
PROLOGUE

Education Just Won't Fit Into Nice, Neat, Little Boxes

The Great Educational Debate has been raging since Adam tried to teach Eve the basics of horticulture. My first exposure to pedagogic controversy came somewhat later at Lincoln Elementary School in Blackwell, Oklahoma. The issue was phonics. My brother-the-speller had an old-fashioned first-grade teacher who flatly refused to abandon this method, no matter what the current wisdom dictated. I, on the other hand, learned to spell by sight, making Webster's Collegiate Dictionary my new best friend, difficult though it may be to look up a word you cannot spell.

The phonics flap was just about as substantive as the educational discussion got in my hometown, as I recall. Oh, we worried about passing the school mill levy among an electorate replete with retired farmers with no school-age children, but there wasn't much conversation about what or how the children were being taught. That was the business of the school folks; we trusted them.

Then we got a scare-and-a-half. While my little brother had been sounding out extraterrestrial, the Russians had been developing a sputnik. The race to the moon was on; science and math education was pursued with a near-religious fervor, and the federal support money began to flow. It was, after all, more important to build a sputnik than to spell it.

As college journalists, we idly debated this issue of federal aid to education—not how to secure more of it, amazingly enough, but whether the states should accept any at all for fear that with federal money would come federal control. We decided not to worry. This era was also known as the Age of Innocence.

It didn't last, neither the money nor the innocence, and we have been picking apart our educational institutions ever since. On the college level, the excesses of the late '60s and '70s destroyed confidence and shocked sensibilities; then survey after survey

showed our students on every level and in almost every discipline to be lagging behind their international counterparts. Now hardly a week goes by without another alarm bell sounding or a new fix-it proposal being put forth, some excellent, some foolish, most somewhere in between.

In Oklahoma, higher admission standards are imposed to raise the level of both teaching and learning in our universities. Public schools must retool to produce students who can meet those standards. The retooling is accomplished, at least in part, by a steady infusion of more and better-prepared teachers recruited from the best graduates our colleges and universities can offer. Call it a benevolent cycle.

Over the years, a number of conclusions can be drawn from the Great Debate, one being that educational concerns cannot be put into neat little boxes labeled "K-12" or "higher education." These areas have been separated for purposes of resource allocation and administrative oversight, but if we are truly serious about "lifelong learning," the dividing lines must be erased that historically have pitted one sector of education against another for the attention and support of the people and their elected representatives.

Another truth about the debate is that it will go on forever. As long as the body of knowledge keeps growing, there will be disagreements on how best to impart it. And in case you doubt the eternal nature of the debate, just imagine my surprise last year when visiting a first-grade class in Oklahoma City. There stood the young teacher, daughter of the sight-speller, niece of the phonics-phenom, guiding 25 little public school rookies as they loudly sounded out their spelling words with wildly exaggerated corresponding hand signals. Something new, she explained, the pedagogic wedding of sight and sound. What will they think of next?

—CJB