
BOYD BODE, JEROME BRUNER,
AND ENGAGING STUDENTS' INTERESTS

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In 1983, with the publication of its report, *A nation at risk*, the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) began a conservative reaction in education that was called the excellence movement. Claiming that public secondary schools offered too many general track courses that diluted academic material, the commission urged parents and citizens to pressure teachers to encourage the students to master important academic material. For example, the commission recommended that public officials strengthen high school graduation requirements in ways that would require students to expend rigorous efforts in mastering what the commission called the new basic subjects: English, mathematics, science, social studies, and computer science (NCEE 1983, 18-19, 24-26).

At the same time, authors who supported the NCEE position sought to demonstrate that public school teachers had ignored academic subjects and diluted materials to provide for student success and to cater to student interests. For example, for several years, Diane Ravitch published articles and books to show that so-called progressive innovations, such as the social studies, turned school subjects toward practical concerns and replaced academically challenging courses, such as history. In 2000, she repeated many of these complaints against progressive education in her book, *Left back: A century of battles over school reform*.

In 2002, Kieran Egan added a philosophical argument to the conservative perspective with his book, *Getting it wrong from the beginning: Our progressive inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget*. In this work, Egan complained that the progressive ideal of seeking to educate children by attending to their stages of development caused teachers to ignore traditional academic approaches. Although Egan did not quote Ravitch, he repeated her complaint that when progressive educators tried to follow the ideas of John Dewey, they produced a form of anti-intellectualism (Egan 2002, 5, 148).

Although Ravitch and Egan made several errors in their texts, this paper will not attempt to disprove their criticisms. Instead, the point of this paper is to show that by placing progressive educators and traditional academicians into two separate camps, authors who favor traditional subject matter approaches, such as Ravitch and Egan, overlook the many similarities that exist between the two orientations. This point is important if theorists are going to make intelligent decisions about curriculum; educators who belong to the progressive group and subject matter oriented curriculum specialists face the same problem. They have to build their courses of study on student interest.

To illustrate the ideas of progressive educators, this paper will consider the ways that Boyd Bode influenced the work of the Progressive Education Association. The paper will portray the ideas of traditional subject matter oriented educators in descriptions of the work of Jerome Bruner. This comparison should correct two misperceptions that Ravitch and Egan perpetuate. First, neither Bode nor mature progressive educators were anti-intellectual. Second, Bruner's work appears to show that the quintessential exponent of a subject matter orientation struggled with ways to engage student interest that were roughly comparable although almost opposite those of Bode.

THE PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION ASSOCIATION AND STUDENT INTEREST

A biographer of Bode, Robert V. Bullough, Jr. characterizes Bode as being a person who could not make practical decisions. Nonetheless, Bode was able to influence his students and these people came to exert significant influence in practical affairs. One of Bode's students, V.T. Thayer occupied an important position in the Progressive Education Association and he was able to direct the Eight-Year Study in ways that Bode approved.

As Ravitch and Egan note, in 1918, a small group of teachers and lay people interested in adjusting school processes to students' needs formed the Progressive Education Association (PEA). Dedicating themselves to allowing the students the freedom to develop naturally, they wanted to use scientific studies to suggest the guidance the students needed to achieve full personal development (Progressive Education Association 1938, 4-6).

According to some commentators, the members of the PEA felt such confidence in their methods that, with the exception of the Eight-Year Study, they never engaged in research to test their methods (Tanner and Tanner 1990, 226-227). But this accusation is not entirely true. For example, in 1925, Ellsworth Collings published the doctoral dissertation that he completed under the direction of William Heard Kilpatrick, a prominent member of the PEA and senior professor of philosophy of education at Teachers College from 1918 to 1938. In this work, Collings tried to show the benefits of one of the most popular PEA methods, the project method. Popularized by Kilpatrick, the project method asked students to work together on activities they selected. In his experiment, Collings compared the achievements of students in two rural schools that designed the curriculum following the Kilpatrick's ideas with another school that followed a traditional model. Collings found that the students who followed the project method performed better on standardized subject matter achievement tests, attended school more frequently, and had fewer discipline problems than did the students in the traditional schools (Collings 1925, 225-269).

