Teacher as Curricular Expert

by Jay Einhorn

Jay Einhorn gives us an earful about how former Secretary of Education William Bennett has misdiagnosed the problems of education, and offers us his own prescription: curricular understanding.

The call from former Secretary of Education William Bennett to improve the American educational system by improving teacher performance strikes a responsive chord in many people who are concerned about the decline of student achievement.

However, Bennett's proposed remedies—requiring teachers to pass competency tests and be more demanding in the classroom—do not go to the heart of the problem and will fail to solve it.

Improving teacher performance should begin in an understanding of and respect for the integrity of teaching as a profession. Bennett's prescriptions do not.

His remedies are wrong because his diagnosis is wrong. Bennett believes our schools and universities are performing poorly because teachers are underprepared in their subject matter and not demanding enough in class. I am suggesting that the primary problem is, rather, that our teachers do not know well enough how to teach.

Improving teacher performance should begin in an understanding of and respect for the integrity of teaching as a profession. Bennett's prescriptions do not. The concept that is central to teaching as a profession is *curriculum*. Teachers achieve professional stature not by virtue of being experts in subjects, or by giving large homework assignments, but by *understanding and implementing curricular concepts*.

This article briefly critiques Bennett's positions, and offers a model for understanding teaching as the specialty of designing and implementing curricula.

The model is based on four major curricular factors: subject content goals, subject process goals, student language skills, and student study skills. It emphasizes the application of these factors to the evaluation and improvement of student and teacher performance.

Bennett: Poor Teachers Make Poor Students

Bennett has forcefully criticized education in America. He particularly lambasted Chicago, calling its public schools "the worst in America." This became the theme of a series of inves-

tigative reports by the *Chicago Tribune* (1988).

Addressing the Illinois Legislature, Bennett(1988) stated that teacher quality is the most important factor affecting the quality of education in the classroom, even ahead of student/teacher ratio and per-student funding.

The problem, according to Bennett, is that too many teachers are incompetent. The way to improve the quality of education is to improve teacher quality.

Finally, the way to improve the quality of teachers is to require teachers to pass objective tests of mastery in their subjects (Bennett, 1988).

Is Bennett's Criticism Credible?

There is little use in teachers complaining of being unfairly maligned by Bennett. He derives substantial public credibility by virtue of his forthrightness in identifying a problem that is widely acknowledged privately, but, until recently, not so much publicly: the dismal achievement level of America's graduates.

Teachers are well aware of the problems of underprepared students and incompetent teachers. But few of us are willing to say so publicly. When we dodge the issue, however, we sacrifice our own credibility as professionals and create a vacuum for critics like Bennett.

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He highlights this situation when he compares educational organizations with business organizations, where the need to evaluate worker performance and weed out incompetent workers is widely acknowledged.

In schools, especially in universities, the history of academic freedom presents a complication in evaluating teacher competence that other kinds of organizations do not have. However, we can't use academic freedom as an excuse to avoid evaluating our work.

A Critique of Bennett's Criticisms

Since we have to evaluate our teaching, we should apply methods based on concepts appropriate to the job we do. We can only approach such concepts and develop such methods if we understand what teaching involves.

Although Bennett is right to decry the poor performance of American education, and, at least to some extent, to blame poor teaching for the problem, his proposed solution is wrong because he does not understand teaching deeply enough.

Bennett's oversimplified prescription for teaching ignores teaching as a profession with its own integrity, which extends beyond subject mastery and homework assignments.

Like his former boss, Ronald Reagan, Bennett perceives and diagnoses social problems and prescribes solutions for them too superficially. Bennett's oversimplified prescription for teaching ignores teaching as a profession with its own integrity, which extends beyond subject mastery and homework assignments.

Although some teachers may lack subject mastery and/or are too permissive with students, most teachers are more or less adequately grounded in their subjects and know how to give assignments. Most of those who aren't and don't can improve in those areas relatively quickly. The real problem, it seems to me, is that *teachers often don't know how to teach.*

Manager Training and Teacher Training

An analogy with management training is relevant here. Teaching is as much a specialty as management. The task of the manager is managing subordinate productivity, and the task of the teacher is managing student learning.

Few people become managers because they know how to manage. Most become managers because they are good at whatever work they do, whether it is making products or delivering services. Having excelled at their work, they are put in charge of other people doing similar work.

When they become managers, however, they find they are generally unprepared for their new responsibilities, which now involve supervising other people in those same tasks.

