



Providing Educational Excellence for All Americans

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By Harry Braun

It is possible to provide an extraordinary education for everyone by organizing the most gifted instructors and documentary production and animation groups (NOVA, Frontline, Discovery Channel, etc.) to produce internet/DVD video productions on every phase of major technical subjects. This would solve the fundamental problem in education, which is that few primary or secondary teachers are equipped to teach technical subjects at all - much less in a creative and inspiring way. Such programs would allow the poorest inner city or rural school children to have access to the very best instructors and animators and would allow each student to progress at their own individual speed.

An Enlightened Approach to Educational Excellence

The elementary through high school educational system in America requires fundamental changes if American students are ever to be competitive with their international counterparts. In discussing the pathetic state of education in America on his CNN broadcast, Lou Dobbs made an insightful comment: "How can teachers teach what they do not know?" This question fundamentally addresses the problem that few primary or secondary teachers are trained to teach technical subjects at all -- much less in a creative and inspiring way. This is why the Phoenix Project Foundation is advocating a plan to have the U.S. Department of Education assemble and organize the best and brightest educators, scientists, scholars, documentary producers, and animators in each major field of study in order to produce NOVA-quality educational programs on every phase of major technical subjects, which can then be made available to all Americans.

More than a decade ago, Glenn T. Seaborg, a Nobel Laureate who served as National Chairman for the development of high school chemistry courses and was a member of a special national commission that investigated the state of American education, concluded that *if an unfriendly power had attempted to impose upon the U.S. the mediocre educational performance that existed, we might have viewed it as an act of war.* Seaborg indicated that the situation is not getting any better because students are not being "turned on" by teachers that are rarely well-trained in science and mathematics. When asked, "If it takes inspirational teachers to bring students along, and we are not producing very many, what's the answer?" Seaborg replied, "That's a very difficult problem." Indeed, the fundamental question is how can one teach what one does not know?

Teaching Teachers

While the Bush administration advanced a "no child left behind program" based on testing, this does not address the more fundamental problem that most teachers are not qualified to teach. This issue is compounded by the fact that in most universities, the college of education is where the least accomplished students go for easy A's, and then once they graduate and secure a teaching position, they become virtually impossible to remove because of the tenure system. While the attitude of students is certainly an important factor in their educational development, there is no question that the serious problem raised by Seaborg is of paramount concern; namely, that few primary or secondary teachers are qualified to teach technical subjects at all -- much less in a creative and inspiring way. There is, however, a way out of this maze, which involves organizing the best and brightest teachers and animators to produce high-quality video productions made available to virtually every student on every major academic area.

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Such educational programs would allow the poorest inner city or rural children to acquire the critical thinking skills that are critical for a democracy to function, by having access to the very best instructors and computer animation that would make the educational process a truly entertaining experience. There is a special bonus in this approach. As the teachers incorporate these programs into their classrooms, the teachers themselves will soon be able to master the material presented, and thereby have their own education significantly upgraded while "on the job." As any teacher knows, the best way to master any subject is to teach it. Another important bonus to this approach is that if a student had trouble understanding all of the material during class (or perhaps the student was out ill), he or she can continue to study the material at home on the internet until the subject is mastered. This not only provides for individualized learning, but perhaps the other members of family or friends can be present so learning can become more of a family affair. This will also provide parents with an opportunity to understand what their children are being taught in school, and allow the parents to upgrade their education as well.

Starting Young

It is important to realize that mastering a scientific discipline initially involves learning to speak its language, and it has been observed that young children are able to absorb information or acquire languages much easier than their adult counterparts. This being the case, it is especially important to create educational programs for young children to keep them from idling away a critically important part of their formative years. A generation ago, the typical American child who grew up on a farm was usually given important responsibilities at an early age. This is still true in much of the Third World. In sharp contrast, however, U.S. children are encouraged to "play" and are rarely exposed to serious responsibilities until after high school, or in many cases, college.

Students need to understand the value of using their "free" time constructively. This free time is an incredibly valuable resource that is usually just idled away. If it is used wisely, it compounds over the years like interest in the bank. This, however, is a lesson that is rarely taught in most classrooms. Students need to understand that reading fiction is very different than reading factual documents of substance that will collectively serve as their basis of their intellectual foundation, which will ultimately enable them to be more competitive in the global marketplace, and make more informed judgments about the increasingly complex world in which we live. Harry Potter books may be entertaining, but they should not be confused with education.

Educational Funding

It is important to note that a quality education is not just a question of money. Per-capita student expenditures in most industrialized countries, including Japan, are less than those in the U.S., yet America's educational system compares unfavorably to those in virtually all of the industrialized countries -- and even many Third World countries. The America's educational system needs to adopt comparable academic standards to those found in best schools in Asia and Europe for each grade level. Educational foundations are critical. As such, if a student is unable to pass a course with at least an 80 percent proficiency in a given academic subject, that student should not be allowed to progress to the next grade or subject level. The concept of "social passing" needs to be eliminated. In the educational process, it is not the student's age that is important, but what the student has learned.



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