to the necessity of making major value decisions, of solving the real-life problems that provide the focus of genuine inquiry, or of taking intellectual or practical risks.

How, then, can we discern the outline of a more meaningful system of education and take steps to implement it? To clear our thinking, I suggest we imagine that we are starting from scratch, as if no schools existed.[1] What kinds of schools would we want to build if we could look at our needs without any presuppositions? What would we decide makes a person truly educated? What prepares a person effectively for life? What kind of citizens do we want to create?

In answer, we would probably acknowledge that we do not want to limit education's goals simply to giving students a body of intellectual knowledge, no matter how comprehensive. We would ask for more. We would expect education to teach students to use their knowledge to identify significant purposes in the real world and to fulfill them. We would like to see students view success as related to helping build a better world. We would expect schools to create responsible citizens, capable of acting effectively and with an understanding of the impact of their actions on others. We would expect education not simply to create specialists and technocrats but to develop individuals who know how to work with others to achieve common goals.[2] In short, we would seek to create experts who have the comprehensive vision of generalists and who can work effectively with others toward socially productive outcomes.

What organizing principle for education would allow us to meet such objectives? The answer lies in righting the traditional approach to education. Schools focus on the accumulated knowledge of the ages and concentrate on teaching children the answers to other people's questions. We must instead focus on questions or challenges that will generate and support the search for knowledge. More broadly, we must organize learning around *purposes* that motivate children to find answers. This change will allow children's learning to mirror that of adults.

Mature adults learn when they are motivated to do so to achieve a specific purpose. They test their knowledge and examine their goals and reevaluate both repeatedly, through the constant interplay between what they learn and their attempt to apply it to their purpose. On all levels, whether intellectual, emotional, or social, it is a sense of purpose that motivates learning, creates a constant interaction between the learner and his or her environment, and builds the learner's self-confidence and power.

A sense of purpose has been all but driven out of the traditional school curriculum, however. Subject-oriented learning has combined with the increasing fragmentation of knowledge to create an information mania in our schools that makes simply digesting facts a priority and eliminates consideration of the goals to which such facts and ideas might be applied. Information learned for information's sake fails to teach children that learning is about testing what we think we know in the world around us and, based on the feedback we receive, discovering what more we need to know and how we need to change our opinions to achieve our purpose.

When we limit our educational goals for students to such purely academic exercises as analyzing Chaucer's grammar or writing an essay on the trade union movement, we also limit the student's understanding that knowledge can be used to change our own and others' lives for the better. The domination of the disciplines unfortunately fosters such disempowerment.

For example, a historical study of the Roman system of road building could be used to great advantage in helping a child gain perspective on our contemporary so-

AUDREY COHEN is the president and founder of Audrey Cohen College (formerly the College for Human Services), New York, N.Y. She also heads the design team for Audrey Cohen College, one of the projects chosen for funding by the New American Schools Development Corporation.

ciety. The Romans built slowly, and they built to last. Ancient Roman roads are still used today for transportation, and a sensitive study of this aspect of Roman culture could throw into sharp relief some of the negative implications of our own fast and furious approach to life. Yet, if a teacher today leads a student into such considerations, it is despite, not because of, the structure of the curriculum. By failing to teach children how to organize learning around goals that involve the way they live today, subject-oriented learning encourages passivity and shallow thinking. Purpose-oriented learning, on the other hand, encourages a willingness to risk what we know for a goal we envisage and a sense of responsibility.

TO BRING a sense of purpose back into education, we need to adopt a *Purpose-Centered System of Education.*® The primary feature of this paradigm is the identification for each learning stage (the division of the school year is flexible: a "learning stage" could last one semester or one year) of a broad *purpose* that will enable students to apply their academic learning to meeting external challenges. First, this purpose should involve a socially useful outcome. Second, it should focus on a substantive area of knowledge that will be developmentally enriching for the child as it enlarges the scope of his or her abilities.

Purposes with socially useful outcomes focused on substantive knowledge might include, for example, building a better environment, using technology to meet human needs, helping people through the arts, developing school/business partnerships, or improving service at specific internship sites. The purpose would be broadly defined, and it would be up to the students, as they studied the academic materials for the learning stage, to work with one another and with their teachers to develop an individual plan of action for the learning stage.