Management is a new kind of task altogether, requiring a new set of skills: hiring, orienting, directing, evaluating, promoting, and disciplining subordinates. These new tasks require new conceptual and human relations skills in the manager.

Those who cannot develop these new skills fail as managers, however good they may have been in their non-managerial work (Einhorn, 1986).

From Subject Competence to Curricular Competence

Similarly, the new teacher has to make the transition from subject competence to curricular competence. As a successful student, the teacher had to know how to learn a subject. As a successful teacher, he or she will have to know how to present a subject to a class in a way that represents its field, at an appropriate level for the class, and that involves students with the subject substantially enough for them to learn something meaningful about it.

The teacher also will have to evaluate each student's learning in a way that preserves the integrity of the subject and of the teaching process. This includes the obligations of the teacher and the student to one another.

Thus, while Bennett sees teachers as subject experts and wants to test them to make sure they know their subjects, my point of view sees teachers as curricular experts who should be evaluated on the basis of whether they can think in curricular concepts and implement those concepts.

Ultimately, Bennett's point of view reduces and narrows the role of teacher, and ignores the most important level of effectiveness in good teachers—the level of curricular manager.

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Four Curricular Factors

The main tasks of classroom teaching are encompassed in four fundamental dimensions of curriculum. Using these dimensions, teachers can be trained and evaluated in ways that will recognize and enhance—not deny and reduce—their professional integrity and skills. These are pertinent to the goals of most educational endeavors: subject content goals, subject process goals, student language skills, and student study skills.

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Factor One: Subject Content Goals

Content refers to the information in a field of study—just the information, not its understanding. Fundamental concepts, terminology, chronological history, etc., make up the content.

In teaching any subject, no teacher expects to present every bit of information there is. Instead, teachers have to select a sample of information representative of that field as a whole. They have to present it so students can develop some familiarity with the subject and learn more about it later if they want to.

For example, in teaching my undergraduate Introduction to Psychology course, I am faced with a huge amount of information in psychology. I have to decide just how much I'm going to present in 16 weeks or so. Now, it seems to me that one semester is just not enough to do justice to Introduction to Psychology. The course actually should be two semesters long.

But even if I had two semesters, I would still have to omit more information than I include. So I have to decide what the most important findings, theories, history, etc., are to present to students.

In practice, this means I select a textbook, decide how much of it and which parts to cover in class. I also must decide what additional information—not included or emphasized enough for my liking in the text—I want to include in lectures or supplemental readings.

Next, I have to decide how thoroughly to cover this material, balancing depth of focus against breadth of coverage within the

time limits, and choose which points to emphasize.

I might make these decisions on my own or with colleagues. The point is not how these content decisions are made, but rather that they are made in every course. These are the content goals of the course.

Factor Two: Subject Process Goals

In addition to subject content goals, there are subject process goals in every class. Process goals are harder for most teachers to identify. Content goals are usually explicit, whereas the process goals are often implicit, felt or intuited. Part of the art of curricular design and evaluation is to make these implicit objectives explicit by articulating and specifying them in ways that are subject to evaluation and verification.

Bennett, apparently, would define education entirely in terms of content goals, in a formula something like this: Education = Information presented to and retained for some period of time by the student.

Stenhouse (1975), in his excellent discussion of curriculum, emphasizes that process goals are open-ended, while content goals are closed-ended. Student learning objectives in content can be entirely prespecified—in the form, for example, of knowing or not knowing the correct answers on a multiple-choice exam. While you can prespecify a process goal, you cannot prespecify the exact form the process achievement will take.

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It might be helpful to compare a content goal and a process goal for the same material. When I teach the social psychology section of my introductory course, for example, there is certain information I want to cover.

This information includes the classical social psychological experiments in conformity, obedience, helpfulness, intergroup hostility, etc. It is prespecified in certain pages of a textbook, plus material I supply by lecture. I expect students to become familiar with this content, and I measure their familiarity with it by multiple-choice test items based directly on the information presented.

Added to these content goals are process goals. There are processes I want my students to go through, encounters I want them to have with fundamental concepts as they learn about social psychology.

For example, I want my students to think about how this information applies to them personally. I want them to consider whether these classical experiments challenge their view of themselves as individuals and members of society.

The process goal for my students is that they come to understand, to some extent, psychological freedom as a concept they can use to observe and understand themselves and others.

To me, this research suggests that new ways of understanding ourselves and others may be more realistic than our current views, with profound implications for individual and social decision-making (Lessing, 1987). I want my students to think about freedom from a psychological point of view as distinct from a political, religious, or economic perspective.

