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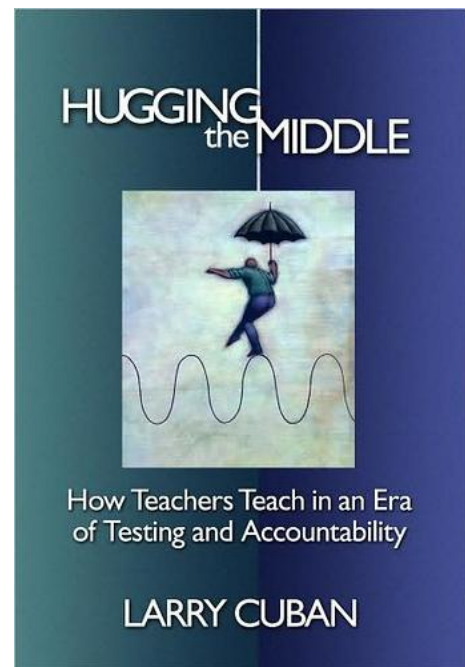
Cuban, Larry. (2009). *Hugging the Middle: How Teachers Teach in an Era of Testing and Accountability*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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The title phrase “hugging the middle” summarizes the thesis of Larry Cuban’s little book, which presents the results of a small study. In 2004, Cuban received a Spencer Foundation grant to extend the work he had done for *How Teachers Taught* (Cuban, 1993). The previous study had results in a database describing classroom practices from the 1890s to the 1980s. Using the same design, in the current study Cuban collected similar data for the 1980s through 2005 from three districts: Arlington, VA; Denver, CO; and Oakland, CA.



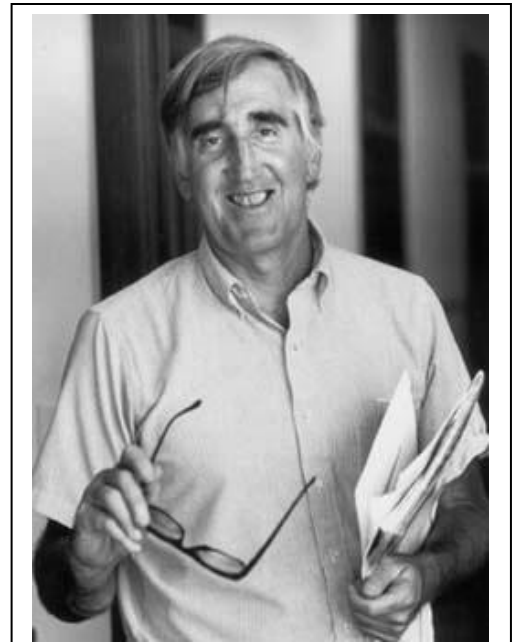
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His thesis is that “in spite of top-down policies aimed at altering what teachers teach and how they teach, I have found that historically most teachers, and those I report on in these three districts, have hugged the middle of the continuum of two teaching traditions, combining teacher-centered and student-centered practices into hybrids of progressivism” (p. 62). This thesis is based on the research conclusions from the small study, described below.

Cuban also uses this book to make two other main points, rooted more in his long career as an educator and educational historian than in the current study. One is that the accountability movement is based on the paradoxical logic that on the one hand teachers are to blame for deficiencies in the current educational system, and that on the other hand these same teachers are the instruments by which education will be improved. The second is that it is not possible to identify a teaching tradition that is “best” in the sense of causally linked to student learning, despite this being the eternal basic question for educational research. In my opinion, the portions of the book making the case for these two points are more readable and more interesting than the portions of the book describing the study results—even though I disagree with the last point.

An Introduction gives the reader the background for all three of these points. Cuban describes the conundrum of the accountability movement that cites teachers as the problem and yet sets up a system whereby teachers are supposed to make needed changes. He also describes the two teaching traditions, teacher-centered and student-centered, that form the ends of the continuum of teaching practices for which teachers hug the middle. He presents evidence from his previous work that between the 1890s and 1980s, the social organization of the classroom has become increasingly informal, although teacher-centered pedagogy still dominates.

In Chapter 1, Cuban describes the overall purpose of the follow-up study as extending his 1890s to 1980s look at classroom practices into the age of “Standards-Based



Larry Cuban is an Emeritus Professor of Education at Stanford University. Trained as a historian, he received the B.A. degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1955 and the M.A. from Cleveland's Case-Western Reserve University three years later. On completing his PhD work at Stanford University in 1974, he assumed the superintendency of the Arlington, Virginia Public Schools, a position he held until returning to Stanford in 1981.

Reform and Test-Driven Accountability” (the chapter’s title). He lists four research questions (p. 15), which I summarize:

1. Have teachers organized classrooms, grouped students, and taught lessons in response to the demands of standards-based reform?
2. Do teachers in high-poverty minority schools do this differently than those in middle and upper-income non-minority schools?
3. What patterns of classroom use of technology have emerged since the mid-1990s (when investment in technology began to grow), in response to the demands of standards-based reform?
4. Based on the results of questions 1 to 3, can pedagogical traditions be linked to student outcomes?

