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Brady, Marion (2011) *What's Worth Learning*. Charlotte NC:
Information Age Publishing, Inc.

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Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bernstein

Marion Brady is a retired educator. He has taught in K-12 and at the university level. He has written columns for Knight-Ridder Newspapers and guest-blogs for the *Washington Post*. He has authored textbooks. He wants to change American education far more radically than do those normally identified as “reformers.”

This new book is the culmination of many years of thought and work. In it, Brady focuses on what he believes is key to reforming our educational institutions, and that is the construction of our curricula. As he has done for many years, he reminds us that the current framework of school curricula into four main domains of Language,

Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies is a product of the Committee of Ten in 1892, of which he notes

The curriculum now in near-universal use in
America's classrooms was poor when it was

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adopted, and has become more dysfunctional with each passing year. About the only thing it has going for it is familiarity and the comforts of ritual. It's accepted not because it's good, but because, like most rituals, it's unexamined. Its problems are myriad and serious. (p. 5)

In the opening chapter, from which those words are taken, Brady identifies six specific problems and then offers what he considers the biggest problem of all. The six are, in order of appearance, criticisms of the "traditional curriculum because it

1. has no Agreed-upon overarching aim
2. disregards the brain's need for order and organization
3. fails to exploit the teaching potential of the real, everyday world
4. lacks criteria for determining what new knowledge to teach, and what old knowledge to discard to make room for the new
5. ignores important fields of knowledge
6. fails to capitalize on human variability

For each of these Brady provides illustrations, before coming to what he considers the most serious issue he can identify:

One problem, however, stands above all the rest in seriousness - the familiar curriculum's failure to model the fundamental nature of knowledge. In the real world, the world an education is supposed to help learners understand, everything relates to everything. It's a systematically-integrated whole, the parts of which are mutually supportive. The curriculum should model that whole, should help learners discover or create a corresponding conceptual framework or structure of knowledge, and it doesn't. Instead, it breaks reality into myriad small pieces and studies each piece in isolation, with hardly a hint either of how the individual pieces related to each other or how they fit together. (p. 11)

By now you should have a clear sense of Brady's intention. He wants to present an entirely different way of thinking about and organizing instruction, by rethinking and redesigning how we do curriculum, for it is the

curriculum that should determine what is taught and how we teach it.

Perhaps a key to understanding Brady's approach to how we should organized curriculum can be found in one sentence at the beginning of Part Two, which is titled "A Solution."

We take our systems of organizing for granted, but it's no exaggeration to say that systems of exploration make civilization possible. (p. 15)

It is not that we do not have a system of organization currently. Brady acknowledges that we do, but argues that it is dysfunctional, based on the outline of learning established in the 1890s by the Committee of Ten that approaches knowledge in a fragmented fashion, and which does not match how we naturally organize material in our brains. One can best grasp Brady's thrust from the following two paragraphs:

Systems are what learners must understand, and that understanding comes from learners themselves investigating many different systems, looking for general principles. This requires (1) noting significant parts of the system being studied, (2) identifying important relationships among those parts, (3) deciding what forces are making the systems operate, (4) noting the interactions between the system and its environment, and (5) tracking changes to the system over time. . . .

If learners apply these five general analytical categories, over and over, to systems of all sorts, the categories will give them a mental framework - a way of organizing what is learned. That framework will, of course, be enhanced by the addition of appropriate analytical sub-categories expanding the learner's mental "filing system." (p. 19)

Brady argues that the most important systems to study and learn are those that involve people as the main components. He suggests phrasing the elements of this systems architecture as being based on Something and defined by Time, Where in Space, Actor(s), Action, and Cause and the to Integrate. If one examines those five key elements, it should be reminiscent of basic journalism,

albeit in a different order than the traditional presentation.

Brady clearly acknowledges this:

As most readers will already have noted, the Model is just an elaborated version of what middle school newspaper staffs are told by their supervisors in their first meeting, that a proper news story include the relevant information about who, what, when, where, and why. (p. 27)

Only ultimately Brady's model is a bit more complex, containing six elements. He chooses to phrase it as Time, Environment, Actors, Action, Shared Ideas, and Relationships, the last being part of how we apply what we learn from using the model to expand and deepen our understanding. Part II consists of an elaboration of this model, illustrated using several different examples from material students might learn in school, and amply supported by graphic representation. In a sense this is the heart of the book, as Brady tries to demonstrate how broadly applicable his model is. He explores how humans tend to explain, noting reliance upon either physical causes or human action, and our tendency to ignore the impact of anything we cannot fit into those two causes. He uses this as an illustration of shared ideas, a topic heavily explored in the section, which of course shapes our understanding of the world in which we live.

This extensive section, pp. 15-70, is followed by a briefer third part in which Brady explores "The Model and the Traditional Curriculum." He begins by noting limitations of the traditional approach, and then offers a few comments about possible uses of the Model within the current structure of curriculum. Thus we will see its application in History, The Social Sciences, The Humanities, Language, The Natural Sciences, and Mathematics. He also addresses what he calls Special Classes, such as teaching non-native students.

