

A Fable of Textbook Strategy

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With no comment whatsoever we present a fable by William Van Til. It speaks for itself.

AS ALL BUT THE TEENSIEST of you readers know, the world of education has long been divided into warring camps--the traditionalists representing conservatism and the experimentalists representing progressivism. No use blinking the fact--we're Two Worlds and we're locked in grapple. Look at the ways we use materials of instruction, for instance.

True to Our Label

Our side--the experimentalists, of course--uses a variety of materials. We use pamphlets and posters, curriculum labs and collected curios, movies and magazines, charts and child creations, film strips and free stuff, best-sellers and biographies, travel and teaching aids, radio and regalia, participation and parents. True to our label, we try anything and many things. We're proud of our experimentation, our fertile usages and inventions. Our materials are good for the education of youngsters; they're also of importance in our continuing war against conservatism.

As you know, some of our materials of instruction have proven as attractive as sin or as shiny new toys to some opponents in the enemy's camp. By trying much, and by reporting and sharing our experiences, we have placed many Trojan Horses packed with progressive ideas and approaches within the camp of our enemy, traditionalism. Many traditionalists have been won over.

But still the army of traditionalism is numerically over-powering. We are yet a long way from winning this war for educational democracy. The enemy has a powerful secret weapon!

Unmasking the Secret Weapon

All captured traditionalists, when disarmed and questioned about their materials of instruction, have reluctantly handed over The Textbook for The Course. Without it, the traditionalist is noticeably nervous and insecure; The Textbook for The Course is apparently a great source of solace and security to him.

It is a strange and wondrous thing--this The Textbook for The Course. It is palpable and tangible; it may be held in one's hand and examined. Take, for instance, the recently seized Atomic Global World and American History, by the scholarly authors Jukes and Kalikak. It is a singular book.

But The Textbook for The Course is more than singular--it is also plural and multiple. The titles it bears are of infinite variety and it is rumored that its sales are astronomical. Like the nosey, omnipresent Greek gods, The Textbook for The Course is pervasive and may be found everywhere at once. Yet oddly enough, though everywhere, it can exist in splendid isolation.

E Pluribus Unum must be the motto of the enemy camp. For The Textbook for The Course illustrates that out of many comes the one. After the mysteries of textbook selection, The Textbook for The Course regains its singular form in a particular class in a particular school in the army of tradition. Here no competitors appear to dim the glory of The Textbook for The Course, the exclusive fountainhead of truth, the traditionalist's material of instruction and his major weapon.

A Daring New Tactic Proposed

Struggling against a traditionalism armed with this potent weapon, we experimentalists trouble the heavens with our bootless cries. We deprecate; we deplore; we denounce; we decry. But all too seldom do we try to turn the enemy's major weapon against him. Yet this is the very thing this article proposes - as a daring and revolutionary tactic in the great struggle in which we are engaged.

Many will denounce the daring proposal to destroy The Textbook for The Course through adapting it to our purposes. Each of our three popular schools of thought as to textbooks are officially on record-against the textbook weapon. The writer hopes he will not be investigated by the Committee on Un-Experimental Activities if he examines each of our schools of thought on the use of textbooks.

"The Only Good Indian" War Cry

Longest established in our camp is "all textbooks are evil" group. The name derives from the war cry of our old-time pioneers in experimental education. Let us recall the historic reasoning: textbooks are used by the enemy; the enemy is evil; therefore textbooks are evil. Textbooks are evil; X is a textbook; X is evil. This admirably disposes of the matter save that the textbook does not vanish upon pronouncement of these syllogisms. Even in our own ranks, experimentalists have been discovered surreptitiously using textbooks!

Historically it is not difficult to recognize how this school of thought came about. As we all know, the war between traditionalism and experimentalism was begun as a revolution by our liberty-loving ancestors. Our forefathers swung lustily against such inviting targets as authoritarian procedures, divorce from social realities, invalid theory of learning, and the ignoring of needs. The textbook was a neatly-bound-together illustration of the major vices of traditionalism. To it, we experimentalists applied many opprobrious and undoubtedly deserved reproaches. Our milder terms included dull, adult-centered, autocratic, standardized, sterile, and venal.