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It is simple to objectively prespecify content learning outcomes and impossible to objectively prespecify process learning outcomes. I can write multiple-choice questions to examine my students about the facts of, say, Milgrim's classic experiment in obedience to authority. If I want to find out whether my students understand the concept of psychological coercion, however, I have to ask them an open-ended question and see how they respond.

For example, I might ask them to describe three situations in which someone, either the students themselves or persons whom they know or have observed, acted in conformity with peer or authority pressure rather than according to his or her own values or motivation.

To this extent, I can prespecify how I will evaluate student learning in a process area, but I cannot prespecify exactly what the students will say. Students must apply this concept to their lives in their own ways. I will then have to judge whether each one understands this concept, and how deeply.

This is the open-ended nature of process learning. This kind of learning that is perhaps most important, for it is here that, in Stenhouse's terms, students come into contact with the "deep structures of knowledge of a subject" (Stenhouse, 1975).

Content learning, perhaps the essential first step to becoming familiar with a subject, is essentially rote memorization. It is only in the process-oriented applications of a subject that we come to grips with its meaning, and demonstrate whether we have achieved understanding, and to what extent.

Knowledge consists of both information and understanding. Educators who think content mastery is the goal of education have less than half the true goal of education within their sight. Such narrow-minded educators tend to produce students who lack the ability to exercise judgment in complex situations because of inadequate understanding of fundamental concepts.

Factor Three: Student Language Skills

Language is the primary medium of academic education. Some education, of course, takes place in the media of mathematics, music, painting, or movement. But the overwhelming majority of education takes place through the medium of language. One of the goals of an academic education is to produce individuals who are skilled enough in the use of language to express ideas, communicate experience, and extend their own learning.

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In most classes, some sort of technical use of language has to be acquired, sometimes in the form of new terms, sometimes in the form of unfamiliar technical applications of familiar terms. Students not only have to learn new words, they have to develop new ways of construing their own lives, based on and expressed in language.

This is an important psychological and educational principle of curricular expertise. Through language, students learn to interpret experiences they have felt but not understood. Through language, students can extend their capabilities for experience into areas they have not yet encountered. Consequently, the improvement of students' use of language must be an explicit and important curricular goal for nearly every school and university class.

I find that this goal, which I try to meet by assigning reading and writing, often has to be defended to today's students. They object to demanding curricula because they are too frequently underprepared in basic study skills or too busy juggling work, parenting and school that they can't devote time to studying that "old-fashioned" academic rigor requires. Certainly, there has been a decline of rigor in academic classwork. And here I believe Bennett's criticism scores a bulls-eye. It gives him and other like-minded critics credibility.

A basic criterion of academic success is our students' ability to communicate more effectively about a subject at the end of a semester than they could at its start.

There may well be a decline in language acquisition and expertise, especially when we see students complete class after class with no newly acquired language or newly extended understanding of existing language. A basic criterion of academic success is our students' ability to communicate more effectively about a subject at the end of a semester than they could at its start.

This expectation should be made explicit. Teachers should deliberately build it into their curricula and should be evaluated partly on whether their students extend their linguistic skills.

Content and Process Goals in Language Development

Language development encompasses both content learning (information) and process learning (understanding). There appears to be a relationship between content and process learning and left and right cerebral specialization. The left "brain" (cerebral hemisphere) acquires language in the definitional sense. The right "brain" provides the orientation to information that goes beyond the mere linear or rote use of language and makes possible the understanding of mearning (Ornstein, 1973, 1977).

This is what Stenhouse refers to as the "deep structures of knowledge" of a subject, beyond a mere superficial familiarity with its jargon, techniques, and history (Stenhouse, 1975). Information becomes knowledge only when, and only to the extent that, we

grasp something of its meaning.

Attempts to improve education have tended to consist of changes in curricular content only, such as changes in the books read or lecture content. It may also mean changes in the method of teaching content, such as using audiovisual aids or student discussion instead of, or in addition to, textbooks and lectures.

Bennett's comments are squarely in this tradition. The problem here is that, in trying to improve education, teachers have focused on content rather than broadening their curricular focus to include student learning processes.

In a word, the problem with teachers is not so much that they don't understand content, as Bennett argues, as that they don't understand *understanding* as an operational goal of their curricular development and implementation.

The most telling criticism of today's objectively educated, multiple-choice-tested students is not that they have retained very little of what they have "learned," but that they have little understanding of the meaning of the subjects they have studied.

