

Let Your Voice Be Heard: A Q&A with Academic Historian Diane Ravitch

Diane Ravitch, a historian of education, is Research Professor of Education at New York University and a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. From 1991 to 1993, she was Assistant Secretary of Education and led the federal effort to promote the creation of voluntary state and national academic standards. From 1997 to 2004, she was a member of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the federal testing program, the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Among her many books she has authored is the recently acclaimed, "The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education."

Q: A couple of years ago, *Thought & Action* published an essay called "The Tangled Web of Standardized Test Culture," in which the author, an English professor, wrote that "students who have swallowed the standardized Kool-Aid test cannot decipher what information is important or synthesize that information into a meaningful statement." What do you think? What happens to students when they strive to master the multiple-choice test? Are they ready for college classrooms?

A: I have been thinking recently about how 12 consecutive years of multiple-choice, standardized tests affects children's brains. I wonder what it does to them when they are repeatedly asked to address a question that can be answered by checking one of four boxes. Of course, they know that two of the answers will be very wrong, and then they can guess between the remaining two. But what happens to their ability to think when they are never asked to consider the validity of the question. What if the question is not the right question? Is

there a different way to elicit a better response? What if there are two right answers? Does this format over time teach students to think inside the box, quite literally? Does it punish divergent thinking? Does it squash creativity and originality? Just recently I read an article by Jerry Weinberger, a professor of political science at Michigan State University, called “Fill in the Blanks: Is Preparing for Standardized Tests Replacing Learning?” It appears in *City Journal* and is worth reading. He writes that he sees a substantial decline in his students’ independence of mind, their interest, their willingness to read and think as well as an increase in their need to be guided and directed. The tests should be an indicator, but they seem to have turned into mental straight jackets.

Q: Increasingly, states (such as Oregon, Texas, Florida and Colorado) are creating “P-16” or “K-20” governance boards, which are meant to “align programs and policies,” from pre-kindergarten to Ph.D. Is this a good thing?

A. Perhaps in another era, I might have thought so, but in the current atmosphere of micromanagement of all things educational, this worries me. It worries me because I see the managerial mind at work, trying to align and streamline everything, trying to smooth away the rough edges and make all the pegs fit into round holes. Something in my head says, watch out. They are trying to control everything, to pave over the last bit of soil, and wild things won’t grow there. Yes, we need some educational institutions that are not aligned, not coordinated, not part of a seamless whole.

Q: Many faculty worry that the worst of K-12 education reform, like high-stakes testing and arbitrary data goals, will creep onto their campuses. In some places, it already has (and creeping is hardly the word for its progress!) In Texas, Gov. Rick Perry has called for “outcomes-based funding” that would reward state universities for graduating more students. To reach the 2015 goal, the state needs to produce 46,000 more degrees each year. Is this a good strate-

gy to create a better-educated citizenry?

A: Good grief, no, this is No Child Left Behind (NCLB) thinking transplanted to higher education. This is the pursuit of numbers for the sake of meeting a quota, not for the sake of learning. This is data-driven higher education, absent the need for any learning. We can graduate all students if we lower standards enough. If numbers are our goal, we can give every student a college degree and not subject them to the trouble (and expense) of going to classes. In fact, with the rapid spread of online “learning,” that seems to be the wave of the future. Students can sit at home in their pajamas, submit essays, answer questions, and no one will know who wrote the essays or answered the questions. Lots of for-profit online universities are ready to sign them up and give them a diploma. And many of the traditional universities are getting into the game for fear of being left behind. Ah, maybe I show my age, but we will not have a better-educated citizenry if we lose the interaction between teachers and students and the interaction among students.

Q: In this issue of *Thought & Action*, retired CSU Sacramento professor, Jeff Lustig, writes that “those who promote a business model of higher education” would ultimately destroy what’s good about the university: accessibility; academic freedom; shared governance; liberal arts; and a sense of shared community. . Do you agree with that list? What else would you add?

A: Well, I would add a couple of important things. I think we would lose the very essence of education, the inquiry and intellectual engagement that is the heart of learning, because they can’t be measured and therefore don’t matter. The business model has been harmful to K-12 education and it will be harmful to the life of the university as well, because it operates by carrots and sticks, by rewards and sanctions. The business model is incompatible with the life of the mind.

