



Our Attempts at Educational Change Are Programmed for Failure

It would be an understatement to say that America's educators are not now in an innovative mood. Yet there is little reason for this to be so. Schools are still beset by problems, and we still need to find better ways to educate our young. Unfortunately, we seem to have a greatly diminished belief in our ability to bring about meaningful and constructive change.

In reality, our failure to maintain innovative programs cannot be blamed entirely on the flaws of the programs themselves. The real problem is with the methods we use to bring change about. We have fallen into a pattern of attempting change hastily (and too broadly), abandoning it swiftly (before it has been fully tried), and moving on to the next promise that is available. Consider the following sequence.

Step 1. A new idea—a program, model, technique, or theory—is introduced. If it takes hold, we rush to praise its virtues. It is the emotional need as much as the idea itself that attracts a following. Because this approach is “new,” we tell ourselves, it must surely be better.

Step 2. Reports about the idea spread, along with numerous accounts of its success in a variety of settings. At this stage, discussion centers on putting the idea to use while its proponents vie for recognition as knowledgeable experts. Little criticism is sought. The idea is still in its honeymoon phase.

Step 3. The innovation gets media-blitzed. We overstate its advantages while failing to relate it in any way to prior experiences. We disregard those who warn of elements of the idea that have failed in the past. In fact, its lack of connection with the traditional seems to give even more appeal.

Step 4. Abandonment. The romance phase having passed, what is now needed is an orderly examination and reporting of results. Some changes are necessary, but, having exhausted the glamour of the idea, supporters disappear and interested teachers are left to shift for themselves. What follows is disillusionment with the lack of instant success, intense criticism, and, finally, indifference. Because dispassionate reporting and systematic examination have been avoided, the idea remains functionally unexplored.

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In the hope of avoiding some of the major errors of the past, a few brief suggestions are in order. First, we need to carefully circumscribe the rhetoric that accompanies innovations. Excessive publicity does far more for the fame of the innovator than it can possibly do for the welfare of the new approach. We must demand proof of its potential before damning it with exaggerated claims.

Second, the educational community must ask innovators in what circum-

stances and under what conditions their new ideas will work. Few approaches can significantly benefit any large segment of students, even though they may well make a dramatic difference for some.

A third and related suggestion is that we become more realistic about the dimension of the changes we attempt. The broader the scope, the more difficult it is to institute lasting change.

Fourth, we must overcome our penchant to accept the “new” simply because it is new. We must cease burdening promising approaches with Madison Avenue rhetoric that is self-serving but ultimately destructive.

Finally, our research efforts need to be better organized and more intelligently applied. Few fields of study have generated as much research as education with such a paucity of results. Too little has been attempted in the way of longitudinal studies that would give us a picture of the long-term results. Lacking this, we are left with a host of efforts by entrepreneurs whose skills vary greatly and whose motives are often complex and not always to be trusted. As a result, research is given a bad name and conflicting conclusions erode practitioners' confidence that new directions can be accomplished.

To persuade by effective example is demanding. It is a slow and arduous process and yet ultimately far superior to publicity and rhetoric. Our need to change the way we attempt to bring change about represents an innovation that will be as challenging as anything we have thus far attempted. □

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