



Title	Reform in higher education : roads to the future
Author(s)	Everhart, Robert B.
Citation	北海道大學教育學部紀要, 68, 275-281
Issue Date	1995-07
Doc URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2115/29486
Type	bulletin (article)
File Information	68_P275-281.pdf



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REFORM IN HIGHER EDUCATION: ROADS TO THE FUTURE

Robert B. Everhart

The chairman of a school board directors called me once to find out how many students there were for each teacher in Japanese schools, and how many students there were for each teacher in American schools. I did some quick homework and discovered that in your country, secondary teachers average about fifty-five students in each of their classes. In America, the average is about twenty seven to thirty. I reported this information to the chairman, and he was quite surprised by the information which I provided. He said that this was not the information he expected--he actually thought that the Japanese schools would have the lower ratio and the American schools the higher ratio. In fact, he said he had heard that Japanese students were nicely behaved and that there were few discipline problems in Japanese schools. As chairperson of the school board, he wanted to convince his colleagues to spend more money to hire more teachers in order that the students in their schools too would be better behaved. When I told him that our ratio was already almost half that of Japanese schools, he was disappointed. I had not told him what he wanted to hear.

You see, in our country there is this long-standing belief that learning occurs only in classrooms that are orderly and in which teachers are in direct and continual control. The way in which Americans conceive of establishing that order and control is to have more adults in supervisory roles over students. They believe that Japanese teachers act like military instructors--shouting orders which students routinely obey without question. Most Americans do not understand that learning in Japanese schools occurs not so much because classrooms are like military units, but because there is high commitment to and involvement in schools by teachers, parents, and the society at large.

The misunderstanding by Americans of how schools of other cultures operate and what we might learn from each other occurs even at the highest levels. A number of years ago, your Minister of Education visited our national Secretary of Education in Washington. Our Secretary, in a dinner address, proceeded to praise your schools and the achievement of Japanese students. Furthermore, he exhorted American schools to borrow from Japan what he saw as the key to high achievement--"the excellent Japanese Juku system." The Japanese Minister of Education was obviously uncomfortable with the comments. Later,

*Special Address in commemoration of the 45th Anniversary of the School of Education, Hokkaido University, which was given on October 7, 1994. Professor Everhart is Dean of the School of Education, Portland State University, Oregon, USA

when the Secretary asked the Minister for his reactions to the speech, the Minister told him that the Japanese Ministry wanted to abolish the juku because it believed the juku placed undue pressure on students and stifled creativity. The Secretary of Education, on the other hand, saw the juku as a symbol of the commitment to schooling which he felt Americans don't have. He thought that if only America could import the juku (like importing a Sony or Toyota) then our commitment to school might increase as well.

The question of the goals of education is integral to the health of all nations. Advanced as well as developing nations see education as a key to their development and their place within the community of nations. In these days, when global matters significantly influence the direction of basically everything in the education of young people, there is an increasingly strong common interest which all of us in education share. I believe it important to focus the international exchanges and partnerships such as that between your university and mine on such commonalities. My remarks to you today center on what I believe higher education in general, and schools and Faculties of Education most specifically, need to consider. I'll focus upon three such commonalities found within the environment of education throughout the world.

The Environment of Education

The most relentless pressure on colleges and universities today is from the changing nature of the world economy and the role that postsecondary education plays in access to the labor market. This pressure, in most advanced economics, is found in the shift from a manufacturing, high wage base to a service, lower wage base. With fewer high wage jobs in the market, the competition for these positions is greater and advanced education plays an increasingly powerful role in their allocation.

This is a lesson hardly lost on tomorrow's workers. Much of the drive for postsecondary education worldwide is a simple recognition by workers and professionals that those who lack advanced training will be increasingly disadvantaged. This recognition effects not only students themselves, but the very institutions of higher education which they attend.

Even among the most elite postsecondary institutions, this search for training is affecting how colleges and universities function. Academic majors are increasingly selected by students more on the basis of the job to which it will lead. Equally important, those who fund higher education, whether they be parents, students, or the government, are increasingly asking the question: What are we getting for our money? These forces in turn are affecting how universities worldwide allocate resources within the university.

The good news here is that higher education is in demand, and there is fairly widespread recognition of the advantages it can bring to the student and the society. The bad news is that much of the demand for education stems from narrow vocationalism which demands immediate relevancy and pay off, such that the survival of higher education may rest more on its abilities to meet market demands than to educate individuals (in the widest sense of that term). How we, the academics who for so long have decided what knowledge

is appropriate for the teacher or clinician of tomorrow, deal with this dilemma of vocationalism versus education may determine the course of higher education for years to come.