In addition to these less significant efforts, the PEA constructed the Eight-Year Study to demonstrate that secondary school teachers could follow the principles PEA members had developed in elementary schools. This was the largest, most carefully constructed, most expensive project conducted up to that time. It began in 1930 when the PEA established the Commission on the Relation of School and College (CRSC). Enrolling more than three hundred colleges and universities and what the PEA called thirty high schools, the commission proposed comparing the extent of student success in college of the graduates of traditional high school programs to the graduates of progressively oriented high schools (Progressive Education Association 1938, 17-18, 35-37).

Administrators and faculty in the cooperating high schools agreed to fashion their curriculums in ways that enabled students work together in groups on projects that satisfied their desires and in ways that helped them appreciate democracy. The members of the PEA believed that to fulfill this agreement the schools had to offer curriculums that met the students' needs. Thus, in 1932, as the work of the CRSC progressed, the executive board of the PEA established the Commission on the Secondary School Curriculum (CSSC) to assist the participating schools in aligning their curriculums with research on the needs of adolescents and the needs of the society in which they lived. Headed by V.T. Thayer, the CSSC began two research projects. First, it established the Study of Adolescents headed by Caroline Zachary that involved the efforts of educators, psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists who tried to provide a description of adolescent development that would aid school people in reconstructing their curriculums. Second, the CSSC created a variety of committees comprised of subject matter experts who sought to describe how the different curriculum fields could contribute to general education. All of these groups disseminated their findings to the participating schools through reports, conferences, summer workshops, and through published books that described their efforts and their conclusions (Thayer, Zachary, and Kotinsky 1939, v-viii).

Although the CSSC noted that educators disagreed about the nature of the students' needs, the members of the CSSC decided Zachary's studies of adolescents indicated that students' needs could be defined as four sets of relationships: immediate social relationships, wider social relationships, economic relationships, and personal living. In defining the students' needs as relationships, the CSSC recognized that adolescents' needs were both personal and social. That is, the personalities of the children developed within the social relationships in their families and, later, in schools and in other social or economic relationships. As the adolescents matured, they became active members and contributed to the development of the groups. Consequently, the groups met the students' needs and the students came to serve the groups' needs (Thayer, Zachary, and Kotinsky 1939, 25, 44).

BODE AND THE PEA

The PEA's Commission on the Secondary School Curriculum followed the ideas of Boyd Bode in part because the chair of the commission, V.T. Thayer was Bode's student and turned to him for advice as much as possible. Thus, Thayer's commission tried to avoid the common errors of progressivism against which Bode warned (Bullough 1981, 64-66).

Writing in 1938, before the CSSC released its final report, Bode warned progressive educators against adopting any idea too strongly. Repeating an observation that he made several times in his works, Bode argued that to hold the democratic ideal as they professed, progressive educators had to construct a psychology of education based on using knowledge to control experience and they had to set up a theory of values that provided continuous improvement of human living by widening common interests and common concerns. To Bode, the democratic ideal meant that progressive educators had to avoid falling into the traditional model of thinking in absolute terms and of using slogans about freedom as if they represented permanent truths (Bode 1938, 26, 37).

In regard to the dangers of absolutism, Bode criticized Robert M. Hutchins who recommended that university programs focus on basic principles or subject matters that were true for all times. Hutchins believed that universities were distorted by appeals to vocational preparation, and he thought they should return to liberal arts programs where teachers and students pursued the truth. Bode made two criticisms against Hutchins' narrow traditionalism. First, Bode claimed that Hutchins ignored the methods of science and the advances that it offered. Second, Bode noted that the distinction between a liberal and a technical education was not as clear as Hutchins made it. For Hutchins, a liberal education was one where students and teachers pursued abstract knowledge and a technical education was one where students and teachers sought practical results. On the other hand, Bode argued that Hutchins distinctions were false. He believed that a technical education became liberal to the extent that it involved a whole way of life. For example, farmers who concerned themselves only with making money were practical in a dangerous sense. But farmers could express liberal notions of technical training when they found operational aspects in scientific concepts or when they thought about such arrangements as cooperative marketing and crop control as problems in moral living (Bode 1938, 32-34).