Many were the stories told at experimentalist campfires of textbook-related barbarisms--the corruption of legislators and educators in the internecine warfare for state

adoptions, the craven behavior of authors who doctored and watered down statements, here conveniently forgetting about evolution of which they must have heard tell, there appeasing racist sensibilities in treating of the Civil War or whether Negroes are human beings too, everywhere paying proper respect to Mammon, a potent god.

The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll

But not all experimentalists shunned and renounced the textbook in actual fact, though almost all did in public proclamations. Some of our people, as mentioned before, used the device in secret, though they wrote no articles about it. Even more interesting than the hidden addiction of some of our masses is the "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" school of thought which appeared among leaders of our progressive camp, including eminently respectable experimentalists in the best standing.

While he was Dr. Jekyll, the experimentalist would denounce traditionalism and its textbooks with the fervor of an elder of the "textbooks are evil" school. At the leading conventions, and with honeyed terms, he would describe the importance of individual differences, of dealing courageously with controversial issues, of presenting alternatives for value application rather than setting forth a fixed truth to be learned, of meeting felt needs, of avoiding sterile question and answer recitations. But in the stillness of the night Dr. Jekyll would become Mr. Hyde. And Mr. Hyde would write textbooks. Even his best friends didn't tell him that his textbooks were different from or better than the textbooks of traditionalism, or that they moved conservative users toward more experimental practice. His best friends didn't tell him because of two difficult facts: (a) his texts actually weren't different or better, and (b) as men of the world, his best friends knew why he had really written the textbooks.

Thus the "Jekyll-Hyde" school stood like a Colossus with one foot squarely planted in each camp. This might have been a very difficult stance to master had not many of the Jekyll-Hydes been professors of education. As professors they had had long training and experience in inconsistency. To them, dichotomy was normalcy. In many lectures, they condemned lectures. They advocated teacher-pupil planning after they passed out their detailed syllabi on the first day of class. They inveighed against arbitrary assignments and assigned required reading on the matter. Before passing out the A's and F's, they thundered against the tyranny of grades. To college classes of nameless faces they advised knowing the student and meeting his needs. In fact, experience was the creed they advocated daily in the walled-in classroom. The writing of textbooks indistinguishable from those of tradition was obviously only an extension of their professional experiencing. Consequently, textbook writing caused only a few to enter the booby-hatch. Many more paid off their mortgages and lived schizoidly ever after in Paranoid Heights.

"Hand-Holders" Abhor All Print

Nor does experimentation with the textbook command support among the left wing of experimental education, the "hand-holders" who form a third school on the matter of textbooks. For the "hand-holders" have denounced not only the textbook but

have renounced the written word itself, along with all ways of learning that fall short of face-to-face contact. In articles and books in which they frequently use strange words, which they apparently coin, they explain that words are useless. Only person-to-person experiences are the real McCoy in changing behavior—experiences like holding cozy conversations. Incidentally, spoken words across a table (which must be round) are regarded as miraculously exempt from the curse of ineffectuality.

The name of this school, "hand-holders," obviously derives from the theory restrainedly sketched before. "Hand-holder" carries the three-fold connotation of (1) person-to-person intimacy as the sole road to salvation, (2) holding one's hand from setting pen to paper, and (3) the desirability of hand-to-hand conflict with the enemy who at present unfairly uses many media of public information in a mass-communication world. For the purposes of this investigation it is sufficient to remark that the "hand-holders" too repudiate the use of the textbook weapon against the enemy, for this is part of their creed at abhorrence of all print--newspapers, magazines, yearbooks, educational periodicals.

So our three prevalent schools of thought are, for varied reasons, unsympathetic to the strategy which is advocated here. Nevertheless, today there are rumblings of dissatisfaction in the ranks of tradition. They must not be ignored--they present an opportunity.

Strategy Is the Solution

Most of our generals are agreed that the great strategic problem for the experimentalist is how to aid a growing number of dissidents in the ranks of tradition to make their way over to our lines. To this end we establish laboratory schools with functions which might be compared to the decoy duck, did not the analogy seem vaguely unwholesome to this writer. To this end, our men become field consultants and seldom again see their wives and children. To this end, we dangle before the opposition fascinating materials of instruction which sometimes win converts despite qualms about security.

But the potent weapon of the enemy we have foresworn. Yet it is the most powerful material of instruction now in use in schools. If we follow our present policy of denouncing the textbooks and then pretending they aren't there, we will continue to abdicate as to any real influence. As a result of our abdication, tomorrow's textbooks will continue to be written largely by traditional educators and our Mr. Hydes.

