Review of What's Worth Teaching: Rethinking Curriculum in the Age of Technology by Allan Collins

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One approach to education states that students attend school in order to learn the facts and skills required to contribute to society. Educators, according to this vision of education, must therefore decide which facts and skills are most important, since citizens need shared common knowledge (Hirsch, 1987) if they are to successfully build the future. The emphasis on knowing facts - lots and lots of facts - has given rise to an American education system plagued by curricula miles wide and inches deep; schools still structured as if education's goal is to produce industrial workers; and high-stakes tests that leach creativity and real-world skills from classrooms. But if you can Google a fact, is it worth knowing? Today's complex societies and their challenges require educators to radically rethink what is taught in schools. More important than *knowing* facts is being able to *connect* facts (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999) and make sense of the world (Berland et al., 2016).

Allan Collins' (2017) book *What's Worth Teaching: Rethinking Curriculum in the Age of Technology* is about *what* and *how*, in light of changes since Hirsch's (1987) work, students should learn in K-12 settings. Collins challenges Hirsch and his insistence that students must learn a common set of facts. Instead, Collins aims to remedy anemic American education by exploring which "ideas, strategies, and dispositions...are critical to making wise personal and policy decisions, and to living a productive and satisfying life" (Collins, p. 8). The book focuses on both general suggestions and specific powerful ideas that guide how to reinvigorate education.

Collins (2017) argues that the problems facing schools are due, broadly, to changes in society that have gone unmatched by changes in schools. This societal change is multifaceted; as in Collins' previous work (Collins & Halverson, 2011), technology is identified as a key reason behind the change. For example, our educational system is structured as if our societal need were to cultivate workers for the kinds of jobs that Collins writes are now extinct in part because shared knowledge is easily accessible with digital technologies.

If educators are to really prepare their students to thrive in the 21st century, then they must, according to Collins, focus on five areas: new literacies; self-sufficiency; career skills for the new gig economy; public policy challenges; and mathematical and scientific foundations. Collins devotes a chapter to each area, breaking down the area into more specific recommendations. The chapter on new literacy, for instance, explains why productive dialogue, being persuasive, and negotiating effectively should be practical skills taught in classrooms.

In addition to describing *what* he thinks should be taught, Collins describes *how* these "ideas, strategies, and dispositions" (Collins, p. 8) should be taught. His answer: through personalized learning experiences that occur in what he terms "passion schools", inspired by existing models, such as Central Park East Secondary School and the Digital Youth Network. In these passion schools, students select topics of interest, engage in real-world problems and investigations within the topics, work with others to solve those problems, and use technology to support their learning and demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Students exhibit their mastery

in a public, critiqued form. Collins emphasizes that "strategic thinking and planning, monitoring, and reflecting" (p. 115) pervade every aspect of the learning experience in a passion school.

Collins' (2017) recommendations contain both familiar findings and fresh ideas. His call for curricular reform standards that de-emphasize memorizing facts can also be heard in the *Common Core State Standards* and *Next Generation Science Standards*. Collins echoes these revised standards, stressing new curricula should include real-world problem solving practices and goal-directed, social activities. Other focal points, such as career skills, public policy challenges, and aspects of new literacies (especially learning to find communities to share with or ask for help), are timely and not often discussed in the journals of academia, the teaching lounges of schools, or the social media accounts of tech-savvy administrators or instructional leaders. Finally, Collins' suggestions around passion schools and the specific teaching and learning approaches can foster useful dialogue.

Some of Collins' (2017) book is less provocative and impactful. While the five areas featured important (mathematical and scientific foundations) and novel (public policy challenges) aims, others could be interpreted as moralistic. While it is necessary, for example, for students to learn about a healthy lifestyle, and to develop self-sufficiency in general, Collins' recommendations seemed too imprecise at times, and at others, even naive, due to a lack of considering the broader structural issues and the real barriers they impose on students' day-to-day experience. More generally, how educators can support learners' efforts to be empowered to address the role of structural barriers - economic, social, political - is not the focus of Collins' book. We are sympathetic about these recommendations not being included given the aims and scope of the book, and readers of *Teachers College Record* may look to books such as Paris and Alim (2017) for more emphasis on these topics.

Nonetheless, Collins (2017) has provided educators with a succinct, 120-page blueprint for how American schools can better prepare students for the complex world they inhabit today and the one they will inherit tomorrow. Collins' themes and specific suggestions are relevant for educators, administrators, and those crafting a new vision of schooling by challenging the long-standing assumptions about what students should learn. We think his book is sure to spark conversations around whether, how, and where to integrate his recommendations into the curriculum.

References

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