

Neo-Progressivism

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Experiential learning isn't a packaged curriculum.

Social and emotional learning isn't an expensive workshop on managing stress in a classroom.

Ed-tech isn't meant to do what we already do "better."

Student voice and choice aren't concepts sold in the latest book.

There is a worrying array of progressive products that diminish meaningful inquiry. Instead of embracing a radical change that disrupts the status quo, educators turn to relatively easy-to-implement products that take traditional ideas but "make them fun" using relatively forward-thinking ideas.

Creating "hooks" that take boring classes and relate them to students.

Embracing gamification and masking standardized classes with "level ups."

Providing mindfulness activities so traditional classrooms maintain order.

Changing a grade system to not reflect letter grades, but still issuing an equivalency that students quickly figure out (1-4, P/F, M/NM)

Using experiential learning as a "nice to have" activity after the "real" assessment (a test.) Usually these are more like arts & crafts.

Focusing on equity as a way to improve standardized test score performance, rather than connect to a community.

These neo-progressive ideas aren't horrible—they're certainly better than the alternative PowerPoint and quiz. I understand they offer educators a safe play in a stressful occupation, and I've used them. Administrators and peers tend to celebrate a "really cool" lesson plan where students pay attention, and many of them truly enjoy it. But the worrying line of thought is that these ideas undermine and ignore the pedagogy of progressive education. We're not embracing progressive ideas of voice, choice, and student empowerment if we're utilizing progressive techniques to actively undermine those ideas.

As in, a teacher who attends professional development on project-based learning learns all the elements of experiential learning: solving real problems, engaged in meaningful work, student choice in their outcomes, and using extensive time to solve it. However, instead of seeking out opportunities in the community that would love a school's connection, the teacher finds ways to pair the project to content standards, restricts student choices (sometimes only allowing them to do that one thing), and ultimately

makes something that no one, outside of the student, teacher, and maybe their family, sees or cares about. For some students, this may be the best class they've ever taken—but we must push more. After all, students may not realize that school could be done differently.

Again, I've made the same mistakes. It's incredibly difficult to create a purposeful PBL experience—or practice progressive education at all in a public setting. I've told kids to stay on task to complete my lessons. I've experimented with gamification to get kids to “do the content.” I've gotten angry at students for not listening to me. I did all of this without asking my students why they felt this way, or really catering to their interests. And the marketing, rollout, and administrative interest in experiential learning is likely ill-suited to the possibilities it provides. Dewey would turn over in his grave to find teachers brandishing his philosophy to do week-long “projects” to display their knowledge of a specific content standard.

Also worrisome are stakeholders making to “transform” learning through ed. tech. As Mark Barnett wrote recently,

“[Seymour] Papert knew that real transformative learning required new models of teaching, where students had more control of learning, where failure was seen as a tool and where students needed to think critically about information instead of being told what to think.”

There's nothing wrong with wanting to be better. It's our strive as educators to be curious learners, just as we want our students to be. These curriculum packages mislead us to thinking that we're transgressing our practice, but really we're doing traditional better.

For example, we care about social and emotional well-being. A school may purchase a web-based, video lesson guide on promoting mindfulness. At its core, it's a decent idea, but no one questions if their practice—the classroom or institution—is the cause of these problems. In addition, is offering every student SEL web courses actually helping them, or does the connection need to be individualized for each learner? Are we attempting to solve problems with surface-level solutions?

Or we care about student choice. We receive professional development that paints choice as choosing between three outcomes for an assignment. It's better than nothing—but certainly student choice could be choosing to do the lesson at all? Perhaps we should invite students to staff meetings and hear their voice at the school level? Why must they learn this content? Who decides?

It's not a menu of ideas, it's a pedagogy. If we put students at the center, they should be at the center. We must embrace the radical idea that a child is a human being who has consent in learning. This involves dramatically changing our classroom approach. It's not what activities we do, or what buzzword is being embraced, but how we value the learner and their background. Direct instruction, online programs, and gamified options can still exist—if that's what students choose and desire to have. For some students, that will be the case, for others, not. That's fine, and we must meet their needs.

Dismantling the authoritarian nature of traditional education won't be solved by making school interesting. At the end of the day, we'll still be ranking and sorting kids, dismissing their voice, punishing them for their decisions, providing a ludicrous amount of "content knowledge", making them compete against each other, and overall — dehumanizing them through the education system.

Traditional teachers, I believe, often don't do this intentionally. Systemic issues — school boards, curriculum guides, district policy — dictate what teachers can and can't do. It is the role of the subversive teacher to fight for humanity in their classrooms through calculated risk. They must push the humanization of the classroom to its brink, not stay within the confines of what their district has deemed "progressive." Most could:

Shift to self-assessment, where students are in charge of assigning themselves a grade based off what they've learned.

Ask students what they want to do, while presenting to students that there are state confines they must work with. Then work with students to make that process as painless as possible.

Establish trust with students on a human-level. Don't yell at them. Don't make them feel stupid. Value them as people to learn with and treat them with respect. It's difficult when students have no choice to be there and may not want to be, but we can be an ally.

If we have to follow certain curriculum guides, morph them to the needs of our class. If our students truly hate it (provide them an outlet to give feedback that matters), then devise together a way to do similar content.

Find a way to be a little rebellious in a risky, yet not completely maniacal, fashion. After all, the community you've built among students and their families — showing them that you care — will rally behind you.

So think twice before accepting that the latest thing in education is "progressive." There's a lot of snake oil and masked traditionalism out there. What should we look for?

A focus on motivation, curiosity, and interest over test scores and assessment.

Enabling students to express themselves for change beyond the little things.

Interesting lessons or projects that we propose to our students, but don't subject them to.

Finding ways for children to be more socially/emotionally stable at a systemic level, rather than a canned activity.

Concepts that focus on skills, rather than content, with the purpose of building those skills because the learner finds them valuable and desires it.