RCL 2015 Rhetoric and Civic Life II

The Pennsylvania State University

University Park, PA 16802

March 23, 2015

The Board of School Directors

State College Area School District

131 W. Nittany Ave.

State College, PA 16801

To Whom It May Concern:

In recent years the topic of public education has reached the forefront of debate across the nation. Many schools have implemented a standardized curriculum that incorporates various aspects of different learning approaches in order to create what is viewed to be most effective teaching style. As board members of the State College Area School District, it is your responsibility to determine and implement this standardized curriculum and teaching style, and as such we have determined that our recent findings would be an asset towards this goal.

On March 1, 2015, the members of Dr. Jessica O’Hara’s class hosted a deliberation, a public forum for discussing important issues within the general population, regarding the learning objectives of the modern classroom. This event broke down the basis of learning into the three main developmental areas of knowledge based, critical thinking based, and social based learning which were discussed individually and then collectively.

The focus throughout the discussion of knowledge based learning was the idea of creating a standardized curriculum and implementing a standardized test for said curriculum. It was a consensus throughout the discussion group that schools require basic sets of knowledge that all students should understand at certain points throughout their education. A major point of concern however with the current system was with regards to how one can evaluate this knowledge through testing. In the current system, students who learn differently or struggle under testing conditions are given an unfair disadvantage relative to peers. It is our determination that moving forward, the baseline for knowledge evaluated through these standardized tests needs to be revised, and that the tests themselves need to be recreated in a way that offers no advantages or disadvantages to any given student.

For the discussion of critical thinking based learning, the main idea was allowing students to develop their own independent thought processes. It was a consensus throughout the discussion group that a teaching method that allows students to reach their own conclusions regarding topics is the most effective teaching style. An idea brought up during the prior discussion of knowledge based learning was that knowledge based learning encouraged memorization, which was determined to be toxic to actual learning. Critical thinking-based learning on the other hand was deemed to circumvent this dilemma, as it forced the student to understand rather than memorize. This critical-thinking based learning was determined to allow the student to think for themselves and equip them with a toolbox of necessary skills to solve all types of problems rather than a select few. A major point of concern however was that when utilizing this teaching method it is difficult to assess progress, as standardized tests scores are poor proxies for one’s critical thinking skills. It is our determination that moving forward the classroom should place more focus on the development of these independent critical thinking skills while simultaneously developing a more effective way to measure the critical thinking ability possessed by students.

During the discussion of the third developmental area, social based learning, the main focus was allowing students to work together in groups in order to achieve a common goal while simultaneously learning from each other. It was a consensus throughout the discussion group that social based learning provides the student with differing perspectives on topics generated by peers, and this ultimately results in learning key social skills applicable to life in general. A major point of concern however was with regards to how those who contribute nothing and those who dominate discussion are toxic to the overall goal of this teaching style. It was furthermore decided upon that if these two parties could be minimized, social based learning has a major place within the learning system. It is our determination that moving forward the classroom should incorporate social based learning within the curriculum, albeit with a stress placed upon attempting to subdue those students who dominate the conversation and motivate those students who do not contribute.

Upon observation of these conclusions reached through the discussion, one can see that each of these three teaching styles needs to be implemented into the common curriculum of education within the United States. Upon careful consideration of the observed discussions and their conclusions, we have deemed it necessary to shift a portion of the focus currently placed on knowledge based learning to both critical thinking based and social based learning. Furthermore, we have also concluded that the current standardized assessment system is innately flawed. The system must be recreated in order to objectively measure student progress in the areas of critical thinking AND learned knowledge rather than simply memorized knowledge assessed through the current travesty that is standardized testing.

We feel that if these actions were taken by the State College Area School District, a leading provider of education within the state of Pennsylvania and nationally, it would incite a chain of events that would ultimately result in a shift in educational focus across the United States. It is necessary for the first domino in the line to fall however before this paradigm shift can occur, and we believe that the State College Area School District possesses all the necessary skills and capabilities to be the leader behind this new era of education.

Best Regards,

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Benjamin Rowles Lillian Swei William Petley

**Introduction to the First Learning Objective of the Modern Classroom**

(Helena Mancini and Lisa Keim)

**The First Learning Objective of the Modern Classroom: Knowledge Based Learning**

Success of a society is marked by the mental development, and education that is provided to those within the community. Therefore, the push for knowledge and developing the individual mental capacity has been a focus in many countries. In the United States, the application of education is a combination of methods of education used in countries that are considered to be the most successful in educating their populace. Specifically, one of the methods used in the modern classroom is lecture-based, providing the student with information, with testing to assess whether or not a student learned the material.

