

## EDUCATION WEEK

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### Time for an Education Reformation

By **Clarke L. Rubel**

As a rule, people do not enjoy being victims or feeling that they have been shortchanged, or fooled, or ripped off. This explains why some students and parents are troubled by the gaping flaws and inequities they see in American education. Likewise, no self-respecting educator wants to feel he or she has been complicit in perpetuating an uneven, unfair system. The educators I know (myself included) are now toiling in a system we have little confidence in, exhausted by trying to find a balance between our obligation to the machine of education and our more important loyalty to the welfare of our students. We are strapped in alongside our students, riding the pendulum of educational extremes. No wonder we so often want to throw our hands up and scream.

We can, however, take some consolation in the history of social reformers who came before us. To take what might be considered an unorthodox perspective, consider the Protestant Reformation. Yes, I'm serious.

The Reformation occurred in part because people felt duped by a micromanaging, deeply flawed, perhaps even underhanded, system of religion, headed by an overbearing church bureaucracy. Messing around with a person's soul is not wise, and ultimately the owners of those souls rose up once they became aware of their plight.

I make the comparison between modern education and the Reformation for four main reasons:

- They are analogous in terms of their spiritual importance—this is to say that education, like spirituality, is an intimate, personal, metaphysical aspect of the human experience.
- Both are deeply rooted in human nature, meaning that people have an inclination toward intellectual pursuits, as well as a drive to understand our place in the universe.

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- Attempts to control education and spirituality fail because there is no product to manipulate; they are intangible investments in the world of ideas.
- They share dubious histories, each governed by self-serving systems, so that education and religion have become synonymous with and victims of hypocrisy, dogma, mismanagement, and arbitrary benchmarks.

The revolutionary acts of the Reformation were the healthiest shake-up to occur in religious history, not because they settled anything, but because they unsettled everything. This is what we need in education today.

The fundamental problem in education is that spiritual pursuits have no boundaries, no limits.

Spirituality cannot be tethered or restrained. The teaching of it is governable, but the spirit itself is not. Thus, in order to systematize education, we redefined education as a subject, rather than properly regarding it as an aesthetic enterprise. We replaced epiphanies with correct answers. At this point, the pursuits of understanding and growth are quantifiable, measurable, and governable—regulated by a system in which accountability trumps relevance.

The problems of modern American education are rooted in the inherent problems of systems. All systems exist to serve their own longevity, and they necessarily devolve to find their equilibrium at the level of the least capable among their constituency.

No system encourages self-awareness, rewards self-reliance, or tolerates divergent innovation. This deterioration is inescapable, which is why systems occasionally need some vigorous shaking. Still, we do need systems, even in education. There is no advantage to anarchy.

The answer is to own up to the beast we helped create, to share more than the ride with our students, to take a cue from the Reformation and diversify the messages we send our students.

Too often the disparity between the lessons we intend to teach and the lessons we actually teach causes angst and confusion for students. While we preach the idea of systematic conformity as a route to success, virtually every example of greatness, success, genius, innovation, or profound influence that we use in our classrooms is an individual who did not conform. The current shift to the Common Core State Standards will not change this. Our diplomas will continue to signify the successful completion of a prolonged course in conformity unless we insist on something more.

The practical way to change this is to teach our students that systems (educational and otherwise) are both necessary and imperfect. Education is, after all, only the first of many systems that will affect their lives.

We must encourage students to use school as a tool to help build themselves, rather than us using them as tools to sustain the system. We should ensure that they do not become a



A 19th century illustration shows Martin Luther, arguably the defining figure of the Protestant Reformation, burning documents issued by the Catholic pope.

—Josef Matyas Trenkwald/iStockphoto

"product" of our system, or any system. Our curriculum should instill a belligerent refusal to define themselves as their transcripts.

Students need to know that important questions lead to other questions—that conclusive answers are for game shows or courtroom evidence. They especially need to know that we don't have all the answers, while we reassure them that answers are not the same as wisdom.

As teachers, we should mentor our students in the art of questioning and healthy skepticism—an art brought to life by that most famous (or infamous) of reformers, Martin Luther. If we lack the wisdom, or become too jaded or tired to live up to the intellectual challenge that teaching should be, we should quit the profession.

We should help students put the biggest investment of their young lives into perspective and find a link between what is in their heads and what is in their souls. It's time for us to do some reforming of our own.

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