Nonetheless, Bode was equally critical of progressive educators who sought to make student interest the center of school lessons. The problem was that progressive educators appeared to be making the same mistake Rousseau had made by focusing curriculum development on the individual child's interests. According to Bode, Rousseau believed that, since God created human beings, human desires were expressions of the divine pattern. Thus, Rousseau sought to distinguish which desires were natural and find ways to enhance the natural

interests. Bode claimed that progressive educators acted in a similar way by thinking they could find the proper curriculum by studying the development of children. This was another form of absolutism, Bode complained (1938, 38-40).

The way out of the problem was to realize that the environment of the children conditioned their interests. In this regard, Bode recalled his youthful experiences teaching in a country school. In this community, vocational preparation took place on the farm; citizenship training happened during the town meetings; and religious education occurred in the church. As a teacher, Bode's only job was to assign lessons that focused on basic academic skills and hear student recitations. According to Bode, the students performed an extraordinary amount of dull and difficult work because these chores were bound up with the way of life on the farm. But he noticed that in a city the children lived lives apart from adults. While Bode did not want to return to the farm life, he thought that schools should develop a theory of social relationships that would replace this intergenerational cooperation. He called this a theory of democracy. To him, it meant that the people learned to rely on intelligence and that the school made the ideal of democracy clearer for everyone (Bode 1938, 48-61).

In part, Bode accepted the notion that a curriculum could be based on the students' needs. But he claimed that the students' needs had to be determined with reference to the way of life the pupils would adopt as their own. Studies could not reveal these choices any more than an architectural design could emerge from a study of the materials used in constructing a building. Instead, Bode argued that education had to encourage growth directed by the pattern of the social order within which the children grew into human beings. In the case of progressive education, the emphasis on democracy meant that the patterns required continual revision because, in a complex modern world, the goals were contradictory and incoherent. For example, Bode noted that people in business had to seek profits and to offer social service. Politicians reinforced the image of rugged individualism and the need for social security. Behind these contradictory ideals, Bode noted the conflict between democracy and tradition. Thus, he concluded that understanding this essential conflict was the primary need from which all other needs should be determined (Bode 1938, 67-72).

According to Bode, progressive educators sought to advance democracy by selecting materials according to the interests of the children. In this way, the progressive educators thought they avoided the conflict with tradition by never imposing adult standards on the children. But Bode claimed this approach did not free the intelligence of the children as progressive advocates hoped. Instead, the children's activity became the standard. Thus, tinkering in a laboratory was called scientific training and splotching color was called creative self-expression. Instead, Bode urged progressive educators to recognize that the distinction

between the child and the subject matter was a false distinction. He recommended that they move in the direction of helping children acquire the ways of thinking of subject matter specialists (Bode 1938, 90-94).

To explain how children might acquire these methods of thinking, Bode cited examples in the areas of the social sciences and the arts. He complained that social science teachers presented changes in traditions as conflicts of absolutes. For example, they presented the rise of democracy as the growth of a different but equally absolute set of values. Consequently, the students came to believe in democracy, but they did not understand it. For Bode, the better direction was for the teacher to acknowledge the intellectual confusion about democracy and to engage the students in a search for a unified and consistent way of life. In art, Bode urged teachers to use the standards such as form, line, or tone to enhance the students' appreciation. While Bode accepted that the teachers could begin with the appreciations the students have, he thought the teachers should lead the students to discover ways to heighten these appreciations (Bode 1938, 118-120).

BODE'S INFLUENCE ON THE PEA

In the 1940s, after the Eight-Year Study concluded, the CSSC published its final report in which the members offered the general conclusions of the principles to shape the curriculums to meet the needs of youth. In addition, the different committees of subject matter specialists published their reports about how the curriculum might be shaped in their particular areas. In each case, the reports followed the suggestions of Bode. They avoided making studies of the students' needs, a substitute for a philosophy of education, and they constructed such areas as social studies and art to show the students how organized subject matters could help them accomplish their goals.

To describe the problems in determining the direction in which the school curriculums should lead, the CSSC report quoted Bode to explain why research into the patterns of personality development could not provide an understanding of the curriculum. The report offered the example of the research finding that adolescent boys desired the independence of adulthood but the economic conditions of the Great Depression made it unlikely that they could find jobs with adequate salaries. The report added that there were several alternatives. Politicians might create jobs for the adolescent boys or educators could help the youth accept their frustrations. According to the CSSC report, research into the development of students would not indicate which option was the correct choice. The answer depended on a working philosophy of education (Thayer, Zachary, and Kotinsky 1939, 54-56).

