

"PHIL DONAHUE" AND EDUCATIONAL REFORM - A CALL TO ARMS

Gary S. Stager*

We live in a time in which education is under fire and educational reform is the focus of much public debate. However, it has recently occurred to me that while instructionists, behaviorists, the testing proponents, politicians, and back-to-basics folks are dominating television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, the educational leaders of the movement favoring constructionism are writing papers and speaking at conferences like ICTE and AERA. The educational research community does not even speak to teachers—just compare the technology speakers from AERA with the NECC program.

In this "information age" the constructionists with a promising vision for the future are using the modes of communication available since Ancient Greece. To my knowledge, not a single proponent of constructionist-based education has testified before Congress, the National School Boards Association, or appeared on Nightline.

The status quo is unacceptable.

Schools are community enterprises. In order for the notion of school to be transformed all interested members of that community (learners, teachers, parents, citizens, politicians, and the media) must believe that they have a genuine stake in the success and continuous renewal of their schools. School administrators and politicians who convince members of the community to invest their time, ideas, and emotions in "site-based management" are playing with fire if these people do not have genuine authority to challenge the status quo invested in them. The hollow bandwagon approach to site-based management is a dangerous fad. There is a great potential for volatility if "site-based management" is used as a smokescreen. Citizens all across the United States are being asked to help "manage" their schools, but what happens when they find out that they may have no impact on scheduling, curriculum, staffing, or allocation of resources?

HOW SHOULD WE PROCEED?

Parents are not the enemy Educational reform efforts such as the work of the Center for Fair and Open Testing have found much parental approval in their efforts to eliminate K-3 standardized testing. Parents are active participants in their children's schools and want what is best for their children. However, they base their models of education on their own experiences and need desperately to be provided with new models. A parent who wishes a school would "go back to basics" would like the school "to let kids be kids" (quite a constructionist idea) as often as the parent who wants more worksheets for drilling math facts. We can not afford to alienate all parties interested in educational reform.

Create effective models Teachers and parents are only able to describe innovations they have experienced. Schools who ask teachers to describe the school they would like to work in will be greeted with a list of suggestions for fewer papers to grade and a shorter work week. Parents will propose better signs directing people to the principal's office, more worksheets for homework, and better playground equipment.

We must assist the community in moving beyond the superficial by allowing them the opportunity to experience different educational models, to reflect on their own learning in these environments, and to choose from amongst a variety of viable and constructive educational options.

Teachers with new educational ideas should be encouraged to take risks and develop new models from which other teachers might choose. Be sure to videotape classroom experiences so that parents can view them at home and invite parents to become active participants in educational culture of the school.

Share learning stories I am convinced that schools would be much different and indeed better if each of us commonly shared our own personal learning stories. In most cases our profound learning experiences would have occurred outside of the traditional classroom environment. Imagine if standardized testing was the topic of conversation at cocktail parties across the United States—it would cease to exist. Nobody ever liked taking these tests. Many of us felt violated by them and intuitively know that they have a negative effect on schools. This form of testing continues to exist—unchecked—because the public has yet to reach a consensus.

Stand up and be counted We all have a role to play as advocates for children and constructionist learning. We must find the forum in which each of us feels comfortable expressing our beliefs, hopes, and aspirations. Some of us do not have access to the Donahue Show or to Senate Committees, but we can write letters to the editor, call into talk shows, speak at public meetings, join school councils, write journal articles, present at conferences, and address resolutions at professional conferences. Our educational leaders must be at the vanguard of this effort since they have access to media outlets unavailable to the average classroom teacher. Choose one or more issues to champion or oppose. Illuminate the simplicity and destructiveness of issues such as national assessment/standards/curriculum, public/private school choice, "America 2000," or the "back to basics movement." We must encourage respect for differences in learning, value ethnic, gender, and racial diversity, and fight for equity in educational opportunity.

Challenge the media to include the constructionist point of view Research should be done to identify and quantify the bias towards instruction in the print, radio, and television media. These outlets should be challenged to include proponents of constructionism in their coverage of educational issues.

I am convinced that if provided with information and persuasive models of constructionism, the public will support the idea of creating rich, learner-centered learning cultures for children. The constructionist's vision of education and educational technology use will only be realized if Moms, and Dads, Senators, and Governors appropriate our ideas. This change in public policy is only possible (and popular) if the constructionist message goes public.

There needs to be a commitment on behalf of the constructionist community to learn to understand and participate in the mass communication-driven democracy of our times. Constructionist leaders, teachers, parents, and members of media outlets must all lend their voices to the process of making schools better places for children.

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Gary S. Stager - President & Educational Consultant: Schools for Our Times

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