He then describes the three districts, which differ in geography and in some unique circumstances. All three are fairly large districts; all three have more than 50% minority students and over 40% (Arlington) or over 60% (Denver and Oakland) free and reduced lunch students. He recounted some of the recent history of each district, and then presented evidence on how teachers organized space, grouped for instruction, and designed instructional activities. He concluded that the classroom informality and hybrid pedagogies he had noted in the 1993 study had increased, despite the climate of standards-driven reform. The research methodologist in me gets nervous interpreting tables with percents (*e.g.*, percent teacher-directed activities, percent student-directed activities) drawn from counts based on available reports that are not a random or even necessarily representative sample of classroom activities. Nevertheless, the general conclusions seem reasonable.

Chapter 2 takes up the question of high-minority, high-poverty schools and low-minority, low-poverty schools. Cuban introduces the topic by referring to literature on the achievement gap, on tracking, and on the challenge of education in high-poverty settings. He then grouped his study data by high-minority, high-poverty/ low-minority, low-poverty. The picture that emerged was mixed. Student-centered practices were evident, even in high-minority, high-

poverty schools. There was a lot of variation in classrooms of both types. Cuban interpreted his mixed results as more evidence of “teacher-crafted hybrids” (p. 40) of instructional practices.

In Chapter 3, Cuban reviewed the high expectations held for the use of information and communication technology in schools. Based on these high expectations, the three districts in the study began investing in computers, networks, and software in the 1980s, as did many other districts across the country. Cuban collected evidence of all kinds of technology use, including older technologies like overhead projectors. Every teacher in his study had access to at least one computer. Student access varied. Access to computers did not necessarily mean use of computers during lessons. Occasional classroom use, he argued, makes significant shifts in pedagogy unlikely. Once again, at this point in history, teachers are incorporating new pedagogical possibilities into their middle way of compromise use of both teacher- and student-centered pedagogies.

In Chapter 4, Cuban presents a discussion of the question, “Can teaching traditions be linked to student learning?” This question is relevant to his study because of his main finding, that no matter what kind of pedagogy is recommended, teachers will amalgamate it into their middle way. Cuban uses evidence from his study and also his broader experience to argue that it is futile to try to link any particular pedagogy to good teaching, or even to successful teaching (a much more narrow, operationally defined construct). Good teaching, he argues, is based on the subject matter and skills to be taught. And decades of studies, as Cuban interprets them, have failed to link any particular pedagogy with student outcomes. In making this proclamation, Cuban throws doubt onto one of the main purposes of the educational research enterprise.

One of Cuban’s criticisms of the link is the inability for educational studies to really control variables, in the sense that good causal research requires. This is an interesting criticism to find in the historical study we have just read, where despite caveats in table footnotes that the data did not

constitute a random sample, the values in those tables formed the basis for interpretation.

More interesting to me, however, is this conclusion that research about pedagogy is essentially useless and will not give us information that we can use in educational practice. I have just finished reading another book that asks a very similar question. Hattie's *Visible Learning* analyzes 800 meta-analyses of educational research, and comes up with the opposite answer: We can influence student learning (Hattie, 2009, p. 237-238):

The story [the interpretation the evidence summarized in the book] is about the visibility of teaching and learning; it is the power of passionate, accomplished teachers who focus on students' cognitive engagement with the content of what it is they are teaching. It is about teachers who focus their skills in developing a way of thinking, reasoning, and emphasizing problem solving and strategies...

The summary goes on, but readers here will get the point that Hattie does believe the synthesis of the 800 meta-analyses involving over 50,000 studies and millions of students does amount to something he can describe. The description is not of a specific pedagogy, but of the orientation under any pedagogy that will be successful. And it is intended as an explanatory story for the evidence, not a "what works" recipe for pedagogy. Nevertheless, the conclusion is that research about student achievement tells us much and is anything but futile.

I should point out that Cuban's "hugging the middle" interpretation is about teaching practices in the aggregate. His study interpreted percentages of classroom organization, grouping practices, and instructional strategies of groups of teachers, not the pedagogy of any one teacher. Presumably in these percentages it is possible that there were teachers who were not in the middle, but rather either very teacher-centered or student-centered in their approaches. The conclusion should be that as a whole, teachers hug the middle, not that every teacher does.

Cuban sums up and reflects on his study in Chapter 5. He states the points with which I began this review: that expecting teachers whom we blame for a bad situation to be its solution is a conundrum, that teachers “hug the middle” between teacher- and student-centered pedagogies, and that there is a lack of evidence that either pedagogy leads directly to desired student outcomes. He reiterates his distinction between good and successful teaching, and uses all these points to conclude that sadly, much more needs to be learned and that our “reform-driven policymakers, pundits, and parents” are not currently going in a fruitful direction.

I do respect—and share—Cuban’s frustrations with the current reform and “what works” mentality. Therefore, I really hope he writes another book. Cuban has had a long and distinguished career, and if I were he, this is not the conclusion I would want my career to end on. Not just because it’s sad, but because it doesn’t seem to fit with a large body of evidence. (Hattie is not the only interpreter who comes to a more sanguine conclusion than Cuban about the possibility of understanding pedagogy.) And, especially, because it’s not a conclusion that will help students learn or teachers teach.

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About the Reviewer

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