

A Back-To-School Wishlist for Society

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Thursday, September 02, 2010

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Simply, two things. Let's make sure our public school system recognizes two things:

1. Our children are priceless individuals with immense capacity to excel, not standardized, interchangeable commodities who can be warehoused in assembly line learning factories.
2. Thinking matters, not just filling up heads with data.

A week before the new school year starts is a key time to think about some priorities.

I quit my 12 year teaching career because I could no longer contend with the increasing assault on those two things. I shifted to politics to address the political agenda that [robbed me of a great teaching career](#) by eroding the system.

Teaching and learning is mostly an art because people are different. It's that simple.

High stakes tests like highly standardized final exams and the [Foundation Skill Assessment](#) tests rarely cover the breadth of human experience in learning. Standardized tests, often marked by scanning bubble sheets, allow only certain kinds of questions to be asked. Students cannot possibly demonstrate the breadth of their experience in such testing environments.

The system has ended up valuing only what can be tested in these ways; the rest is demeaned. This is good for the Fraser Institute's privatization agenda and various traditional learning advocacy groups, like what turned up in the *National Post* yesterday:

Romantic progressivists also are given to touchy-feely edu-speak, like "learning to learn" and "higher order thinking" and "meaning-making in a context-rich environment," imprecise terms representing theories supported by very weak--or no--scientific evidence.

via [Learning the old-fashioned way](#).

I hear these types of criticisms a lot. But I've never before actually heard [higher order thinking](#) lumped into the mix. Impugning a model of education that empowers actual thinking attacks the idea that while lower order thinking is important, like remember and comprehension, higher order skills are useful in really contributing in life: applying knowledge, analyzing it, evaluating it, and creating new approaches or ideas.

Anyone who talks of promoting a knowledge economy connects with higher order thinking integrally.

But now the traditional learning folks are actually admitting that they think higher order thinking is bad.

This is no surprise because people well-versed in such thinking can see the socio-economic agenda inherent in some of these education policies: creating an underclass of subservient, productive, obedient, not overly capable, but non-threatening workers and consumers.

There is no need for higher order thinking if schools are designed to warehouse children, toss them on content assembly lines, ignore individuality and pump out interchangeable worker bees in a just-in-time, mainly service sector workforce.

Asking if we'd like fries with that requires really only rote learning. As does reading the book profiled in that article without investing the time to really understand complex issues to the point where we could evaluate, analyze and draw conclusions:

What's Wrong with our Schools And How We Can Fix Them....This book is short, fewer than 200 pages. It is easy to read -- like a school primer, no coincidence. Even at the end of a long day, parents can manage the necessary 20 minutes it takes to read a chapter....

Don't be put off by the "for-dummies" simplicity of the format and language.

via [Learning the old-fashioned way](#)

No. It's not supposed to be ironic.

Now the Fraser Institute is advocating that to improve schools by running them more like businesses, we need to

start thinking of children as commodities....

Ontario's plan to invest in full-day schooling for four-and five-year-olds "delivers an immediate return of \$2.02 [in GDP] for every \$1 invested in operations and \$1.47 for every \$1 invested in capital infrastructure."

via [Run schools like businesses, researcher says.](#)

This is just terrifying. If we eradicate higher order thinking and human individuality in lieu of developing children's minds and spirits as a value-added commodity, like turning a tree into a table, we will cease to

have an education system for our society.

And if we follow the money, we can ask who benefits:

- politicians who would like to arrest hundreds of peaceful demonstrators and bystanders during a political summit, preferably without civil outcry, all in a context of diminishing voter turnout [does this sound familiar?]
- corporations who need semi-skilled workers who don't need pesky hobbies or critical thinking to impede their ever-increasing productivity
- think tanks that are well-funded to push policies that serve the two masters above.

On Canada Day this year, I attended a celebration at a Vancouver community centre. The ever-glum BC minister of education showed up and skulked around putting in her face time. I watched her for a few minutes observe children at play with studied disengagement. Maybe as a doctor she wanted a different ministry. Maybe she was having a bad day.

But she and her government are doing their best to enrich the rich, privatize public assets and institutions, [exercise shock doctrine tactics to create crisis for easy dismantling of social systems](#), and generally defund government so communal approaches in society become so crippled that only their beloved market can save us all. Adam Smith's invisible hand, is of course, God!

But even this minister of education, though, was quoted yesterday spouting the kind of policy that the Fraser Institute would cringe upon hearing:

“Research shows play-based learning...for kindergarten students makes a big difference to them.”

via [Full-day kindergarten for B.C. kids starts next week](#).

She sounds like a romantic progressivist! So when a minister of a government that normally riffs on Fraser Institute pseudo-wisdom speaks in opposition to the think tank Kool-Aid, we know there's a good deal of spin in the air.

When Labour Day passes next week into a new school year, we all need to be vigilant to ensure our school system does not get eroded to a point where it is of no use to society. We're already heading there. The *National Post* is pushing the agenda strongly with the Fraser Institute and many other groups who have a stake in killing the social good.

Whether each of us has children in the system or not, if we care about having a new generation of intellectually capable and well-rounded human beings graduate from high school, we need to push back on this anti-social agenda.

If we don't, our next generations will not even be self-aware enough to know they lack the aspirations necessary for ensuring the future of our community, nation and world is sustainable and worth living in.