

How Schools Can Be Much More Productive

I predict ergonomic education is the next big thing. I know we need it! Although neither teacher nor engineer myself, I've always been fascinated by a point at which the two fields intersect. Namely, how do we make education truly efficient? How do we teach the MOST knowledge in the LEAST time with the LEAST effort? With the added proviso that the info has to stay put, ideally for a lifetime...

There's fast ways and slow ways of doing every job. If we could pit one approach to teaching against another, surely we could quantify which methods work best. But who is actually studying education from an ergonomic perspective? Search "ergonomic teaching" or "ergonomic education" in Google. You'll mainly find articles about the physical side of life: chairs and computer screens. In fact, my impression is that only businesses and the military actually get down in the dirt and try to determine what works. The educational establishment does not seem interested. Here's two reasons:

- 1) Throughout the 20th century, our educators got sidetracked by social engineering. With that focus, they naturally didn't have a lot of energy left over for making schools more academically successful. Read John Dewey. He wanted to downplay academics so that he could push his ideological schemes, especially in the crucial early grades. Not much to teach, and in no hurry to teach it, that's the Dewey plan. It's still hurting us.
- 2) Another problem is that the typical professor or textbook author has spent an entire life on one topic. These experts seem to want everyone else to struggle down the same long road. Which is silly. The average high school student is going to get one year of American history, one year of biology, etc. That's it. Schools have to make these brief exposures count.

Personally, I was lucky--I went to a lot of great schools. But here's my bottom line: not one course was taught as well as it could have been. That's what got me thinking. Surely, I concluded, teachers and schools could do a better job. Classrooms could be more organized, more exciting, more dramatic. More cunning, really. But where does a teacher learn to do all this when the ed schools and the ed establishment are not helping?

I've been making notes for years--decades, actually!--on the question of how education could be made more effective. I've finally distilled all this material into a piece called "How to Teach History, Etc." It stresses four main points:

1. School and teacher must commit to a subject. (Clearly, teachers have to major in the subjects they will teach.)
2. Use every teaching aid, visual aid, or educational aid. Use every trick, gimmick, or technique that will make classes more exciting, fun, and memorable.
3. Repeat, repeat, repeat. And then say it again some other way! The idea that you can go once over a subject, and expect people to recall much of it, is just not realistic.
- 4. Every course is ideally a gigantic mnemonic device, a matrix of interconnected facts.

The article's title is "26: How To Teach History, Etc." on Improve-Education.org.

I believe I've described the shift we need to see throughout American education: twice the seriousness and ingenuity in reaching our educational goals, but also twice the fun. At present, this is my impression, most schools aren't genuinely serious and people in the schools aren't having that much fun. Can't we do better? Of course we can.

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About the Author

Bruce Deitrick Price is a writer, artist, poet and education activist. He writes about education, language and culture on Improve-Education.org. This site now has 26 articles and more than 40,000 words of original content. Topics include: Latin, birds, robots, poetry, design, 1984, creativity, English usage, sophistry, and, now, efficient education.

