

Hyphen-Based Reform

If challenged to list “Hyphens I Have Known,” educators should have an easy time of it. One of our favorite ways to signal the preeminence of the latest movement in education is to adorn it with a hyphen. We have had Outcomes-Based, Concept-Based, and Assessment-Based Curricula; Community-Centered and Child-Centered Education; Performance-Based Assessment and Mastery-Learning-Based Teaching (double score); not to mention Competency-Based Learning, and a newcomer, Brain-Based Learning. None of these, it should be noted, has led us to World-Class Education. But not to worry, for now that we are on our way to Standards-Based Reform, victory is at hand (by the year 2000, no less).

The trouble with such catch phrases is not that they are necessarily wrongheaded, but that they are overblown and counterproductive. They simplify what is complex and offer more than they can deliver. As a hyphenate becomes prominent, it tends to take on all manner of meanings and, in the process, loses whatever conceptual sharpness it started with. As a banner for some to rally around, it soon becomes a target for others to shoot down. Thoughtful discourse and decision-making lose out, as the “outcomes-based” brouhaha of recent memory vividly reminds us.

Take the case at hand, standards-based education reform. The proposition seems very ordinary, if not irrefutable, to most of us: the education system should be organized to produce certain results, results that are best delineated in terms of what is to be learned. But if that is all the slogan means, why canonize it? After all,

it can be argued that our education system already has national standards, if not by intent then surely by default. How else can we explain (local rhetoric notwithstanding) why the content and delivery of education varies little from sea to shining sea?

What is different about the current movement is noteworthy, however, and merits our attention. It is that standards


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should be made explicit and should center on learning. Up to now, our standards have been implicit — they have had to be inferred from the content of textbooks, course syllabi, examinations, and state and district curriculum documents. They have been more concerned with action than with results, more focused on what to teach and ways of teaching than with what is to be learned as a consequence of teaching.

Tough Questions Ahead

But standards-based reform is no more magical than its hyphenate predecessors. The movement can make a difference, may even be indispensable to reform (with or without the moniker) but only if lots of other changes take place, and only

if the movement itself addresses some very tough questions. For instance: How can standards be both forward-looking and consensus-based? How can standards best be expressed? Which aspects of the education enterprise are likely to benefit from the establishment of explicit standards, and which hindered? Does raising standards mean adding more to what is to be learned or changing what is to be learned? When do standards become standards? When declared so by their authors? When blessed by some “official” organization? When adopted in enough places? Is voluntary standards an oxymoron?

Project 2061 has been in the forefront of the move to base reform on clear statements of what we believe students should know and be able to do to be science literate. We will continue to base our work on realizing the learning goals presented in *Science for All Americans* and *Benchmarks for Science Literacy*. Maybe this doesn't earn us *le hyphen*, but how about the *Croix de Guerre*? 


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