        In this pillar of knowledge, students are provided with information and it is up to the individual to learn the material and take advantage of the resources provided to them. Through this method, all students are provided with the same information, giving all students an equal chance of success. This method of education is currently being used in most classrooms in the United States and is characterized by lectures and standardized testing. Standardized testing, particularly, has taken our nation by storm in recent years, as many educators and political leaders see it as the only fair way to assess which students are better than others. One of the latest installments of these tests is being seen in schools is the Common Core, which consists of a set of standards developed by state leaders and educators that all students must meet. In the United States today, where there is so much social and economic inequality that so often translates into the quality of schools, these standards help ensure that all students will have the same basic education. Once they have equal bases to build on, all students, no matter where they go to school, will have a more equal chance to continue on to higher education if they choose to.

        This method of educating indirectly emphasizes memorization and individualism, or lack of community. Often, teachers spend a large amount of instructional time preparing for and taking standardized tests. While also catering the material being taught to match exactly what is going to be tested, emphasizing the memorization of facts leaves less time to develop critical thinking skills or logical reasoning. Through lecture-style classes with standardized assessment, many students become competitive and individually focused since their level of knowledge is displayed by a test score. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, roughly half of the high school students who took the Keystone Exam, science section, failed to score proficient or advanced in 2012. Those students scoring under proficient are restricted from graduating and are often put in remedial classes to relearn the material to be tested again the following year.

**Final Thoughts and Policy Recommendations Regarding the Implementation of The First Pillar in the Modern Classroom**

        While moderating a deliberation regarding the issue of education, many points arose regarding how students and the general public felt about this particular mode of teaching. Some of the key points that reoccurred throughout the deliberation dealt with restriction of creativity, exclusion of other curriculum, and how the baseline of education should be established. Many participants were concerned that if this method of teaching continues, other programs, such as art and music, will be discontinued causing students to be more restricted by material taught in the classroom. In regards to art and music, the educational system is trying to standardize these topics, creating a quantifiable test, but some participants noted that these kinds of knowledge cannot be standardized and standardizing the topic reduces creativity. Instead the standardized tests and modern classrooms emphasize certain curriculum, such as math and reading comprehension, which hinders students who want to focus their education on a different topic.

        Others brought up the need to establish a baseline of knowledge, or what every student should know. However, the deliberation did not know how to create this new baseline because education is very complex and every student learns in a different manner. The idea that people cannot be compared under the same standards due to their different types of knowledge was explored several times during the deliberation. One possible solution to the issue of testing students on areas that are not their focus would be to establish specialties or tracks that the student chooses to study. Although this would solve the issue at hand, others worried that choosing what to study early in life is a huge risk since many people who graduate from college are still unsure what they want to do with their lives.

        A few other issues that the group struggled to make sense of are how schools teach for standardized testing and how standardizing testing affects the teaching environment. Students in the deliberation agreed that instead of being taught information, students were being taught how to take the exam, or strategies in order to get the highest score. Also, these students feel as though the testing does not use application of knowledge, rather it focuses on memorization and how well a student can retain information. Many attendees at the deliberation argued that the application of knowledge and utilizing critical thinking skills and logical reasoning is more important.

While the discussion certainly focused around many problems with standardized testing, the group seemed to agree that standardized tests could be beneficial if they were used differently. Currently, standardized test are used to determine which teachers are the best, and those teachers are given higher salaries. They are also used to evaluate schools; those that perform the best receive more funding, as a kind of incentive to take the tests seriously. While this may have seemed like a good idea in theory, it actually leads to a kind of paradox, because the schools that score lower on tests are the schools that likely need more funding for classroom materials or teachers. Some attendees of the deliberation mentioned that if the scores of standardized tests were only used for teachers and parents to see what their students need help with, they could be beneficial.

**Introduction to the Second Learning Objective of the Modern Classroom**

(Nicole Luchansky and Kaylee Bangs)

**The Second Learning Objective: Independent Thought Based Learning**

Over the past several years, there has been a nationwide push for schools to adopt teaching styles that favor independent thought. The most common way to approach this method is through the Dewey Model. John Dewey was a philosopher in the early 1900s and he believed in a learning through doing approach (“John Dewey”). According to the International Centre for Educator’s Learning Styles, this method forces learners and teachers away from the traditional teaching style discussed in approach one, and pushes for creativity, innovation and reflection. The ultimate goal is to empower the learner, help the learner to become aware of issues like justice and equality, and guide the learner to challenge themselves and their beliefs (Masoumbeiki).  The students are engaged and empowered, and share the common value of responsibility to the community.