In seeking to meet a learning stage's purpose – for example, to improve service at an internship site – students would be compelled to apply their intellectual studies to considering what service is. They would evaluate how to relate their studies to the goals they had set for themselves. They would learn to devise their own strategies and to assess their impact. Through their school experience, they would build an ever stronger relationship to their community and would begin to see themselves not as passive learners but as people capable of positive action.

The focus on socially significant purposes as the first and organizing feature of a new paradigm immediately yields the second crucial feature: *Constructive Action.*® During each learning stage students would use their own studies to identify and carry out individual or group Constructive Actions – initiatives that would benefit individuals, groups, or organizations and that, in the eyes of students, teachers, and the community, would improve the world around them. The kinds of Constructive Actions that children would carry out would depend on their ages and capacities, as well as on the learning stage's purpose.

For example, while 10-year-olds might work together on group Constructive Actions during a learning stage (putting on a play for a local senior citizen center or interviewing senior citizens for oral histories), a 14-year-old would be capable of independently planning and implementing long-term Constructive Actions – creating a newsletter at an internship site, studying wildlife habits and teaching children about them in a parks program, or developing a book to use in teaching elementary youngsters.

By emphasizing that intellectual knowledge should be applied directly to the carrying out of Constructive Actions, our new paradigm takes exception to the long-standing isolation of schools from the outside world. Every child grows up in an environment dominated by an interlocking set of institutions: businesses, government agencies, cultural institutions, political organizations, health organizations, financial networks, and so on. Schools need to build formal ties to these institutions and to help children recognize that we live in a complex, interdependent world. The Constructive Action gives children the opportunity to see how this world operates and to learn within it. It allows them to see that they can use what they learn to affect institutions around them. The Constructive Action is the bridge between classroom learning and life outside the classroom.

Related to and extending the concept of the Constructive Action is the third organizing element of this educational paradigm, *learning in the community.* The substantive focus of each learning stage will generally point in the direction of the appropriate organizations for the students' Constructive Action opportunities. For example, museums and other cultural institutions will be chosen for the learning stage whose purpose is "We Help People Through the Arts." Every organization in the community becomes a part of the school, playing a role in the education of the child.[3] This creates a new community environment for learning.

The fourth feature of this new paradigm is that traditional academic materials will no longer be taught as discrete subjects. Instead, they will be taught in relation to how they help students identify and meet the purpose of the learning stage. Before describing in greater detail how subject-oriented material can be reorganized around purpose, let us look at an illustration of the process in action.

Suppose, for example, that the purpose

for a learning stage for 9-year-olds is to work for better health. Such a purpose is particularly appropriate at this age because it pinpoints developmental needs of children at the same time that it involves them in Constructive Action. Children at this age are capable of taking responsibility for their own diet and physical hygiene. It is important that they do so because they are frequently surrounded by negative health messages (fast-food restaurants, cigarette smoking, alcoholism, and so on). Indeed, it is a sad commentary on our system of education that, while it provides children with intellectual knowledge, it so rarely enables them to take charge of their lives in important practical ways.

A learning stage whose purpose is to work for better health might organize elementary anatomy studies around learning the basics of nutrition. Students might apply their math learning to making graphs depicting their own eating patterns and analyzing the nutritional value of various foods. Exploring the lifestyle patterns of children in other cultures and in their own community would deepen students' understanding of health. Science could help them determine the value of different types of physical exercise. Children could look at the evolution of modern medicine and how it has changed our society. They could read biographies of prominent people in the field of health and look at changes in how health and disease have been understood throughout history. And, as a major step toward personal responsibility, they could adopt a plan to improve their own health.

While building their own understanding of health from various sources, 9-year-olds would simultaneously prepare to offer what they know to others.[4] They might, for example, plan and put on a health fair for parents, other children, and outside organizations; write nutritional self-help brochures; interview visitors about their attitudes toward health; invite doctors and other health professionals to speak; or dramatize the place of health and medicine in other cultures.

As soon as we begin to relate academic learning to purposes and Constructive Action, we begin to expand the scope of what we want children to learn, including not only academic material, but also the competencies to which that academic material will be applied. We begin to ask questions such as the following: How well have students learned to identify significant challenges? To develop strategies for meeting these challenges? To use intellectual knowledge to deepen their understanding of these challenges? To identify Constructive Actions that contribute to social improvements? To overcome or learn from the obstacles that arise in attempting to implement Constructive Actions?

These questions define certain *dimensions* of knowledge and action whose mastery enables one to act as an intelligent and responsible citizen for social improvement. These dimensions, which constitute the fifth feature of the new paradigm, demand more from education than a narrow academic definition of its goals.