The CSSC report proposed that curriculum practices should tend toward the fulfillment of the democratic tradition. They argued that Americans had

long conceived of the schools as protecting democracy. Further, they noted that an important idea within the democratic tradition was that all institutions should enhance the individual by extending his or her opportunities and safeguarding his or her rights. The report stated that this conception fit the CSSC's view of the ways schools should help students find their sense of worth through relationships (Thayer, Zachary, and Kotinsky 1939, 63-65).

The various curriculum committees offered suggestions that paralleled Bodes' view of using the organized subject matters to help students accomplish their own ends. These committees accepted the view of the CSSC that students needs fell into four areas of relationships. They sought ways to use the organized materials within the subject matters to clarify the problems that students faced. For example, in an effort to use the social studies to further the students' personal-social relationships, the committee suggested that history could contribute to the understandings of the changing patterns of the American family and of the stresses placed on the different family members. Sociologists could offer explanations of family disorganization, and anthropologists could show the similarities and differences among families in several cultures. According to the committee on the social studies, these materials could contribute to mutual appreciation among the family members and thereby strengthen the family ties (Committee on the Function of the Social Studies in General Education 1940, 127-128).

The PEA's committee on the social studies recommended that teachers begin the classes with such activities as watching an Andy Hardy movie in the community theater or reading Booth Tarkington's book, *Seventeen*. The students could have discussions to illuminate problems revealed in the movie or the book. These would lead to research about the bases of those problems and possible solutions (Committee on the Function of the Social Studies in General Education 1940, 129-130).

In a similar way, the Committee on the Function of Art in General Education tied art activities to the needs and interests of the students. For example, the committee noted that when the students worked on large murals, they had opportunities to plan and to work cooperatively. The committee recommended that students draw pictures of human forms and that this activity could help students understand gender differences. They hoped this would help children develop a wholesome, aesthetic interest in the human body. Above all, the committee recommended that the art teacher encourage the students to express their own ideas in their work. When the teacher found the students having trouble, the teacher could approach and suggest methods of handling brushes or organizing a composition. In this way, the students did not begin with descriptions of proper techniques nor of principles of composition found in master works. Instead, the organized body of the subject matter came to the students in the

form of suggestions to help them accomplish what they wanted to do (Committee on the Function of Art in General Education 1940, 61-70).

BRUNER AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE DISCIPLINES

According to Ravitch, during the 1950s, conservatives attacked progressive educators accusing them of being un-American. Academics complained that teachers who met students' needs ignored essential subject matters. And military spokespeople cited the Sputnik crisis as a call for schools to return to intellectual training (Ravitch 2000, 342, 343-345, 361-365).

Although Ravitch considers the return to academic training as opposed to the PEA effort to meet students' needs, the scholars, such as the Mathematics School Study Group, who created those academic programs, such as new math, sought to capture students' interests. Unlike the PEA, though, these scholars did not think student interest came from relationships. They thought students could find discoveries of what they called the structure of the disciplines to be interesting.

In 1959, a group of scholars who had created programs in physics, mathematics, and biology met in Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Jerome Bruner wrote the document, *The process of education*, to express the working principles of the different efforts. Their conclusion was that an understanding of the structure of the discipline should guide the reform of the curriculum.

According to Bruner, the structure of a discipline was an accumulation of the fundamental ideas that enabled a scholar to proceed. He believed these ideas could be shaped into a spiral so that young children could learn these ideas in simple forms and older children would learn them again in more complicated settings. But to be useful, the principles had to be discovered by the students. Series of lectures would not convey to the students the scientific attitude implicit in the structure of the disciplines (Bruner 1960, 27-30).

For Bruner, this model met students' needs in two ways. First, they felt the thrill of their minds functioning fully. This delight kept them on task longer than could any system of external rewards. Second, the students could learn, recall, and use the ideas more easily because they had an organization that enabled them to reconstruct missing details (Bruner 1960, 20-26, 49-51).

Unfortunately, Bruner could never describe the structure of any discipline. In *The process of education*, he listed some examples such as students learning the triangle of trade in colonial America as part of the fundamental idea that all nations must trade to exist. Yet, when he considered the role of intuition, Bruner acknowledged that guessing was an important part of any analysis. Since this implied that scholars did not always make deductive judgments from some set

of fundamental ideas, Bruner acknowledged that more research was need on the subject (Bruner 1960, 21-24, 63-68).