**Concerns Regarding the Implementation of The Second Pillar in the Modern Classroom**

The group participating in the deliberation unanimously agreed that critical thinking is crucial in order for a student to be well-developed and prepared to enter the real world. There was not a great deal of disagreement in this discussion, instead there was a great deal of concern on how best to implement critical thinking in the classroom, and how to reduce the stigma, rejection and anxieties associated with critical thinking. From an administrative perspective and a teaching perspective, it can be hard to develop these skills due to insufficient instructional time, lack of teacher training and a lack of resources. One participant brought up a valuable point that critical thinking can be “hard to measure and even harder to teach.” Another participant suggested that “grading on the answer may hinder critical thinking.” If teachers can find a way to balance objective and subjective grading properly, it could diffuse the tension of the grading experience. Unfortunately, the group remained unresolved on how to solve this issue.

The group members value youth and innocence, and the ability to mold a younger mind over a secondary education student whose mind has been manipulated to think mechanically over time, and ultimately confirmed that critical thinking needs to begin in primary education classrooms. By building these skills early, students will “be taught it is okay to be wrong and that it is just part of the learning process.” Confidence is required in this approach, as it will allow a student to accept failure and continue to strive for a solution without becoming unmotivated.

**Balancing Approach One with Approach Two**

In the first approach, there was a general consensus that standardized testing and rote memorization are not what builds a well-rounded student. The participants in the deliberation all seemed determined to change this approach, but after discussing approach two, the group realized how difficult it can be to adopt Independent Thought. One participant argued that the “college application process makes students fearful of being wrong and challenging themselves.” Standardized testing requires memorization and mechanics, and since standardized testing scores are one of the key elements in the college acceptance process, the student concluded that standards and the push for resume perfection are the problem. However, after the group began to discuss the concerns regarding implementation, the group realized that there must be a balance between the two approaches.

**Final Thoughts and Policy Recommendations Regarding the Implementation of The Second Pillar in the Modern Classroom**

Overall, the group proposed many ideas regarding critical thinking in the primary classrooms, technology reduction in the classroom, a change in grading policy that blends objectivity with subjectivity and the negative effects of college and standardized testing on student growth. It is very difficult to build a policy for the implementation of independent thought, however, several schools in the State College area can be examined as viable models. The CLC Charter School is a public school that provides free tuition and education for middle school grades 5-8. According to their biographical information, “We are a small and nurturing environment that emphasizes learning by doing. Our innovative project-based, hands-on curriculum integrates the latest technology and motivates our students to reach their full potential.” This school operates very similarly to the DELTA Program at State College Area High School. There is a focus on a teacher-parent-student relationship, and this triangle of communication builds a sense of trust and direction. This dialogue is essential in guiding students into pursuing the right classes and skills that will lead to their greater success in the real world. The “project-based learning” allows for the development of pedagogical knowledge, but since it is not the only focus, students are also conditioned to think critically and take control of their own learning. Independence and direct communication, as well as a diminishing of the pressures associated with rigid standards, is what have allowed these programs to be just as successful as traditional public schooling. Statistically, the CLC Charter School produced an equivalent score to the SCASD MS of 87.3 for the 2013-2014 SPP. These results show that the students are still reaching the standards while also learning to be qualified, and independent members of society. By providing a larger-scale advertising campaign for this type of education, and by a closer partnership with the DELTA Program in the SCASD HS, it is possible to resolve the issue of poor critical thinking skills.

Overall, group members in this deliberation agreed that schools must begin to move toward an approach to education that fosters the development of independent thought and critical thinking skills. In today’s society, critical thinking is not only looked highly upon by employers, but it is also an essential skill moving society forward and progressing toward a better future. It is time to begin reforming teaching methods at local levels in order to move toward a new and improved education system across America.