Q: One business model for higher education is the one embraced by for-profit colleges (whose students lead the nation in unpaid debt and joblessness.) Are you surprised by their predatory practices?

A: I am not surprised because the nature of a for-profit institution is making money. From that perspective, it makes sense to lure customers into the door – just as unscrupulous agents and banks lured poor customers to take out mortgages they could not afford. I think that “for-profit” is incompatible with education because the interests of the shareholders and investors will take precedence over the needs of students and the institution.

Q: Not long ago, Montana’s Professor of the Year, Delena Norris-Tull, told us that she tells her education students that “even though there’s this strange legislation out there, we need to provide a rich curriculum to all of our students.” What else do you think future teachers need to know about NCLB?

A: I think that future teachers need to know that NCLB is a law that is ineffective and punitive. Although it invokes the term “research-based” repeatedly, the law itself is not research-based. It was based on a non-existent Texas “miracle,” the politically motivated claim that testing and accountability would by themselves produce amazing results. Ten years later, we know this didn’t happen in Texas, and it hasn’t happened nationally. They should know that its utopian goal—that all students would be proficient by the year 2014—was utopian and turned into a timetable for the destruction of American public education. The closer we get to that magical date, the more schools are declared “failures.” Although I don’t think its framers intended it, NCLB set schools up to fail and cleared the way for privatization and for the most pernicious campaign against public education and teachers that this nation has ever known. So, to avoid becoming demoralized, future teachers must see themselves as fighters for a better day and know that they will live to see the end of this reign

of error.

Q: How can we turn our students into better advocates for themselves? They're often happy to question their assigned grades, but sometimes less comfortable with advocating for better education funding or policy.

A: I think that teachers, especially professors, have an obligation to help students understand the nature and politics of education. They need to know why classes are larger, why some subjects are no longer offered, why favorite teachers have lost their jobs. Teaching them about the conditions of their lives and their education is an obligation.

Q: Many of our members – and readers of this journal – are professors of education. What are the top five things they need to know to be successful in their classrooms some day?

A: First, they must enable their students to become the best possible teachers. They must provide the encouragement, support, practice, and guidance that their students need. They must be sure that their students become masters of the field they will teach, that they understand how to communicate their knowledge to children, and that they have the tools of classroom management that they need.

Second, they must retain a spirit of hope and optimism. These are very bad times. Teachers and education are under attack from many quarters. But we must not lose heart. We must continue to believe in the importance of our work and not give in to those who disparage it.

Third, they must be honest with their students and explain the challenges facing teachers, public education, and education in general. For the foreseeable future, jobs will be scarce, because there are so many layoffs. Students must un-

derstand why state legislatures are cutting the budget and must also see the context in which legislatures are simultaneously cutting corporate taxes and refusing to raise taxes on those with the greatest means to pay them.

Fourth, they must hold on to their own sense of values and their vision about education. There is a deeply anti-intellectual mood in the country right now. Our policymakers speak of education almost entirely in terms of global competition and economic competitiveness. But as educators, we are accustomed to speaking of the importance of citizenship, of lifelong learning, of the joys of learning, of the excitement of history, of and the excitement of expressing oneself through the arts. We must not let these values be drowned out by the insistence on economic goals.

Fifth, they must inspire their students with a sense of idealism and purpose. This is the reason why people become teachers. They know they will never get rich. They want to make a difference in the lives of children. That is the mission that will get them through the difficult times in their professional lives.

Q: Faculty and unions: Why do they need each other?

A: I have never been a member of a union, but I defend teachers and professors' right to belong to a union. Every professional group has an organization to represent its interests, so it seems only fair that teachers and professors should have a voice in determining the conditions of their workplace, as well as an organization that will defend their rights and academic freedom.

Q: Anything else you want to tell our readers?

A: I have traveled this country over the past year, and I know that teachers are demoralized. Some feel hopeless. But we can't give in to despair. The solution

to many of our problems lies in electing better representatives at every level of government. That means that professors and teachers must get involved, inform themselves about what their governor and legislature are doing, what their Congressional representatives are doing, and participate. Use all the tools of our democracy to defend your profession, your students, access to education, and the quality of education. Do not despair. Do not give up. Stand up for what you believe and let your voice be heard.