

“Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!”¹

Expanding the National Standards to Unshackle the Soul of Schools

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Many of us long for a strong breeze to blow through schools which would “lift” the cultural “soul” of the students so that they can tap into the stream of “sweetness and light” envisioned by Matthew Arnold in 1882. The last decade of the twentieth century brought the “soul” of the disciplines to American Schooling in the form of National Standards resulting in bitter feuds across the contemporary entrenched camps of educational thought with both sides either rejecting standards or the outcomes of standards. We can endlessly debate the merits of standards for the disciplines, but what is really at issue revolves around the need for a cultural breeze which will softly lift the institutional framework of schools to tap the true “soul” of the disciplines.

Although the boundaries of disciplines are constantly evolving and spilling into each other, those who experience the struggles, play, and joy of practicing single or combined disciplines in their professional adult lives embody the “soul” of these disciplines. In 1990, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi sought to define this notion as “optimal experience” or “flow” in one of the largest international research efforts to empirically define intangible essences of transcendentalism:

Quite often people mention experiencing self-transcendence in flow, as when a musician playing a particularly beautiful melody feels at one with the order of the cosmos....An engineer from Bangalore in India, whose flow comes from computer programming, describes his absorption in that work: “It leads me into an imaginative world of program variables, operations, and algorithms. I feel as if I am an inside part of a computer — or another computer....” Children — provided they are healthy and not too severely abused — seem to be in flow constantly; they enjoy “unfolding their being.” Unfortunately they soon have to stop “unfolding,” as school starts to force their growth into patterns over which they have no control.²

In 1882, Arnold sought this notion as “the study and pursuit of perfection...in other words, sweetness and light.”³ In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom Arnold admired, envisioned it for the:

schoolboy under the bending dome of day... when this spiritual light shall have revealed the law of more earthly natures — when he has learned to worship the soul, and to see that the natural philosophy that now is, is only the first gropings of its gigantic hand, he shall look forward to an ever expanding knowledge, he shall look forward to an ever expanding knowledge as to a becoming creator.⁴

So, whether we call this pursuit a “state of flow” or “sweetness and light” or “natural philosophy,” it most definitely does not evoke the sense of experiencing education and learning in a manner which Bruce Novak warns us is “poised to create a great nation of pencil pushers” engaged in “the process of acquiring standardized souls.” Novak reiterates a long standing thread of public education criticism, and references the 1890s observations of New York City schools by Joseph Mayer Rice (sometimes heralded as the “father of evaluation”) who observed schools in thirty-

six cities and over twelve hundred teachers. Of one New York City school Rice commented, “The spirit of the school is, ‘Do what you like with the child, immobilize him, automatize him, dehumanize him, but save, save the minutes.’”⁵ In the 1892 introduction to his evaluation of American schools, Rice used the criteria of “excellence” and “standards” to define the benchmark ideal still echoed today, “What is the educational standard by means of which the degree of excellence of a school may be measured?”⁶

A century later the enormous 1990s project defining National Standards for the pursuit of disciplines (used by states to define their state learning standards) was nearing completion. This was both a momentous democratic (open forums across the country) and philosophical (defining true disciplinary essences) task. For the first time the teaching profession had a broad epistemological framework to act as a guide for the disciplines. However, the emergence of this fascinating epistemological project a century after Rice’s call for “standards” remains incomplete.

Rice remarked in 1892, “The characteristic feature of our school system may perhaps be best defined by the single word ‘chaos.’ [C]onducting its schools in accordance with any whim upon which it may decide, being restricted only by certain State laws of secondary importance.” He followed this observation by a characterization of the chaotic spectrum of what Arnold might have termed school *culture*. For Rice the ends of the spectrum ranged from those who believed “that school is a place where children must be put through certain definitely fixed mechanical processes, that there can be no deviation from these” to those who believed “in the preservation of the happiness of childhood, and who think that the means with which to gladden the early years of life are at hand.”⁷

Today, the discontent with the cultural atmosphere of schools is often mistakenly laid at the door of “Standards.” What people are usually referring to is not the “Standards,” but rather “Testing” and “teaching to the test.” These are *cultural* attributes of school. The National Standards for each of the major subject domains address the attributes of the *disciplined* mind, they do not address the *cultural* attributes of School necessary to achieve harmony with the disciplinary standards.

As damning as it may sound, we are still in need of more standards — standards which unshackle the “soul” of the school as a *cultural* institution. With only a decade so far for school culture to wrestle with engaging such a comprehensive set of national disciplinary standards, schools have reverted to pre-progressive “factory” notions of culture which directly contradict the “soulful” essence of the disciplines.⁸ As a result, the current culture of school is framing a pedagogic ontology which resonates to Arnold’s criticism of “faith in machinery” or Rice’s criticism of the “automatizing” qualities of education.

Arnold’s 1882 project offers us an early attempt at defining a set of standards for “culture.” In this sense, Novak points us in the direction of the next democratic project in America’s never ending quest to evolve its ideal of School towards Arnold’s notion of “perfection”: National Standards *for School Culture*. Such standards would undoubtedly need to provide a framework transcending “the machinery” of school and an ontological alignment with the “soul” of the disciplines

defined in the recently developed National Standards for the disciplines. Currently thinkers in Educational Leadership do most of the recognized philosophy on culture and its definition in schools, as exemplified by Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson:

Beneath the conscious awareness of everyday life in schools, there is a stream of thought and activity. This underground flow of feelings and folkways wends its way within schools, dragging people, programs, and ideas towards often-unstated purposes...Students deserve the best schools we can give them — schools full of heart, soul, and ample opportunities to learn and grow. Too often, students are being shortchanged. They are stifled by sterile, toxic places that turn them against learning rather than turn them on to it.⁹

Within the popular notion of *school culture* lies the “bread and butter” of thinkers in the Education Philosophy field. Rather than derailing the massive new democratic project which now provides a worthy and “soulful” epistemological framework for the disciplines, education philosophers might well consider a new democratic project defining National Standards to guide the evolution of *School Culture* — one which unshackles the essences of a cultural framework for schools and lifts the standards which now define the soul of the disciplines. Perhaps Arnold’s “sweetness and light” would be considered an aging vernacular in contemporary standards language, but its essence would undoubtedly resonate in the twenty-first century language of such a document.

1. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ode to the West Wind,” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: W.W. Norton), 223 [original: 1820].

2. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 185, 191.

3. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Toronto: University of Toronto English Library, 2002), chap. 2, para. 1; see <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/nonfiction_u/arnoldm_ca/ca_ch2.html> [original: 1882].

4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 66 [original: 1837].

5. Joseph Mayer Rice, “Our Public-School System of New York City,” *The Forum* 14 (Jan. 1893), 617 [fourth in series of nine accounts of schooling in thirty-six cities].

6. Rice, “Our Public-School System: Evils in Baltimore,” *The Forum* 14 (October 1892), 147 [first in series].

7. *Ibid.*, 147.

8. Each of the discipline areas of the National Standards is represented by a book-length philosophical document which the states usually reference in their own State Standards documents. See how this works for the history discipline by viewing the National Standards on Historical Thinking at <<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/standards/thinking5-12.html>> and their incorporation in the Illinois Learning Standards for Social Science at <<http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/socscience/social.html>>

9. Terrence E. Deal and Kent D. Peterson, *Shaping School Culture: The Heart of Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 3, 137.