**Introduction to the Third Learning Objective of the Modern Classroom**

(Diana Alnemri and Austin Hazlett)

**The Third Learning Objective: Independent Thought Based Learning**

Persian philosopher Avicenna believed that education should not be solely based on independent study, but on interaction and human collaboration. He stated that we as humans are social creatures, we should not learn in isolation, but be taught together, as one. People often overlook the fact that most of one’s knowledge and wisdom stems from interaction with others and learning by observation and reflection. The third and final pillar of knowledge emphasizes the importance of working with fellow classmates in order to develop proper social skills and portray ideas in more goal-oriented and appeasing fashions. It urges the United States, a worldly power and model for other countries, to further mold its students to be well spoken, cooperative, and social beings through more of a classroom focus on group work versus independent studies.

In this pillar of knowledge lecturing and standardized testing are pushed aside to embrace more of a collaborative classroom where students can learn their function in society by working with their classmates and other members of society. Each student can discover the true meaning of their citizenship- as vital members of a social and developmental society encouraging communication and teamwork. Through this approach, students are taught to focus their energy toward the community benefits rather than their own. Teachers also take advantage of the classroom setting by encouraging communication and collaboration, and discarding competition. At the same time, through this highly collaborative classroom, students can feed off of each other’s ideas to further develop and modify their views.

Modern education systems are becoming very focused on standardized tests and making students see their classmates as opponents, rather than allies. This mode of education does not involve much examination and students are not assessed on their level of mastery in a particular subject. Instead, students trust each other to share their knowledge and educate the class. Teachers evaluate a student’s ability to communicate their ideas and incorporate the ideas of others in a group effort to achieve a common goal. Additionally, classrooms are very discussion based and encourage each student to develop him or herself in a nonjudgmental and open environment. Teachers function not to one-sidedly lecture at the students, but to facilitate learning among them. Rather than watching and listening to the instructor, students are speaking and working with their classmates.

While this approach can be beneficial in forming cooperative and social students, it can also ignore other vital aspects of education such as individual evaluation and fairness. Through a classroom focused more on discussion and group work rather than independent testing, there is not an accurate mean of testing student success in the class. Teachers also have difficulty narrowing and assessing an individual student’s struggles. Since much of the graded assignments are based on group work, some students may shy away and leave the rest of the group to do most of the work while still achieving the same grade. At the same time, students who may be very outspoken might control the group and disregard the efforts of others. Later, when students need to move on to higher educational systems like universities, the institutions will not have a reliable means of assessing which students are more qualified over others.

**Concerns Regarding the Implementation of The Third Pillar in the Modern Classroom**

The deliberation seemed to be very indecisive on the benefits of group work. At first thought, many shunned the idea of working with others, claiming that some individuals see group work as a free pass to contribute minimal effort and let others carry the team. Among all the initial rejection, one member stated that what many people forget is that once students move away from the classroom and into the “real world” of holding jobs, they are, for the most part, working and interacting with others. Think of a scientist, working with and depending on the efforts of fellow researchers and assistants to write papers and work toward the common goal of discovery. Think of senators, athletes, police officers, directors, and business owners- all jobs requiring teamwork and collaboration.  The working world does not have much lecturing and standardized tests, but more collaboration and communication with others to build one’s self up. Reflecting on this, deliberators began to see the benefits of group work and discussions rather than lecturing and claimed that students do, in fact, tend to lose interest in a solely lecture based classroom. By having more discussions and collaborations, a student’s mind will be constantly working and, in the long run, more successfully maturing to face the real world.

There was still much speculation about the overall benefits of social learning. Many fellow deliberators highlighted the difference between introverts and extroverts and how this can interrupt the success of social classrooms and group work. From first hand experience, people saw that the extroverts in groups tended to control the group and take a leadership position, even when they may not have been as qualified as other students. At the same time, introverts tended to shy away, able to contribute valuable knowledge, but too timid to portray their ideas. This does not help either type of student progress his or her knowledge.

**Final Thoughts and Policy Recommendations for the Implementation of the Third Pillar in the Modern Classroom**

Deliberators were challenged when asked to think about the overall success of the U.S.’s education systems. Based off the world education rankings, the U.S. is ranked number fourteen, while Japan is ranked number two. When assessing the educational attitudes of the two countries, the U.S. has proven to be much more of a competitive society. Citizens think more about their own individual gains and successes rather than the overall community’s. In Japan, this is the opposite- people view their success and achievements as a benefit for the community. They hold more of a communitarian attitude versus and individualistic one. Deliberators were left questioning whether this could be the reason for their success. They believed that a downfall of our society is its focus on advancing schools with the highest rankings, but not funding ones that may be falling behind. Overall, they agreed that we should take more of a communitarian stance in education to advance all systems.

