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Overview

RON BRANDT

The Fate of Craft Boutique

When in the mid 1970s I recommended approval of a list of courses including "Craft Boutique," a board of education member asked good naturedly whether I thought that was basic education. At a coffee break, I reminded him that our goals called for the schools to offer "some opportunities to extend individual talents and interests" as well as to provide basic education. We already offered several craft courses, and distributive education was an established part of the curriculum, so why not combine the two? Craft Boutique would give slow learners an opportunity to make attractive things and to learn economics by selling them in a school store.

The idea seemed defensible, but the recent reports on American education put the question in a new light. The National Commission on Excellence—along with most other groups—recommends that schools require more English, social studies, science, and mathematics. Yet John Goodlad reports that these are the very courses students dislike most.[1] The main reason, he says, is that students don't *do* much in academic courses except fill out worksheets and listen to teachers talk.[2] What many of them would rather do is construct things, act things out, do projects.[3]

"Most students," Goodlad writes, "need to see, touch, and smell what they read and write about. Time spent visiting a newspaper press, examining artifacts, or observing a craftsman provides reality and stimulus for later reading, explaining, and discussing." Otherwise, ". . . academic learning is too abstract."[4]

Yet *academic learning* is what the reports say these students should have. They acknowledge that the achievements of schools so far have been remarkable, but insist that the great American experiment in mass education will not be complete until all normal students learn to use their *minds*.

Goodlad attacks tracking, which he calls "a retreat rather than a strategy"[5] that corrupts the principle of individual differences. Mortimer Adler emphasizes "the samenesses that underlie the differences"[6] and urges a one-track curriculum that is "general and liberal . . . non-specialized and non-vocational."[7] The National Commission proclaims that *all* students "are entitled . . . to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost."[8] Ernest Boyer argues that "to expect less is to underestimate the capacity of students and diminish the significance of education."[9]

I had reservations about Craft Boutique in the 1970s, but I was not overly concerned because I thought it would be beneficial for students who needed to learn by doing. Now we are asked to reconsider whether such "personal development" courses are desirable for *any* student.

If not, deciding the fate of Craft Boutique will be relatively easy. The hard part will be coming up with courses in English, social studies, and other academic subjects that use active, concrete experiences—in order to develop the intellect.□



[1]John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), p. 116.
[2]Goodlad, p. 124.
[3]Goodlad, p. 114.
[4]Goodlad, p. 128.
[5]Goodlad, p. 297.
[6]Mortimer Adler, *The Paideia Proposal* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), p. 45.
[7]Adler, p. 18.
[8]National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 8.
[9]Ernest L. Boyer, *High School* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 117.

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