The most far-reaching indictment of American education, it seems to me, is that it has left students without rudder, guide, or "structures for judgement" (Stenhouse, 1975), except their uneducated feelings, especially their insecurity, loneliness and acquisitiveness. Educators may not responsibly delegate training students in the perception of meaning to parents, religions, etc. Meaning is inherent in every subject of study, properly taught.

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Factor Four: Student Study Skills

Finally, the curriculum for each class should include teachers' deliberate efforts to include training in academic study skills. Students are not only learning subjects. They are learning how to learn.

Although teachers often bemoan their students' lack of preparedness, few have been willing to deliberately design study skill training into their curricula. The reality in most schools is that many students are not as ready to learn as they should be, and so training in learning readiness must be included in most, if not all, curricula.

Evaluating Student Learning

Performance Samples: Studying Student Performance

Student evaluation is an important part of the teaching process, and must be explicitly and deliberately integrated into it. Too often, student evaluation is reduced to merely giving tests to obtain grades. A nearly empty ritual.

An important part of teaching is learning about each student. At least two people need to learn about the student: the teacher and the student himself or herself.

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To this end, part of the curriculum of each class should include methods of producing examples of student learning in the form of performance samples that can be evaluated by both teacher and student.

Tests and exams of various kinds can serve this function, but they are too often regarded as merely methods of providing a basis for grading. In fact, exams provide the most accessible methods of estimating how the teaching/learning process is proceeding.

At the end of the class, the record of student performance on tests and exams, including both overall quality of work and improvement in quality, provides substantial, and perhaps the most important, feedback about the teacher's performance (I am using "exams" in the widest sense, including essays, papers, etc.)

For this reason, I am generally opposed to relying upon a single final exam or a two-exam (mid-term and final) strategy for evaluating student learning. My experience has been that students often do relatively poorly on their first exam or paper, and that a minimum of three exams or papers is necessary—one to find out how they're doing and two more to improve their performance.

On their first exam or paper, students receive feedback on how accurately their feeling about how they are studying matches up with their actual performance, as evaluated by the teacher. They

may be performing below their own expectations, or there may be a mismatch between their standards and mine.

In either case, they'll have to apply themselves more, or better, or both, to achieve their goals. They may need to learn how to read more effectively or how to complete an acceptable paper, subjects that I address in class as well as with individual students.

They may have to work harder for the grade they want than they expected to. Alternatively, of course, they can decrease their expectations of themselves, or drop the class. In either case, a standard has been established and maintained.

Student Self-Esteem and the Teacher's Role

In these days when offending no one seems to be the predominant educational value, it seems to me that teachers sometimes become confused about their roles with students. Too often, teachers are reluctant to criticize students appropriately, for fear of hurting their feelings.

The result is that students can graduate from high school, and even go through four years of college, and never sit down with a teacher and take a hard look at their strengths and weaknesses. The resulting deficiency in self-appraisal persists into employment after graduation, when employees cannot accept appropriate criticism from their supervisors (Einhorn, 1986).

We should, however, and within some broad parameters, be willing to work with students from wherever they are when we find them, and we should believe in their ability to develop from wherever we find them...

Students whose self-esteem is too fragile to receive appropriate criticism should be in psychotherapy, not the classroom. Teachers are not psychotherapists, and do not have to be terribly concerned with nurturing fragile egos or providing unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1961).

We should, however, and within some broad parameters, be willing to work with students from wherever they are when we find them, and we should believe in their ability to develop from wherever we find them, under the right conditions.

Student effort, teacher effort, and a class in which the student can connect with the content to a necessary minimum, provide those conditions.

Teachers should be mentors, and the fact that modern English has recognized *mentoring* as somehow separate from teaching signals our failure to adequately define and carry out our essential functions with our students. (Maybe mentors are teachers who take their jobs seriously.) Our students should learn to base their self-esteem on a foundation of real achievements in learning and an increase in their capacities.

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Student Evaluation and Teacher Integrity

Our evaluations of students must genuinely reflect student performance. Unfortunately, teacher evaluation of student performance has been so subject to extracurricular considerations, including political and economic ones, that the integrity of our schools and of teaching as a profession has suffered.

Our subjects have an inherent integrity, which they retain even if we present them inadequately. However, the integrity of our educational institutions, and of teaching as a profession, is directly dependent upon the integrity of our teaching.

If I teach psychology badly, psychology is not demeaned as a subject of study, although my students may not develop an appreciation of it. But if I teach psychology badly, the institution that employs me is, to that extent, failing in its mission, and the viability of teaching as a profession is, to that extent, diminished.