A second environmental factor affecting us all is, of course, the technological factor. It seems most appropriate to touch on this matter here in Japan, where so much of the world's electronic technology has originated.

Higher education institutions around the world seem to have gone far in adopting technology. Many if not most faculty use personal computers for text processing as well as the manipulation of data sets. Networks abound worldwide, and communication between faculty is instantaneous and at times overwhelming. The availability of small, portable computers which link the user to virtually any communication network worldwide has virtually redefined the concept of one's "office." Indeed, I find now that some of my own faculty define their office by the location of their laptop computer and not the physical space where their books are stored.

The problem however is that most of us in higher education have approached technology more as individual consumers than as collective producers. While we may use technology to change the way we conduct our personal business, we have not considered fully how the same technology can apply to the process of teaching and learning. Even more critical, we have scarcely considered how this technology is rapidly altering the entire marketplace of educational goods and services.

Consider first the nature of technology as an interactive dimension. If networks serve individual faculty and the manner in which they conduct their scholarship, is it not equally likely that the same technology can have a profound impact on the teaching-learning process? If a faculty member can access information virtually at any time and anywhere, will not students be able to do likewise?

The presence of such a technology and its increasing availability has the same power to render the school and university classroom as obsolete as it does to change the nature of the faculty "office." Yet most of us in education have yet to fully grasp this reality. We prepare the educators of tomorrow for environments that may disappear in a short period of time, and act as if the technology we use to communicate with each other has no relationship to fundamental changes in the manner by which people learn.

Even more critically, few of us fully comprehend the impact of this technology on the marketplace of education. In many places throughout the world (and the U.S. is no exception) entire advanced degrees are being offered through satellite programs, beamed from locations thousands of miles from where they are received. In our University a masters degree in media and technology specifically designed for individuals who will staff the libraries of tomorrow is received via television and computer from Kansas--some fifteen hundred miles away. The proliferation of these programs, while opening access to education for students, also creates competition for colleges and universities which for decades, indeed centuries, have enjoyed a monopoly on the providing of educational services. How we enter

into this technology mainstream will do much to define our future in the years to come.

The third environmental factor affecting higher education worldwide is the increased press toward privatization, or the private funding of education. Higher education is coming more and more to be seen as a private good supported by private funds than a public good supported by public funds. There is a worldwide shift in perspective about higher education, a shift in perspective that argues that it is the individual who benefits most from the advantages of higher education, and it is the individual who should make most of the investment in their education. Thus parliaments and legislatures are increasingly likely to shift the payment for higher education from the society to the individual.

In my own university, this process has already occurred, with the percentage of the costs of higher education paid for by the student rising from twenty percent seven years ago to thirty five percent now. I foresee the day in our country where the fees charged students will be determined by the student's ability to pay, and thus different students will pay different rates for essentially the same education.

One can see how this move toward education as a private good intersects with changes in technology and the relationship between education and work which I discussed above. A student who bears an increased percentage of the cost of their education becomes, in essence, a customer of educational services, much like an individual who wishes to purchase an automobile. They enter the marketplace with certain resources, hoping to "purchase" an educational product that will "work" for them. In the past, the definition of what "worked" in education was largely defined by us, the faculty of the university. We set the curriculum, we decided the requirements for degrees, and we decided how to teach. We could do this because there was no competition--nobody else was involved in offering the same product. Even if our product didn't work, even if we did a terrible job of delivering the product, it was still the only product on the shelf. We might be ineffective teachers, we might teach material that students found useless or boring, and still the students came. There were no other options.

But other options are proliferating and the student who has the resources to buy education now has choices. Software learning packages are proliferating like viruses. Educational programs are beamed across nations and indeed the world. The assessment of learning is rapidly moving from a focus on inputs to a focus on outputs, thus rendering the manner by which a student learns relatively meaningless. Demonstrated learning is increasingly valued, while proxies for learning are devalued. The degree to which we face these realities will indeed define our success in the future. The degree to which we fail to meet those needs could easily cause us to go the way of the steam engine or the propeller aircraft.

Adapting to Change: An International Perspective

There are, I believe, ways in which those of us in higher education can assist each other with these challenges. Most specifically, I believe that the long-standing and productive

relationship between Portland State and Hokkaido University can be enhanced to center on the changing nature of education and how we in Faculties of Education can help direct the changes before us. To do that however, we need to examine carefully the nature of the academy and what know about how to change it. We must examine the nature of the work we do in the context of the forces that are sweeping across the international landscape. We must pay attention to the proverb, popular in America, related to those who would give easy advice: "physician, heal thyself."

