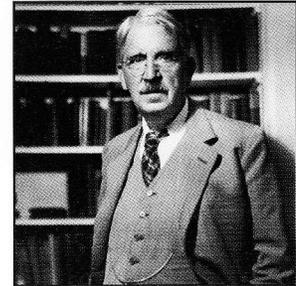


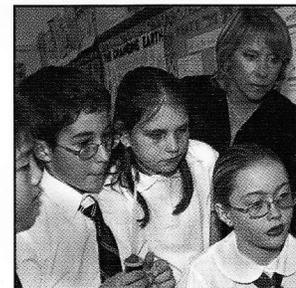
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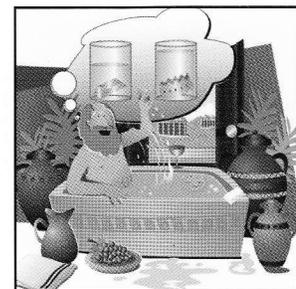
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COLLOQUIUM

A Matter of Degree

By Jason Ohler

In the two decades that I have been involved with teacher education, I have never seen a profession so in search of itself. I entered education during the peak of the open classroom/alternative education movement, which was rapidly replaced by education theorist Madeline Hunter's need for predictability and accountability, which yielded to a number of attempts to honor self-discovery, which were always countered by a back-to-the-basics movement. Then, either because of or coincidentally along with the advent of technology, came restructuring, in which the classroom and the roles of its inhabitants were redesigned due to the changing demands in the way we lived and worked. As we wrestle with school-to-work, voucher-driven, semi-private education and K-80 learning, we are, as always, not only in the middle of one paradigm but also always poised for the next.

LAYING BLAME

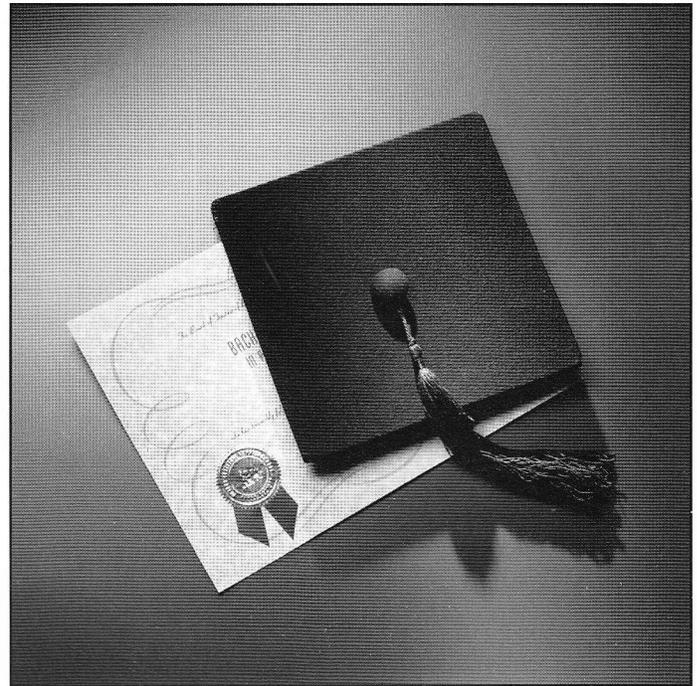
Education's search for a path is largely driven by a sincere desire to improve and by a confused public that blames our schools for everything from a bad economy (when there is one)—but never credits them for a good economy (when it comes around)—to a lack of respect for the past, while pushing them to abandon it in order to prepare kids for the future. By the end of the last two decades, there was very little I knew for sure about the ever-evolving world of teacher education, except perhaps the following: (1) every educational movement offers something worthwhile to the profession of teaching while simultaneously containing the seeds of its own misuse; and (2) despite our experience on the merry-go-round of educational philosophy, we have not yet learned to anticipate the downside of, as CEO of Aspire Public Schools Don Shalvey calls it, "the paradigm du jour."

As we wrestle with school-to-work, voucher-driven, semi-private education and K-80 learning, we are, as always, not only in the middle of one paradigm but also always poised for the next.

Classroom teachers, often criticized for their unwillingness to change, many times are simply overpowered by policy makers who tend to adopt the newest trend, overdo it, vilify it, and move on in search of the next one so quickly that classroom teachers don't have time to determine what works and what doesn't. So, bear with me as I examine the current paradigm in light of these observations.

SETTING STANDARDS

The rage now is standards and their practical complement, competencies. Through various federal, state, and local initiatives,



many school districts across America have developed standards, which usually take the form of a wish list of abilities that we want students to have at various age levels and in various subject areas. Competencies are standards made concrete. They typically consist of skills that students who have met the standards should be able to demonstrate. Thus, a standard might be expressed as: "Students should understand the basic working of the solar system"; while a competency to address this might be stated as: "Students will be able to describe the basic elements of the solar system, using diagrams, and explain the relationship between the surface temperature of a planet and distance from the sun."

So, you might ask, if this is an example of the current movement, how can anyone be against being competent? It sure beats being incompetent. As with all educational movements, standards and competencies offer a great deal that is useful. But I offer the following concerns, which sooner or later we will need to address.