Grades as Inadequate Indicators of Student Performance

There is a problem with the use of grades to indicate student performance. Stenhouse (1975) correctly points out that grades are, at best, symbolic indicators of student learning. My own feeling is that narrative evaluations of students by teachers can provide more realistic descriptions of what students have actually learned, and not learned, than are provided by grades.

Written descriptions of student performance, or narrative transcripts, while more cumbersome, are more useful in evaluating both student and teacher performance. Obviously, there are problems with changing the standard of evaluation from grade to written description. And written evaluations can be just as misleading as grades.

As I wrote this, I watched a news story about an incompetent heart surgeon who went from hospital to hospital, state to state, killing patients. He had glowing letters of recommendation—a kind of narrative evaluation—from each of his former employers, all of whom wanted to get rid of him painlessly (Slobogan & Lach, 1989).

Whatever forms our evaluations of students take, they should mean something about our students' performance.

Four Sources of Distortion in Teacher Evaluation of Student Performance

Regardless of our method for evaluating student performance, there are four widespread distortions in teacher evaluation of student performance that must be avoided if the integrity of teaching is to be restored:

1. Teachers giving inappropriately high grades to students as a form of encouragement or to avoid disappointing them. Students have to learn to be encouraged by genuine achievement, and to accept disappointment as a sometimes necessary step toward genuine achievement.
2. Teachers giving inappropriately high grades to students from disadvantaged populations in a misconceived attempt to redress historic social imbalances. Those imbalances are not redressed by encouraging students from disadvantaged populations to base their self-esteem upon illusions and deceptions, however well intended.
3. Teachers giving inappropriately high grades to students to maintain school enrollment and tuition income, upon which teachers' continued employment, salary increases, and promotions may depend. This merely exchanges future institutional viability for current prosperity.
4. Teachers giving inappropriately high grades to students to avoid being challenged by them, perhaps at the departmental or executive administrative level. Teachers and administrators must learn how to address challenges from students, including investigating and evaluating such challenges fairly, and to expect this as part of academic routine and not as rare exceptions.

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As public dissatisfaction with teaching swells, the question is not *whether* teachers and teaching will become more accountable, but *how*.

Teachers do students no favors, in the long run, by lying to them about their performance—even in the name of kindness.

Kindheartedness in the classroom becomes cruelty in life after graduation when it takes the form of telling students that they know more than they do and are performing at levels higher than they are. Sooner or later they will come up against someone who is secure enough and principled enough not to back down when challenged.

Evaluating Teacher Performance

The integrity of our schools at all levels has been seriously compromised by many teachers' unwillingness or inability to give students the performance evaluations they deserve, and to subject their own and one another's work to appropriate critical appraisal.

As public dissatisfaction with teaching swells, the question is not *whether* teachers and teaching will become more accountable, but *how*. Another question is whether the standards of accountability that are applied will be in harmony with the fundamental concepts and values of teaching, or destructive to them.

With these four curricular factors—subject content goals, subject process goals, student language skills, and student study skills—

we have a conceptual structure for improving the quality of teaching that is comprehensive enough to encompass the entire process of teaching.

These curricular dimensions can be studied through a variety of methods—teacher self-description, group discussion, peer and/or supervisor observation, videotaping of classroom teaching, etc.

It can be particularly useful to describe your teaching in these categories before teaching a class, and then to have a dialogue with a peer, supervisor or yourself as you go through the class, trying to perceive and analyze how you are really doing compared to your curricular intentions.

In an educational psychology class, I asked my students to interview a teacher of any other class they were taking, to elucidate his or her goals along these lines. Then students evaluated, in a paper, both the teachers' expressed goals and their progress in meeting them.

This approach can be used by teacher trainers and supervisors. It provides a comprehensive basis for evaluating teacher performance, while also providing a comprehensive perspective on student learning.

It takes time and expertise to carry out such an operation. If we take teacher evaluation and development seriously, we will have to build time into the teaching schedule for this to happen.

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There is certainly a need for "master teachers" who can teach less expert teachers both by evaluating their performance and by having their peers and subordinates accompany them as they teach.

This position is analogous to that of the clinical specialist in nursing, the expert whose job is to help other nurses do better, by serving as a role model, by helping to orient, evaluate and train new and existing nurses.

Our initiatives toward improving teacher performance must increase academic rigor because we have lost so much of that during the past years. But we must also have a professional understanding of what "academic rigor" really is, based on a comprehensive view of learning and teaching We can settle for superficial window dressing, or we can really address the fundamentals of the educational enterprise.▼

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