

Are Educators Lemmings? Now, It's Standards, Another Behaviorist Hoax

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The days of a teacher getting a curriculum and putting her independent spin on it, her interpretation those days are over.

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Abstract

This article analyzes the relatively recent standards movement, now morphed into Common Core standards, in curriculum as another behaviorist approach in education. First, the metaphor of the lemmings-march-to-suicide is briefly mentioned, then behaviorist thinking is briefly portrayed with examples provided of behaviorism in education. The standards movement is then presented and analyzed, pointing to its use of tests as the vehicle for evaluation, followed by the conclusion that, indeed, the movement is clearly behaviorist in its nature. Last, we present some remedies, conclusions, implications, and recommendations for policy and action.

Keywords:

Curriculum; standards movement; Common Core standards; behaviorism; test-driven curriculum; emergent curriculum models.

Brief analysis of behaviorism, examples in education, (and, comments on Pavlov's little known difficulties in his original experiments with dogs)

The title of this paper uses the metaphor of lemmings marching to suicide to illuminate another example of educators' stumbling blindly and unthinkingly to popular fads and movements. Exploration of behaviorism provides an example of an unthinking march to an unpleasant end. Behaviorism as a school of psychology goes back a considerable distance in time to Pavlov (1927) and Watson (1913). Watson believed that "...psychology was the study of observable, measurable behavior, and nothing more" (Morris, 1982, p.6). For Watson and other behaviorists, cognitive thinking processes were of no interest. How individuals think, how they make meaning, was inconsequential. How humans develop their thoughts, how they develop their thoughts alone and in interaction with others, was not a factor. Only measurable, observable behavior was the target. So, conditioning, stimulus-response comprised the processes used to elicit the observable behavior that the psychologist, or teacher, or administrator wanted to measure.

However, a colleague whose father was a friend of Pavlov and who could read Pavlov's experimental notes and journals in Russian discovered that not all the dogs cooperated in the experiments. Indeed, some dogs became angry and refused to play Pavlov's game. (W. F. Benjamin, personal communication, Sept. 14, 1997). In short, they appeared to develop a mind of their own, comprising a serious limitation to the validity of behaviorism and its use with people.

An example or two of behavioral thinking in education?

- Gold stars, M and M's are reward systems for appropriate resultant conditioned behavior. Usually used in special education (but not in gifted) classes.
- Teachers' expectations that student will learn from lectures, despite the evidence that only a minority of students learn from that delivery method.

- The accountability movement, now, a mania, expressed in the testing movement, is another illustration.

Standards, now, Common Core standards a recent development

Actually, the entrance of standards into the field of curriculum is relatively recent, following the short-lived Outcome-Based Education (McNair, 1993) movement taking place in the 1980's, which became too politicized to survive. Outcome-based education (OBE), "...specifies the `outcomes' students should be able to demonstrate upon leaving the system" (McNair, 1993, p.1), seems to have emerged as a reaction to the scientifically-based and early systems approach developed by Tyler at the University of Chicago (1950). Tyler ushered in the behavioral objectives era, which Mager (1962) codified in his *Preparing Instructional Objectives*.

The standards movement then succeeded this brief OBE approach, starting in the late 1980's (Dorn, 2007). Standards began their life cycle as voluntary, as part of the first President Bush's Goals 2000. Relic (2007) noted "By the beginning of the current academic year more than 40 states had enacted legislation for standards, thirty-three of them also including high stakes testing with grade twelve exit exams and benchmark tests at various other grades to determine progress" (p.1). As Erickson (2007) observed, "State *standards* are driving curriculum and instruction in the United States today" (p.37).

And, now, we see the specter of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan racing full tilt into the standards movement, pressuring the states to "...develop common, internationally measured standards for student achievement..." (Whitley, 2009, June 14, p.1). The standards movement has morphed into the Common Core state standards (CCSS), by Oct. 2010 adopted by 37 states and territories legally for math and language arts curriculum (Tienkin, 2011). "As of mid-April (2011), all but eight states had fully adopted the standards" (McCarl, 2011, April, p. 1).

What are standards?

"For many educators and members of the general public, a standard states what a student should know or be able to do" (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2009, p. 325). The authors further stated, "The National Research Council and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics interpret *standards* more broadly. These organizations indicate that standards elucidate what will enable all students to gain literacy and competence in the application of knowledge" (p. 326). Erickson, however, noted that standards seem to be pretty close to objectives (2007, p. 39).

And, the mechanism for measuring achieving standards?

What, then, is the mechanism for measuring success in learning the standards? Tests of course comprising a perfect confluence of movements as the testing movement now has joined forces with the standards movement (Ravitch, 2010). To support this assessment, note that Secretary Duncan allocated \$350 million dollars in 2009 to help states develop tests to assess those standards.

The problem with tests is that they have become the major approach for measuring achievement of standards and benchmarks. As the importance of testing has increased, particularly stimulated by the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the testing movement has become a mania. Obviously, the problem is that our American obsession with testing measures chiefly one capacity or skill, and, as Lemmon noted (1999, p.345), they do not measure "...wisdom, or originality, or humor, or toughness, or empathy, or common sense, or independence, or determination...."