DROWNING IN A SEA OF PAPER

Let me start with the less important stuff first. To begin with, there is the sheer volume of paperwork associated with competencies. As an educator, I must now address seven sets of standards or competencies, some related to my field (educational technology), some related to my institution (a state-supported university), some related to state mandates (Alaska), and so on. I could easily find seven more, all of which have value. It has become a "rubric's cube" (pun intended) to keep them aligned. While this sounds more like whining than social inquiry, I am compelled to observe that what had all the potential of being helpful is now confusing, unbelievably time consuming, and often counterproductive—if the real goal is to spend time helping students learn.

teachers joined last year, and use a database tool designed for group resource sharing. With continuous review and guidance by their teachers and some peer technical assistance in preparing their presentation with multimedia tools, they complete their project. When the team finally presents its finding, the planning commission values and utilizes the knowledge created by this student team while deciding the city's zoning issues. The students' findings and successes will be published electronically on an environmental home page on the town's Web site for others to reference in the future.

In these examples, schools have taken advantage of resources available to them. Teachers were prepared to do what needed to be done within each of the suggested scenarios. It meant that (in addition to having the technology that was available and understood by teachers and students alike) teaching was moving from highly directed instruction toward a more project-based, constructivist learning environment.

An audit is about knowing where you are, and where you want to be along this continuum.

AN AUSPICIOUS BEGINNING

Phi Delta Kappa has for years helped districts through Curriculum Management Audits (CMAs). The CMA is fundamentally a discrepancy analysis—it is a process of letting an audit team examine a district's curriculum frameworks with an eye toward discovery of what is missing or what should be expanded. When PDK made the decision to develop Technology Audit Services, it was determined that the outcome should not place blame nor shame upon anyone or any process. Instead, the Technology Audit Service is geared to provide for the means to continuous, specific improvements.

Technology Audits were developed initially by the Center for Excellence in Education at Indiana University (IU) for a partnership with Phi Delta Kappa International. Aided by a grant from the Kellogg Foundation, IU, Howard Mehlinger (then director of the Center), and his staff began in June 1998 to develop procedures for technology audits and to lead the initial effort. In January 1999, a meeting was held in Indianapolis to discuss the tentative procedures and to elicit the interest of individuals who might wish to become auditors. A series of "awareness conferences" was held in spring 1999 to market the service under the name TechAudits; PDK also began to market the new service.

In May 1999, the first audits were undertaken in two Indiana communities, Corydon and Anderson. These two efforts were tests of chosen procedures; both audits were heavily subsidized. In December 1999 and in February 2000, teams of auditors completed audits and produced written reports for school systems in Burlington, Vermont, and Pike Township in Indianapolis. Another audit team traveled to Perry Township in Indianapolis in December 1999, with the intention of completing a multimedia report using an approach somewhat modified from that used in Corydon and Anderson. The Perry Township multimedia report was completed recently.

Pike's assistant superintendent for secondary education, Larry Galyen, reports that months later the district is still living with the impact of the audit. In this case, the audit brought two camps of thinking together on personnel issues that had been going unresolved. This has allowed the district to move forward

with its own technology plan implementation as well as the three-year plan required by the state of Indiana.

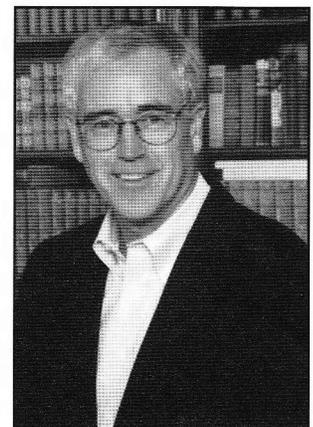
Beyond the planning and plan implementation, the audit brought the district's focus on reality and, as Galyen says, "crystallized our thinking about the district's direction for technology now and in the future." Among the audit team's recommendations was that the district make a deliberate effort to publicize and draw attention to some of its most innovative practices in the use of technology. Then, it was further suggested, the district should adopt the most effective practices district-wide to ensure conformity of student experience. Further, it was suggested in the audit report that the district consider adopting the International Society for Technology Education standards for students. These, it was said, could provide a baseline, and the school could adopt or modify these as they were deemed important.

Galyen indicated that the audit continues as an essential document that will be used as a map to this district's effective use of technology. A side benefit, he said, was the excitement generated among staff in preparation for and during the week-long visit by the PDK audit team. Teachers, students, and other staff felt that their opinions counted and that what they said to auditors, as well as what the auditors were able to see for themselves, would begin to make a difference.