Some scholars argued that the idea of the structure of a discipline was overly simple. For example, in 1964, Joseph Schwab contended that there were different types of academic disciplines and the structures varied according to the types. Schwab noted that physics appeared to be theoretical, ethics appeared to be practical, and engineering was productive. Furthermore, Schwab found that scholars in any field combined the information they gathered in different ways as they used it. Thus, he concluded that the structure of a discipline was not a fixed way of thinking (Schwab 1963, 14-30).

Despite the problems of capturing and transmitting the structure of the disciplines, several commentators argued that Bruner's efforts were roughly similar to those of the progressive educators. For example, in 1967, Robert B. Davis asserted that efforts such as the new mathematics were direct extensions of the progressive movement. He believed these innovations extended the progressive tradition because they did not depend on textbooks and they encouraged the students to discover the important ideas (Davis 1967, 4, 51-57).

Despite Davis' claim, the progressives had a different conception of student interest than the one that Bruner developed. In fact, the 1960s curriculum reforms turned the ideas of the progressives on their heads. Although Bruner and his colleagues sought to build on student interests, they thought that the interest came from different directions than did the progressives.

SOURCES OF INTEREST

In his educational works, Dewey offered a biological explanation for the source of students' interests. In *School and society*, Dewey explained that his school used occupations that involved individuals working with such things as wood, cooking, or sewing. He claimed that students were interested in these activities because they were essential to live and appealed to their instincts (1956, 132-137). In a later work, *Democracy and education*, Dewey repeated the idea that a person's desires could derive from original instincts (1966, 127). And in *Experience and education*, Dewey noted that teachers had to change students' desires into purposes which meant forming plans and recognizing the range of possibilities ahead of them. In this work, he acknowledged the students' desires could be natural drives (1963, 65-68).

Although Bode claimed that Dewey had influenced him, he changed the notion of interest or needs from a biological basis, as Dewey had predicated, to a social one. For Bode, the students' interests were tied up with the way of life and the relationships of the children. While Bode changed the source of the interests, he retained Dewey's view that interests were something the children

brought to school. The job of the teacher was to show the students how organized subject matters could help the students realize their aims.

On the other hand, Bruner turned around this progressive idea. He believed that the students could find interest in the school rather than bring their interests with them. Bruner's view was that, if the students could discover the central ideas of the discipline, they would be captivated by these discoveries and the understandings. The satisfaction that came from learning these ideas would satisfy the children's intellectual needs. Further, the scientists with whom Bruner worked sought to design materials that enabled children of various intellectual abilities to learn the material. They hoped that by spreading scientific understandings through out the population, their new curriculums would meet the democratic needs of the society. This would avoid the dangers presented by a few people controlling scientific knowledge. In a technological society, such a condition would be oligarchy. Further, Bruner worried that it would lead to a stagnation of ideas because people who thought in different ways could not enter the academic fields (Bruner 1960, 70-80).

CONCLUSION

While Dewey and Bode thought of interests as something children brought to the school from their lives outside, Bruner conceived interest to be inherent in correctly presented material. Although educators tried to apply both sets of ideas, it is hard to say who was correct. The Eight-Year Study applied the ideas of Bode and the efforts of such groups as the School Mathematics Study Group applied Bruner's ideas. In each case, the efforts met with initial success and fell into disfavor in a short period of time. Nonetheless, the comparison between the two efforts is important because they show that progressive educators and subject matter curriculum specialists recognized that students had to take an interest in the material if they were going to learn it.

The point is simple. Critics of progressive education portray the PEA as a group of fuzzy minded anti-intellectuals. They consider subject matter specialists as hard headed realists. But progressives and academicians shared essential views and confronted similar problems. On the one hand, progressive educators, such as Bode and his student, Thayer, developed complicated ways to build on their view of students' desires and use them to lead to the subject matter. Similarly, Bruner and the scholars at Woods Hole constructed complex approaches to the subject matters that enabled the students to discover things that made the subject matter interesting. If some one wants to construct well thought out curriculum plans, they must consider the notions that Bode and Bruner share.

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