Our own research, however, provides some lessons as work together to face the changes I have outlined. Let me talk next about three guideposts that we can use in our travels.

At the beginning of my address, I noted the observation by our Secretary of Education that the solution to increased achievement in American schools was to import the juku from the Japanese educational system. Adopting a change without understanding its context is a process often used in education. Yet mandating an ill-conceived change is one of the worst things we can do as we meet the challenges before us. While increased mandatory standards for drivers licenses might reduce traffic accidents, it is doubtful that mandating how college faculties deliver education will have much of an effect on the educational process. The manner in which curriculum is developed, material is delivered, research is conducted, and learning is assessed, all require changes in skill level, capacity, commitment, motivation, and judgement of the individuals making those changes. If there is anything we have learned across societies it's that, short of the threat of physical harm, It is difficult to make people change. Accordingly, at least in our profession, *you can't mandate what matters*. One can set the conditions for change, but not the direction of change. As we attempt to cope with the global forces affecting higher education, let us strive to establish conditions that will yield effective practices.

A second lesson we have learned about effective change concerns the role of "problems." If most of us are honest with each other, we must admit that, more often than not, we try to avoid problems. It's human nature. We want things to go well, we want to believe that what we do works, and we explain away data to the contrary. Research in business organizations confirms this. Studies of work teams shows that, all too often, teams spend their time competing for advantage, avoiding things that will make them look bad, pretending that everyone agrees; in short, maintaining the appearance of a cohesive team. Yet research in organizations shows that in the long term the least successful units are those that avoid problems, pretend they aren't there, or try to explain them away. The most successful organizations, on the other hand, are those that probe deeply into things they didn't understand, design interventions to change what they see as difficulties, and try again if the first attempt doesn't work. It isn't that successful schools have fewer problems than other schools--they just deal with their problems better. In short, *we need to see problems as our friends* rather than something to avoid. Such is the nature of the scholarship that we engage in as professionals, and it should be no less true in the manner in which we examine our role in a changing world order.

A third lesson focuses on vision and its implementation. In The States right now, vision is very important. Every organization tries to articulate the nature of its mission. This in turn is supposed to serve as a beacon, guiding activities along a fairly straight path. Schools and colleges schedule "vision workshops" where they go through elaborate procedures to articulate a vision, then develop a strategic plan to carry out the vision. Many consultants are making very much money leading such workshops, and an organization is not considered to be progressive unless it has its vision painted brightly on a large sign as one enters the building.

Much of the research now finds that such a linear process of vision setting and planning does not produce the long-lasting change that is sought. This is so because setting a direction in this manner is predicated on the assumption that once a target is established, the aim on that target will be clear and true. This may be true in the abstract, but it does not represent how people normally behave. Vision does not normally come before action, rather it emerges from action. As a direction emerges from action, other actions are based on the prior vision. Thus if one wants to establish a new direction for an organization, they are more likely to be successful if they can improve first the environment within which people interact, then provide them the resources to solve common problems. In our own Faculty of Education, we are making more progress on changing our organization by first establishing an environment where people can work together than we would by debating in a vacuum what tasks people should perform IF they were able to work together.

Rather than the "ready, aim and fire" approach to establishing vision, I like what Michael Fullan calls the "ready, fire, aim" approach. This allows collective learning to play a crucial role in the development of vision and direction.

What We can Learn Together

In this short address, I have argued that higher education faces challenges of an international nature. We, the Faculty at Hokkaido and PSU do things differently, that is for sure, and we talk about what we do in a different language and with different cultural assumptions. Still, Sapporo and Portland share something in common. We are part of a university community that is equally affected by three forces: 1) the changing nature of the workforce and the role of education in that change, 2) by technology and its implications for how higher education is conducted, and 3) by a worldwide debate about higher education as a private or public good. All nations, I believe, face or will be influenced by these three areas.

The long-standing relationship between Hokkaido University and Portland State University allows us all to meet these challenges together, at the same time we face them alone, within our own environments. We can define the issues of common interest, the concerns we share, and strive to learn from each other. Through a deeper and shared understanding of how education occurs within each of our own societies, we can better assist each other in our search for answers to the complex problems which we all face.

After all, we all care deeply about the future of the next generation. We all are dedicated to improving the conditions of teaching and learning for those who follow us. We all believe that education is a root system that helps hold together the soil of society.

In those who are young lie the sunrises of tomorrow. And as the Japanese proverb says, "if you would form a tree, do so while it is young."