

EDUCATION WEEK

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The Classroom Is Not a Factory

By **Bob Barsanti**

Everything I needed to know about modern teaching, I learned in a factory. In the summer of my 18th year, I made plastic drink stirrers on the night shift at Spir-It Inc. I spent the night sitting next to machines that made McDonald's coffee stirrers, olive swords, and steak sticks. The shift began at 11 in the evening and ran until 7 in the morning. I got a 10-minute coffee break at 1 a.m., a 20-minute lunch at 3 a.m., and another coffee break at 5. Then, as dawn broke and Robert J. Lurtsema played his birdcalls on Boston's public-radio station, I left the factory floor and went home to bed.

Millwork ain't easy, and millwork ain't hard. For the first hour of the shift, I raced to figure out the music and rhythm of the machine. Once I had the dance down, I was able to open a book and read through the hours, all the while tending to the needs of the conveyor belts and grinders. At the end of the night, the machine and I had filled a skid or two of forgettable and eternal plastic.

Had I chosen to make a career out of swizzle-stick crafting, I would have gone to the bulletin board in the morning when the foreman posted the efficiency numbers for the machine and the worker. As I was only a snotty college student, I merely glanced at my ranking and then went home. In September, when the owner shook my hand and gave me a thank-you letter, I thought I had done my last millwork.

Silly me. Many of the current reforms in education aim to turn the schoolhouse into that plastic-products factory. Our machines are not hydraulic, but they are mechanical; textbooks, curricular frameworks, and approved book lists are the same from Swampscott to San Francisco. The machinery heats and molds our children, then stamps, bags, and packages them to a professional uniformity. The SAT and its related bubble tests perform quality control. Once a year, I check the green Scantron sheets and see that our students are missing a few points on pronoun agreement. I adjust the machine accordingly.

For our students, the factory floor is a dangerous place to grow up. As the books and tests we use become more refined and ubiquitous, our students become more reduced and uniform. The textbook they memorize at age 16 is out of date by the time they are 20. The answers they recite in their senior year become trivia questions before they finish college. Our plastic students will be with us for a long time: My swizzle sticks still exist, but they fill a landfill or float in a Texas-sized island of plastic. They don't accomplish anything.

However, for a superintendent or any other politician, the school-as-mill has an attractive whistle to it.

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They can measure what goes on in a young lady's head, put a number to it, and pronounce it fit or foul. They can control what the kids learn, what the teachers instruct, and how big the "Mission Accomplished" banner will be when the test scores are posted. When the problem is framed in terms of millions of children and billions of dollars, the solution is going to look like the Lawrence, Mass., textile mills. Success will come in one-ton rolls of gray cloth—at a cost.

That's not the job I signed up for.

Like most teachers, I didn't enter the profession with the hope of standing at my desk and running the kids through the classroom on a conveyor belt. Instead, I wanted to sit at the oval Harkness table as Kay Herzog did.

She was an odd merganser. She was in the last 10 years of her career when she taught me. Her eccentricities had hardened into habit and legend. She wore rosewater to her class, decorated her classroom with her own paintings, and wore pastel, swooping, gauzy sundresses to class. Her energy and her enthusiasm infected all of our larval adolescent writing fantasies. We read Woody Allen, Raymond Carver, and John Updike; stories that were full of sex, violence, and godlessness. Twice a week, we wrote our own pieces and read them to the class. She stripped our adolescent egos down to blood and bone, then called us to dance. Afterward, in the silence, we wrapped ourselves in her blankets.

Now, 30 years after that steamy July south of Boston, I understand the freedom that she enjoyed. She selected her own tools and then carved, sanded, and polished us over that summer term. At the end, she collected all the stories we had written, compiled the best into a magazine, and sent our work out to our friends. No state average, no AYP, no improvement plans; just a squad of wannabe writers holding a photocopied magazine.

But isn't that more valuable than a "235 out of 280" score and a bar graph? When I took the magazine home to the folks, they could see what I could do. Perhaps the story was troubling, perhaps it was exhilarating, but my little story within a magazine of stories demonstrated what I could do both on my own and alongside my peers.

Unfortunately, literary magazines don't translate into pie graphs, cocktail stats, or **Race to the Top** grants. Personal, artisanal success does not scale to congressional hearings and documentary films. Only test scores, with just a patina of accuracy and fairness, can drive a nationwide debate. Unfortunately, test scores are not actual skills, but the shadows of them. To judge whether my son can write, I should read what he wrote. Someone else's grading of him isn't as valuable.

Not everyone can study under a Kay Herzog. Not every teacher can publish a small literary magazine or have a science fair; most teachers are far less engaged and demanding. Multiple-choice tests and national standards go a long way toward ensuring that every student has the minimum of skills and knowledge. Testing ensures that every student stands on the same floor. But, to reach the sky, students need to be challenged and developed individually. Parents, coaches, and teachers need to work as craftsmen and artisans, not as millworkers on the night shift.

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