

Preface

Innovations launch in schools like fireworks in July. Some explode with a bang, like the “whole language” movement, and whiz back and forth trying to find their philosophical resting place. Some, like the 1970s “new math,” shoot straight up and then nose-dive, leaving a trail of fading light. Some give a little “pop,” hoping for attention, and some, like the National Standards and No Child Left Behind legislation, implode with a sonic boom as we run for cover from the fallout.

As an educator over the past four decades, I helped to detonate some of the dazzling displays. Through these experiences, I gained a sense of when to tuck and when to toss from Innovation’s door. Eager to aid learning, educators embrace innovation and fad with wholesale zealousness. We buy the program dogma with nary a question, disregarding the research that doesn’t fit into the popular paradigm instead of asking, “What is reasonable, and what is not?”

This book will discuss what is reasonable and workable in contemporary curriculum design and provide educators with a practical structure for deciding whether to tuck or toss from the dizzying display of the day. The overriding message throughout this book will be the need to design curriculum and instruction that will guide thinking and learning from the factual level to the conceptual level of understanding—the level where knowledge transfers and thinking become integrated.

The standards movement, so prominent today, defines student standards as “what we want our students to know and be able to do by the time they graduate from high school.” In districts across the United States, these standards deal with processes and skills, factual content knowledge, and conceptual understanding. Standards provide an anchor for aligning district curricula, but standards vary in their expectations and design. In some states, the design raises the intellectual bar for district curricula; in others, the state design actually impedes quality curricular programming and instruction.

National and state policy makers call for performance-based assessments using benchmark indicators of progress, at various grade levels, to ensure that students are attaining the identified process and content abilities. Benchmark indicators are examples of developmental performance related to the student standards that have been identified for various grade levels or grade groupings.

This book will examine the current state of curriculum and instruction and propose a curricular plan for achieving higher standards without sacrificing intellectual integrity. The proposed plan will focus on the following premises:

- Thinking teachers inspire thinking students. We need curriculum frameworks that encourage teachers to use facts and skills to develop a deeper understanding of key concepts and principles of disciplines.
- When curriculum and instruction engage the personal intellect of students (and teachers), students are more motivated and interested in the study, and exhibit a greater degree of retention and understanding.
- Self-assessment is a powerful learning tool for both students and teachers.
- Curriculum that is relevant to issues surrounding the human condition and our world challenges the intellect and engages the spirit.
- Concept-based curricula are more effective than topic-based curricula, for the world of today and tomorrow, because they take teaching and learning to a higher level as students analyze, synthesize, and generalize from facts to deeper understanding.

As you read the following chapters, you will evaluate the elements and impediments of the change process in learning organizations, and you will look at the factors of time, training, and funding. You will design a vision for learning that links desired student outcomes with sound schooling practice. You will learn new approaches to the development of subject area and interdisciplinary curricula, and explore the changing character of student assessment. Finally, you will consider what it takes to stir the head, heart, and soul and form a vision of loving to learn. Students and teachers who love to learn create positive tension and energy that ripples through a room with enthusiasm, curiosity, and creativity. It is my hope that you will leave this book with that same creative tension and energy—loving to learn and eager to stir the head, heart, and soul.