Both teaching and assessment should be focused on developing five crucial dimensions. These dimensions replace courses as the organizing framework for each day's learning. At each learning stage, the same five dimensions would be taught, but the specific academic materials taught through the dimensions would relate to the developmental level of the students and to the purpose of the learning stage.

The five dimensions of knowledge and action are purpose, values and ethics, self and others, systems, and skills. They provide the structure for five classes at each learning stage, classes that relate academic materials to the students' specific Constructive Actions and that each year develop more sophisticated intellectual and practical competencies in the students. By focusing all the academic material of the learning stage on one overarching purpose, these dimensions avoid the fragmentation typical of the traditional classroom and encourage the student to see his or her learning as a tool for constructive change. The result is a highly synergized experience of learning, in which the same purpose is repeatedly viewed from many directions simultaneously.

The first dimension is *purpose*. In the purpose class, students learn problem-solving skills and habits of flexibility and persistence as they apply their classroom learning to planning, carrying out, and evaluating their Constructive Actions. They use math, geography, history, English, and science to pursue their purpose and to carry out a Constructive Action that will benefit themselves and their communities.

The second dimension is *values and ethics*. Students need to appreciate on a practical as well as an intellectual level the fundamental ethical questions that come up in dealing with other human beings and with organizations. How do I appreciate that someone else can have values fundamentally different from my own? What do I do when faced with a conflict of values and the need to make a decision? How do I learn to appreciate and balance the competing interests and values of different people in my family and in the organizations I am part of? What do responsibility and integrity require of me?

These types of questions recur throughout history. They come up in literature, philosophy, and the history of science. Those subjects become meaningful to students when they are brought to bear on the real ethical issues that students have to consider as they participate in their communities and plan Constructive Actions to improve the life of an individual or of an organization.

Carrying out purposes in the real world

should always involve this ethical dimension, because the ability to understand and work toward meeting other people's needs is not only a desirable character trait but is also fundamental to a society whose prosperity is largely dependent on the provision of effective service. A course during each learning stage focused on values and ethics would have students look directly at the ethical questions they face in their own Constructive Actions, through the lenses of academic works dealing with value questions. Such courses would prepare students, at an ever more sophisticated level, to integrate ethical considerations into their behavior.

The third dimension is that of *self and others*. Clearly, students need to develop both an intellectual and a practical understanding of human dynamics and social interactions. Their lives are lived with other people, and their work is carried on with and for the sake of others. A focus on the self and on relations – and on how our understanding of both affects our behavior – should provide the explicit framework for one course during each learning stage.

The academic materials that relate to this area are typically taught as separate subjects – psychology, anthropology, literature, and so on – and in the process their relevance is often lost. It would be far more meaningful for teachers to pull together into one course the materials that relate to understanding the self and others and then to ask students to use what they are studying to gain a broader understanding of the situations they face in their own lives – for example, in their Constructive Actions. In addition, during each learning stage such a course would take explicit responsibility for developing interpersonal and communication skills among children.

The fourth dimension is *systems*. Every student needs to develop both a theoretical and a working understanding of the systems of which he or she is a part. These systems include the family and larger social organizations, government, the economic system, the education system, the world of technology, the environment, and so on. This dimension of learning is, relatively speaking, underexamined in our traditional education system. Yet the more we operate as members of interlocking institutions, the more we need to understand the systems of which we are a part and to gain direct experience of them.

During each learning stage a course focused on understanding systems would build students' abilities to operate as members of a global society. Academic materials from various disciplines that relate to understanding systems – history, social studies, computer science, economics, the physical sciences, and so on – could all be collected together under this crucial dimension. The systems course in particular would be responsible for helping students deal on a practical level with the institutions involved in their Constructive Actions.

The fifth and final dimension is *skills*. Clearly, students must develop the concrete abilities or skills they will need as adult citizens. Some of these skills are commonly attended to in the traditional curriculum: reading, writing, grammar, computer literacy, and math and science ability. Yet students would be far better motivated to learn such skills if they applied them as they learned them to concrete goals that they had themselves devised – if they saw them as tools that were useful for immediate purposes. Every math problem and science experiment would relate to the learning stage's purpose. Thus learning how to perform these tasks would bear a direct relationship to one's life.