The Strategy Revealed

The writer makes bold to suggest that experimentalists experiment with a possible way of moving forward the educational frontier through writing the insights of experimental education into the textbook. Let us destroy The Textbook for The Course through textbooks which will foster teacher-pupil planning, take youth needs as a point of departure, pose situations involving choice among conflicting values, get to grips with vital social realities, encourage wide use of varied materials of instruction.

No experimentalist emancipated from The Textbook for The Course by conversion or grown up in our ranks need protest that he will be forced back into the academic straitjacket. If he has learned to advance democratic purposes and vital education without dependence upon a textbook, more power to him. The new textbook is intended for the many in the camp of tradition who are dissident and unhappy and who might find their way into our ranks if vouchsafed more help. Those who ask for bread will hardly be satisfied with the philosopher's stone. The new textbook is also intended for those in our own ranks who are secretly addicted to the Textbook for The Course. It is for those who are theoretically saved while practically living in sin.

If, for instance, we wish to foster actual teacher-student planning by those who fall into the two broad groups for whom the new material is intended, let us write into the body of our experimental-minded texts illustrations of how teachers and students plan together. Let us so build our texts that further joint planning by teacher and student is essential to complete a process already begun which, in turn, is integral to the structure of the text.

If we wish to foster critical scrutiny of conflicting value patterns and consequently to help students to reconstruct their experiences, let us create situations in texts in which values conflict and students must choose. For instance, instead of blatantly or tacitly expounding any one approach to economic thought, we might consider the pros and cons not only of conflicting economic interpretations but also of the basic assumptions which underlie each interpretation--particularly the philosophical, psychological, and historical assumptions. We can construct texts which, instead of presenting a witches' brew of uninterpreted facts, pave the way for intelligent discussion of value issues.

If we wish to encourage broad use of varied materials of instruction, let us be fertile in our suggestions. Has anyone ever used a battery of materials and a meaningful approach through the pedestrian lists of suggested activities tacked on the ends of chapters? We need no bustles on the rears of our chapters. We'll get maximal use of a variety of materials on the part of our users if we disperse throughout the text a range of things to do which are exactly right for the occasion. When recommending movies related to a topic, our experimentalist will not be content with a vague benign endorsement; he'll both refer to the film catalogue and give book, chapter, and verse on specific available movies. When writing of possible community participation activities, he'll mention specific past precedents as well as dream up recommendations.

Always the writer will present several possibilities, multiple media, the varied ways for skinning a cat. Always the effort will be to help the teacher to be free. Emancipation alone is not enough; in education we have found that many, free in theory, have in reality clung fondly to their chains.

Grave Will Be the Concern

Great will be the head shaking in the councils of the experimentalists at this proposal for destroying The Textbook for The Course by turning against the enemy experimental models of his ancient blunderbuss. The "all textbooks are evil" school will stalwartly, though a bit repetitiously, advance their claim. The "hand-holders" will shake

their heads pityingly and will continue calling for hand-to-hand struggles in this age of mass communication. Worst of all, the "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" school will first wait to see whether the proposal gains acceptance and, if it does, claim that this is just what they have been doing all along. Thus the difference between the Jekyll-Hydes and the few venturesome souls who have been actually attempting the strategy here recommended may become as blurry as a reactionary newspaper's distinctions among communists and liberals. To differentiate among the two schools, fortunately we can still use the Biblical injunction, "By their works shall ye know them."

It will be argued that the weapon-makers, the publishers, may get wind of the real purpose of the Machiavellian scheme, the destruction of The Textbook for The Course-- and with it the enemy, traditionalism. If so, it will be said, the publishers may be shrewd enough to refuse to publish our books. This, however, seems an unlikely move on the part of the makers of weapons, the merchants of death who publish The Textbook. If what these merchants refer to as a "demand" develops, they will go along with one eye on trends, one on sales, and with both hands clutching a financial statement. Despite the briskness of business at present, the brighter among them indicate a worried willingness to move in the experimental direction if they can find out what in thunder it is.

Basically, however, fear of the merchants of death getting wind of the scheme and related fear that traditionalists will stiffen their resistance if their counter-propaganda tips them off are equally groundless. The secret of our daring proposal is safe since no traditionalist and no conservative publisher reads *Educational Leadership*. For if they did, how could they remain traditional or educationally conservative?

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