After this exploration of the application of the Model within the various disciplines encountered in school, Brady devotes some time to discussing its limitations. Two often we are presented ways of thinking and organizing - and teaching - that are too rigid. Brady offers this caution:

Although new models of the real world liberate and expand thinking, they also eventually begin to have negative effects. What begins as *a* way of

modeling reality in order to make it intellectually manageable tends to increasingly become *the* way of doing so. Instead of checking our models against reality to see how they should be changed to make them more accurate, we tend to accept only information that fits with or reinforces the one we've come to find comfortable and useful. The longer we use a particular model, the harder it becomes to change or discard it. (pp. 87-88)

For Brady, these words not only serve as recognition that if applied his model may need to be adjusted over time as it is applied. It is also implicitly a criticism of our continuing to rely upon a model of thinking more than a century old he thinks serves us poorly. He does not want to make the same mistake in his approach, even as he strongly argues that his model is much more usable, relates to how we tend to organize naturally, and thus can improve our learning far beyond what is too often the learning of facts and concepts too much isolated and unconnected to the real world.

The third section covers 18 pages. The fourth and final section, Notes on Teaching, is only 16, from 89 to 104. In it Brady offers some broader thoughts about schools in general. He tells us that he began playing with these ideas more than four decades ago. He offers some anecdotes from his own experience. He strongly criticizes common aspects of what students encounter in schools. For example, under Roles he begins

One of the messages transmitted by the arrangement of the typical classroom is that the teacher is an expert on the subject at hand and her or his role is to distribute information. (p. 92)

Similarly, under Textbooks we read

To suggest that traditional textbooks are a major, perhaps *the* major obstacle to the achievement of educational excellence will seem to many to be nothing less than heresy. (p. 97)

Brady criticizes much of what we see in education as Theory T—that the purpose of instruction is the transfer of information from those designated as knowledgeable (teachers, creators of textbooks, curriculum and standards writers) to the captive audience of students. This implies a

particular understanding of the purpose of school and how and what is to be learned. While Brady does not reference it, readers might see this as parallel to the banking model so heavily criticized by Paulo Freire.

Against this Brady offers what he calls Theory R, one of relationship. He argues that much of what we learned and remember

... we learned on our own as we discovered real-world patterns and relationships - new knowledge that caused us to constantly rethink, reorganized, reconstruct, and replace earlier knowledge. (p. 104)

I think it fair to say that what Brady is attempting to do with his model is to formalize how students learn naturally. He wants us to understand that the paradigm for how our schools and our learning is currently organized is outmoded - that is, if in fact it ever served a useful purpose. He believes strongly, as one involved with education for more than 6 decades, that we ill-serve our students and our society by remaining tied to a paradigm that does not support—and may hinder—real learning and understanding, that is contrary to how our minds work naturally.

Brady is explicitly critical of the current approaches to “reform” that dominate our educational policy discussions. He thinks we need a radically different approach.

As Brady was, I am a social studies teacher. Much of what he offers makes sense, based on my far shorter (16 years) tenure as a professional educator. I have seen bits and pieces of what he suggests in approaches such as *History Alive!* I have seen teachers do part of what he suggests. Where possible, I have implemented some similar approaches in my own pedagogy, which may be why when I first got to know Brady and his work almost a decade ago I found myself drawn to his approach.

Drawn to it, but not completely convinced. Given my druthers, I would completely redesign our entire public education system. I simply do not see that happening. Like Brady, I am highly critical of much of the thrust of our current efforts at “reform.” Yet absent a broader reform of

our society on many levels, the best we seem able to do is to try to ameliorate the worst effects of that ‘reform.’”

Nevertheless, I think this book is quite useful. It may not be possible to totally restructure our schools and our curriculum, but even within the current structure it is possible for schools, individual departments, individual teachers, to take what Brady offers and make major modifications to how they organize learning, to how they teach. In fact, many of our best teachers already do this. It is one of the stressors of being an educator that we are bound by rules and structures imposed from above and outside by people who do not fully understand either learning or teaching, we must seem to be abiding by them, yet our real fealty is to our students and to our discipline. I think it is possible for individual teachers to implement much of what Brady offers.

Would it be possible to totally redesign public education along the lines of his model? In theory, yes, although I do not see it happening. Perhaps we will see some private schools, or some charter schools, as well as the occasionally very brave individual school attempt to follow what Brady suggests. The problem is this; so long as those in public schools are going to be measured by the kinds of tests and measure we currently use—something that will not be changed that much by the efforts of the two multi-state consortia now underway—the validity of Brady’s approach will not be fairly assessed. Those who try it run the risk of being found “wanting” by how we currently assess learning, even if in the long run students participating in such an approach will be far better educated in the best sense of that word.

I said I was not convinced. I am not convinced it is possible to do as it needs to be done. I am convinced that there is much wisdom and insight in what Brady has presented. Those thinking about how to make what happens in our schools connect more effectively with our students will find this book useful for expanding their thinking, even if they decide they cannot fully implement all that Brady suggests.

About the Reviewer

Kenneth J. Bernstein is a National Board Certified Social Studies teacher. He holds degrees in music from Haverford, Religions from St. Charles Seminary, and teaching from Johns Hopkins University. He did extensive doctoral studies in educational administration and policy studies at The Catholic University of America, and additional studies in reading education at the University of Virginia. He has served as a peer reviewer for a number of professional publications, including *Current Issues in Education* and *Teachers College Record*. He is coauthor of Rotberg, I; Bernstein, K. J. & Ritter, S. B. (2001). *No Child Left Behind: Views about the potential impact of the Bush administration's education proposals*. Washington, DC: Institute for Education Policy Studies. He was recently named 2010 Washington Post Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher.

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