SINCE THE five dimensions identify the knowledge and the abilities that students need to develop to become fully educated, they also implicitly define assessment procedures under the new paradigm. The sixth feature of the paradigm is therefore that assessment focuses on students' abilities to integrate their understanding of the dimensions of learning into effective Constructive Action.[5]

This approach to assessment is holistic and performance-based. It evaluates not simply the student's theoretical knowledge but rather the growing ability to use that knowledge in ever more sophisticated ways to achieve a certain outcome. Thus the assessment process reflects an educational design in which the student moves from the school into the community and from the community back to the school – always applying what he or she learns, testing ideas, implementing actions, and evaluating the results of those actions.

As they test and apply what they learn, students of necessity learn not a fragmented but a comprehensive approach to life. Their experience asks them to relate academic materials to one another, to the Constructive Action, and to life. Simultaneously, they develop personal, social, and professional skills. Their experience teaches them to see themselves as citizens who can make positive change happen.

Teachers will find it useful to establish for each learning stage both general and specific outcomes against which learning and performance can be assessed. A general outcome might be the successful completion of a Constructive Action, while specific outcomes would focus on the intellectual and personal growth of the child. Such outcomes would be specified for each dimension. For example, in a learning stage in which children focus on developing the arts in the community, an outcome for the values and ethics dimension might be the ability to describe

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values in a work of art produced by someone in the community and in a work of art from, say, Latin America. This outcome would involve skills of comparison, making connections, and evaluating. During each learning stage, students would be assessed for their growth in those skills and for their sophistication in applying them to life.

This fundamental change in our understanding of assessment implies a deep change in our understanding of the role of teachers as well. A seventh feature of the paradigm relates to the way that teachers function within such a new system of education.

As we abandon teaching by the disciplines, teachers inevitably face new roles with more challenging possibilities. Instead of teaching isolated subjects in isolated classrooms, they will find themselves working together to build curricula around significant social purposes. They will explore as a team how they can use academic materials to illustrate the dimensions of effective knowledge and action. They will become responsible not just for academic knowledge but also for the growth of their students as serious citizens. Moreover, they will see this growth in terms of its ability to help children become a force for social improvement. Teachers will see themselves as liaisons to the outside world and will become responsible for building links with the community. They will see themselves less as storehouses of information and more as mentors, guiding their students through an empowering process that unites intellectual knowledge with effective action.

The role of teachers will be far more challenging than the role they play in the traditional system. It will also be far more exciting and energizing because it will allow for growth. Teachers will be asking themselves not how they can drum information into their students, but rather how they can enable students to become what they should become – leaders who can revitalize their communities and society. In other words, teachers' outlook on what they do when they educate children will be fundamentally different.

While the new system of education proposed here is profoundly different from the current system, that does not make it utopian.[6] Today 10 public schools are in various stages of implementing this model, under the guidance of staff from Audrey Cohen College. The college first implemented the design in a public junior high school in New York City in 1983. Its schools today include elementary and junior high schools in New York State, Arizona, California, Florida, Illinois, and Mississippi. Children enrolled in these schools have shown marked improvements in social and academic development as well as in motivation and retention. In July of 1992 the college's proposal to the New American Schools Development Corporation was chosen from a pool of 686 applicants as one of 11 designs to revolutionize America's schools.

In education, as in life, change is often resisted because it is difficult. But when that change is confronted, what looked difficult becomes liberating, as new energies are released. It would be a mistake to perpetuate a system of education that is linear and fragmented, when current brain research indicates that the mind does not work in a linear and fragmented fashion.[7] This new system of education is in harmony with the way the mind actually functions.

We have stifled our children – and thus our society – for too long. Educators need to reaffirm their commitment to the child and to the vision of the child as the rejuvenating force of our future. This vision can only be achieved by giving children the responsibility to grow into their capacities. By focusing on purposive Constructive Action as the goal of education, the new paradigm gives children the opportunity to be what they need to be, and it gives our society hope for the future.

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3. Arthur W. Chickering and Associates, compilers, *The Modern American College: Responding to the New Realities of Diverse Students and a Changing Society* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981), pp. 522-24.
4. Audrey C. Cohen, *The Service Society* (New York: College for Human Services, 1976).
5. Audrey C. Cohen, *The Citizen as Integrating Agent* (Rockville, Md.: Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Human Services Monograph Series 9, September 1978).
6. Grant and Riesman, p. 17.
7. Walter J. Freeman, "The Physiology of Perception," *Scientific American*, February 1991, pp. 78-85.