All in all, deliberators felt that social and community based learning is a key aspect of educational systems. At the same time, they believed that modern schools need more of a balance of this approach among others to achieve the most fulfilling classroom. They embraced the ideas that most charter schools, such as Nittany Valley Charter School, reflect with an openness and inclusion of all educational systems. These schools take different approaches for different students based off of the learner’s preferences. Deliberators also believed that while lecturing is important, classrooms can become more social by arranging seating in circular fashions and encouraging more discussion and team problem solving.

None of the members of the deliberation group were able to come to a common consensus on which approach was the “best” for the modern day classroom. The group; however, did come to the conclusion that in order to be able to run a successful classroom, it is necessary to have a type of learning that uses an even balance of all three structures. The idea of a modern classroom being able to utilize all three approaches to learning sounds great, but it is a very gradual change that doesn't happen all at once. It was brought up that we need to reassess the focus of education. Lately, it has been focused on assessments and comparison rather than actually learning how to learn and learning for the sake of knowledge. Outcome driven students are known to focus on how the information that they are learning will impact them in the future and how using it can produce bigger and better outcomes down the road.

**Concluding Thoughts and New Ideas**

**(**Collin and Shannon)

After the deliberation, many attendees expressed their other thoughts, findings, and ideas through the post deliberation questionnaire. Many attendees found different things that changed their specific, individualized viewpoint that they had before coming to the deliberation. Many said that they did not realize that community learning is so applicable to ‘real-life’, which is what makes it so important. The group work that so many students dread is of vital importance in preparation for the workforce and world that lies ahead, too. Others expressed how they were unaware that some schools allow students to find a major or area to specialize in earlier in their schooling years. This could be beneficial; however, a lot of undecided learners do not fit into an individualized plan of specialization, especially that early in the schooling years. Others expressed their concerns of who is to say what the knowledge base of a student should be. Everyone learns at a different pace and a different level so how can we find a common ground in this?

Deliberators found it interesting that schools like DELTA School and CLC exist and that within these schools, they emphasize project based, hands on learning while also focusing on teacher-parent-student relationships to build a base for the education to grow from. Students are widely assumed to take the easy way out or simply memorize information. Many thought that the idea of starting to implement critical thinking at an earlier age could prevent this from happening and could also promote students to dig deeper into his or her education. This community learning can help to encourage students participation; however, educators must be careful as to not discourage being wrong. It is okay to be wrong and we should support the participation in a critical thinking approach regardless of the verity. Building confidence is also necessary to encourage learning and growing in and out of the classroom. That being said, confidence building should be considered in any of the approaches discussed.

Many new and interesting ideas and concerns were suggested by the deliberators. One attendee expressed how she thought that if standardized testing was done in a different way it could be better. Her concern was “how” to do this since it is such a touchy subject and necessary evil. Should schools put a ‘de-emphasis’ on failure in hopes of motivating students to do better? The group did not come to a common point of agreement on this point, either. Another arising thought after the deliberation was the idea that if schooling was grouped by development and not age, could that potentially change the face of education? Schools are currently grouped by age which leads to the fact that oftentimes, some students will more than likely be left behind. Along these lines, the idea that “the grade that a student is placed into should not be determined by age, but rather capabilities” was also presented after the deliberation from deliberator Nyomi Warren. She went on to suggest that if classes were grouped differently, competitiveness wouldn't be stressed as much and maybe students would eventually react to the lessening stress and begin to show better learning in and out of the classroom (Warren).

To conclude, even though each individual deliberation attendee took something different from the discussions, everyone found common points of agreement as well. Americas individual based learning could be compared to Japan and their community based learning style. Could it be the case that our current style of learning in America is working but not nearly as much as Japans preferred learning style? Yes, each learning style works to a point, but can everybody be sure enough to know which is the best? The answer is no. It is so extremely difficult to come to a true agreement on this matter; therefore, we must continue to work towards a balance of knowledge, individual, and community learning styles. If we do this, then it is possible that one day a new style of all three combined can be discovered and put into action in the classroom to help guide the purpose of learning back to the real purpose.

Sincerely,

Austin Hazlett, Ben Rowles, Collin Hensley, Diana Alnemri, Helena Mancini, Lillian Swei, Lisa Keim, Nicole Luchansky, Shannon McCulloch, Will Petley, and Kaylee Bangs

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