LOOKING AHEAD

From all this a pattern becomes clear: Effort has, for years, been the object of our energy and spending. Effort is good and necessary. The outcome of effort is usually quantified as "sufficient" numbers of machines gathered in labs or in classrooms sometimes joined together by networks of fiber backbone and cabling infrastructure. Effort may also be measured in terms of "seat time" in front of a computer. In fact, it can include a teacher's approach to including technology in her or his lesson plan. Effort may also extend to a learner's striving to include a Power Point® presentation in a report about the Mississippi River, and it may also be calibrated against a curriculum for teaching technology. But, as we've seen in the CEO Forum reports and in the scenarios describing levels of technology integration, it will be results, not effort, that take center stage in the 21st-Century school. ◀

Henry B. "Hal" Gardner and his wife, Jean, are partners in HomoFaber Technologies: Curriculum and Technology Solutions, an educational technology consulting and sales firm located in Kansas City, Missouri. Over the last 25 years, Hal has worked in media and technology with the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Missouri School Boards Association, Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) Schools, and Charlotte Education Foundation. He was instrumental in the development of legislation in Missouri that resulted in an earmarked tax on video rentals for distance learning technologies in state schools. He can be reached at kchbg@aol.



There is also the fear that always lurks in the back of my mind that some, if not many, students might be better off developing the talents and interests they have rather than focusing on the plethora of competencies that now confront them. I am not suggesting we have set the bar too high, but perhaps too broadly. As I look at the exit standards for high school students in my own state, I don't know any five people collectively who have these abilities among them in all subject areas. We all know students who shine in some areas and are weak in others. These students will, on some level, be judged incompetent by standardized learning and testing. Some of our concerns about these students are bona fide, while others reflect cultural and social biases and fail to take advantage of students' intrinsic motivation to develop talents and skills that are meaningful to them.

Schools in poor areas that are already struggling will be held to the same standards as all other schools, but will receive no extra help—all stick and no carrot.

The economic divide will only amplify this situation. Schools in poor areas that are already struggling will be held to the same standards as all other schools, but will receive no extra help—all stick and no carrot.

I also don't feel we as a society have thought through the amount of power we are willing to relegate to standardized tests and those who create them. As students, teachers, schools, and entire districts are reduced to statistical assessments of standardized test results, we begin to see an ugly truth: in a standardized testing environment, it is extremely difficult to test or reward for skills in creative problem solving, critical thinking, lifelong learning, and a number of other key skills that are needed today. Therefore, teachers will forgo the kind of honest inquiry and exploration skills needed in "the real world" to make sure students are ready to take tests or address standards. No doubt there are things we can legitimately test for in a standardized environment. But no doubt there are many we cannot, none of which will be considered valuable, and therefore, will not be addressed.

But perhaps the most disturbing part of a competency-driven education environment is that, as the teacher, I can no longer move the goal post down the field for those who need to

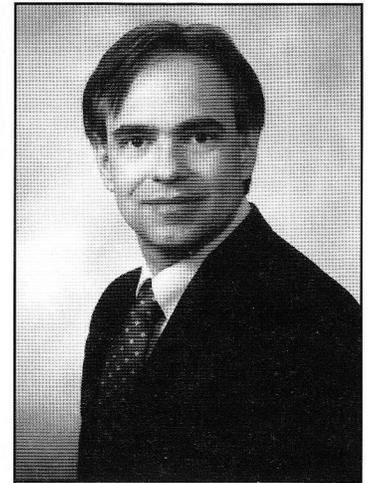
be pushed the extra 10 yards to truly realize their potential. If a student meets or even exceeds the competencies, he or she is free to go. While this sounds wonderfully equitable, it comes at the expense of true mentoring while promoting mediocrity. The great irony is that it is the students I pushed to excellence over the years—many of whom were "competent" before they met me—who have come back to thank me for being a good teacher. I don't think many will come back to thank me for recognizing their competency.

SHIFTING PARADIGMS

In this political year it was at least curious, if not disturbing, to hear all the great macho blustering about being "tough on standards" juxtaposed with candidates' desires to have students prepared for the realities of today's workforce. While these two goals are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they are far from being reconciled. Perhaps they will meet in the middle by letting the competency movement put formal education out of business. After all, what is the value of a degree in an era in which being competent is king? If we can prove we know how to do something, do we need a learning institution to bless our knowledge? If employers value proven abilities over parchment, then clearly formal education has a new role in society. Perhaps it will turn out to be producing well-rounded human beings before they set out for the work world in which "attitude as well as aptitude" is the new key to success.

. . . the science of teaching is knowing a number of different approaches to teaching, while the art is knowing when to use which.

As a teacher, I know that somewhere in my future lurks an enthusiastic reformer who honestly believes in the next paradigm and whose job it is to help me make the shift. While no doubt there is value in the next wave of re-evaluation, the fact is that good teachers come in every flavor of philosophy. As paradigms come and go, we would do well to remember that the science of teaching is knowing a number of different approaches to teaching, while the art is knowing when to use which. In the meantime, I brace myself for the next wave of reform and hope we have the wisdom of foresight to anticipate its weaknesses. ◀



David Gelotte

Jason Ohler is director of the educational technology program at the University of Alaska Southeast in Juneau. He is author of *Taming the Beast: Choice & Control in the Electronic Jungle*, published by TECHNOS Press in 1999, and is editor of a second TECHNOS Press book titled *Future Courses: A Compendium of Thought about Education, Technology & The Future*, scheduled for release in spring 2001.