However, the system is so set that kids *must* pass these tests in order to move into the next grade. In Florida, if an eight-year old third grader does not pass the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), he/she will fail and will be forced to repeat that grade again, despite the virtual unanimity of research pointing to the disastrous results of failing kids. In the first year of FCAT testing in Florida, 44,996 third graders were in danger of failing and 26,398 actually were held back (Green & Winters, 2006). The legislature, supported by the governor of the state, Jeb Bush, passed a law that if a child did not pass the FCAT on his/her second try, that child, now 9 years of age, was doomed to fail a second time and be 10 years old, still in third grade for the third time, now a full two years older than the rest of the kids. Almost ten thousand fell into that category.

Presently, the standards approach dominates the field of curriculum, obliterating any alternatives. If one opens any recent book on curriculum, if one consults any state department's handbook on criteria for determining and evaluating curriculum, if one looks at any school system's documents for classroom curriculum, one inevitably runs headlong into a host of standards, used to define the subject fields of curriculum.

The nail in the coffin -- Are standards valid?

Tienkin (2011, Winter, p. 3) cited Mathis (2010) categorically asserting, "The standards have not been validated empirically and no metric has been set to monitor the intended and unintended consequences they will have on the education system and children." Tienkin further noted,

The major arguments made by proponents in favor of the CCSS collapse under a review of the empirical literature: (a) America's children are "lagging" behind international peers in terms of academic achievement, and (b) the economic vibrancy and future of the United States relies upon American students outranking their global peers in international tests of academic achievement because of the mythical relationship between ranks on those tests and a country's economic competitiveness.

...Unfortunately for proponents of this empirically vapid argument it is well established that a rank on an international test of academic skills and knowledge does not have the power to predict future economic competitiveness and is otherwise meaningless for a host of reasons (Tienkin, 2011, pp. 3-4).

Is the standards movement behaviorist?

As one reads through the standards stated in curriculum textbooks, then in state standards for courses of study, then through syllabi for various subject-matter in school districts, one is struck that the organizing principle of standards has become *the* base for building learning experiences and then for evaluating the effectiveness of those experiences. In short, the construct of standards is dominating the field of curriculum relatively completely. No other model appears to be driving the field. And, perversely, as cited by Relic (2007), Vito Perrone noted in a lecture at Harvard University, that the standards movement seems to be "...more about standardization than standards, and a great danger is that given all the state mandates, the richness of classroom dynamics, what is studied and talked about, will be narrowed and stunted" (p.2).

Another way to recognize the impact of the standards movement is to analyze curriculum in terms of three types that appear daily in classrooms, the formal, the informal, and the hidden curriculum. One becomes struck by conclusions that fairly leap out of the classroom. The formal curriculum, that is, the intended curriculum, the objectives, are driven by the standards, which, in turn, are measured by a variety of benchmarks. They *are* the formal curriculum.

The informal curriculum, like all informal models, "Sally, would you mind getting the reading book out of your bookbag" constitutes spontaneous classroom interactions. However, it is the hidden curriculum that is often the most interesting in classroom and schools. It consists often of the teacher's not-so-hidden agenda which he/she brings into the classroom, as well as the schools' or district's or state' or national agenda or biases. The hidden curriculum, to which this paper refers, is essentially driven by the accountability movement, expressed directly by the omnipresent testing movement stampeding the curriculum of America like an uncontrolled juggernaut crashing down through the forests of our curricula.

A prescient article in 1989 by Benjamin predicted the emergence of the testing movement driving the curriculum, which, unfortunately, has come true. The hidden curriculum, now nationally apparent, driven by No Child Left Behind and its Annual Yearly Progress component, is to pass the tests come hell or high water, because the punishments are so draconian (loss of job, transfer of the staff to another school, takeover by the state or a private company, loss of bonuses and in the case of children, retention).

Another hidden curriculum not apparent to all, consists of the destruction of public education (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Ravitch, 2010, Inskeep, 2010, March), to be replaced by private education.

Remedies to escape the mousetrap

To escape a trap, one has to recognize that it *is* a trap and that one is caught in it. Culbert's (1974) *The Organizational Trap And How to Get Out of It* tells us that we have to change our thinking by utilizing different constructs and theories. We suggest constructivist thinking, or any other progressive approach (pragmatism, existentialist thinking). Using such an option as an emergent curriculum model finesses application of standards and benchmarks, since we are then working with the interests and needs of students, and probably society, but not those of the subject-matter specialists cited as the last effective source of curriculum noted by Tyler (1950). In the process, new, but individualized standards can be created, can emerge, more suited to and based on the expressed needs of those involved in the learning experiences created by students and instructors (if we wish to continue this model). This constitutes a distinctly divergent approach to the behaviorist subject-matter based standards presently dominating curriculum.

Conclusions, recommendations

Is the lemmings metaphor in the title of this paper appropriate? Are we marching to the drum of a behaviorist movement? The standards movement has become a noose tightening around the throats of students and teachers since its accompanying accountability model, expressed by an out-of-control testing movement, has taken control of the curriculum and the consequent learning activities in the classroom. Teachers are now almost exclusively teaching to the test, particularly in grades tested annually, (grades three to eight in elementary and middle school, and two grades in high school). The formal and hidden curricula attest to the dominance of this behaviorist model currently dominating curriculum. Moving toward constructivist emergent curriculum approaches can counteract this behaviorist domination.

Are we acting like lemmings, marching to suicide?

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