

# Reading, Writing, and Ripoffs

*The only ones helped by most teaching fads are  
those who market them*

by Patricia Kean

When Phillip Composto was a teacher, he took a no-nonsense approach to resolving student disputes: Sit the combatants down, allow each to speak his piece, and then give equal time for a response. Later on, however, an education book taught Composto that he had actually stumbled onto a highly complex mediation technique called "The Magic Circle."

"That's what happens in education," says Composto, who is now a New York City junior high school principal. "It was just common sense, but somebody came along, formalized it, put a name to it, marketed it, and got money for it. People go for buzzwords."

Education fads are nothing new; schools are haunted by the ghosts of language labs and open classrooms past. But in these heady days of national school reform, the buzzwords are flying faster than ever, creating exciting, innovative ways to waste a great deal of money. Some ideas represent common sense bloated beyond recognition, while others spring directly from educational masterminds. But many have seen these concepts at least once or twice before: "Education is a wheel," Composto says, "It goes around and around, and we keep recycling."

It's enough to give classroom veterans a queasy feeling. During Sally Pratt's (a pseudonym, per her request) 15-year tenure as a high school language teacher, she's seen flashy school innovations come and go. "All fads create turmoil and chaos. They're terrible for morale," says Pratt, who teaches on Long Island. "It's gotten really bad over the last two years. They tell us, 'You must teach this way.' It's all coming from administrators who haven't been in a classroom for 20 years."

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Patricia Kean is a New York writer.

It has only been a few years since I was in a classroom teaching high school English. But it wasn't until last fall, when I enrolled in state-required education courses, that I got hip to the latest crazes, everything from "authentic assessment" to the "teacher-facilitator."

While the victims of fashion recover quickly, school fads do lasting damage by siphoning off dollars that could make a difference. Reducing the number of students per class, recruiting teachers who know subject matter instead of education school palaver, dismantling the inherently unjust tracking system, and rebuilding the crumbling infrastructure of the nation's inner-city schools would be good places to begin. As it stands now, however, should you ask why schools where kids who have closets for classrooms also have video production studios on the premises, you're likely to get a lot of blank stares in return. It's simply easier for education bureaucrats to grab the latest quick fix and abandon it when the next sure thing comes along.

How do you separate the fads from the worthwhile ideas? First, look beyond the warm and fuzzy rhetoric that envelops most of them (one quick way is to count the number of times the word "empowerment" is used).

Next, check the price tag. Because fads typically exalt technique over content, they require a vast array of goods and services, turning schools into suckers for salesmen hawking some truly silly "educational" products. Finally, consider the claims made by supporters. Do they sound vaguely messianic? If advocates promise the moon and are backed by the latest in social science research, be afraid. Be very afraid.

Dr. Geoffrey Fletcher, Texas' associate commissioner for technology applications, says it's

time for teachers to stop “doling out pearls of wisdom, expecting kids to dump it in their empty heads and vomit it out the mouth or the pen.” That’s because high techies fervently believe that machines, not men and women, will usher in education’s brave new world.

In other words, technology will soon do the dumping for us, and the whole thing promises to be a lot less messy, though a bit more costly.

It’s not as though we can save on teachers’ salaries by replacing them altogether. Teachers

New words appear!) In 1989, Texas made it official, by allowing its schools to broaden the definition of “textbook” to include such items as computer software and laser discs. Because Texas is one of the states that adopts “books” on a statewide basis, it helps set the agenda for publishers and thus for the rest of the country.

But since software requires hardware, Texas had to allocate additional funds for that purpose. Right now the technology allotment stands at \$30 per child, set to increase \$5 a year, until lev-

## Compare the ease of D’Nealian letters to traditional circle-and-stick.

As you trace the following letters, note how often it’s necessary to lift your pencil. The more times a beginning

writer has to lift a pencil, the harder it becomes to make a legible letter.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

Now try writing the word *wake*. First use the circle-and-stick letters and then use the D’Nealian letters. Note the

difference in how often you need to lift your pencil with the traditional method. Note how the D’Nealian letters flow.

wake

wake

Circle-and-stick lower-case manuscript  
11 strokes

D’Nealian lower-case manuscript  
4 strokes

The D’Nealian manuscript alphabet cuts way down on common reversals too. For example, how many students

have trouble writing the letters *b, d, g, p*? There’s no problem with D’Nealian letters—because there are no pencil lifts.

b d g p

b d g p

## Another grade school educator reinvents the wheel

will still have to be there, but they’ll take on reduced roles as “facilitators” or “coaches.” “Technology allows students access to any information in the world,” Fletcher says. “It allows for the democratization of information.”

So does the library, once you’ve mastered the intricacies of the Dewey Decimal system. But books are fading fast, possibly because they haven’t yet figured out how to sell themselves as “interactive.” (You turn the page!

eling off at \$50 per student. “Some people say that \$30 per child isn’t very much,” Fletcher says, “But if you multiply that by 3.3 million students, you’re talking more than 100 million bucks. And that’s a big chunk of change.”

If you thought states breaking off such a chunk from shrinking school budgets would need hard, fast evidence that kids learn better when tethered to a machine, you’re right. The research is out there, says Michael Eason, Flori-

da's administrator for education technology, but much of it comes from parties that could be considered "interested"—like Apple Computer.

Not all technology is bad, but not all of it is necessary, either. Laser-disc players offer one example. According to Quality Education Data, a Denver research firm, the number of schools using them has doubled in the past two years. Florida spent \$1.6 million to ensure that every school in the state had one.

But a Brooklyn-based producer who has worked on science laser-discs and who wished to remain anonymous questions their value. "It's typical of things that boards of education do," she says. "They think, 'This is the new thing, we're a good district if we have it.' But the ones I've seen are all flash and no substance." And Lisa Hersch, executive editor for education technology at Macmillan-McGraw Hill says, "We think that laser-disc technology is a fad that will pass." So her company is hard at work on the next generation of electronics, a multimedia language arts program, requiring still more gear—in this case a CD-ROM player—set to hit classrooms by 1994.

By contrast, the ABCs would seem to be a simple affair. Lesson one is easy: ABCs are out. Under the heading of "The Alphabet: To Teach or Not to Teach?" the January 1993 issue of *Pre-K Today* offers the following warning: "Worksheets encourage children to follow instructions passively rather than think creatively. That's why alphabet instruction isn't recommended."

But if you insist on teaching the alphabet, Donald Neal Thurber, a former grade-school teacher, has something for you. He devised a new alphabet, one "that respects individual differences"—and bears an uncanny resemblance to the old one. But there's a twist to the D'Nealian alphabet—a curlicue on the end of most letters that make them look something like a cross between print and script. This curvy alphabet not only reduces the headache children feel each time they must lift the pencil from the paper as they print, it also eases the rocky transition to cursive or script. Thurber patented his new alphabet, naming it after the letters of his own name.

The ScottForesman D'Nealian handwriting program, now in its third edition, offers plenty of help for those who must re-learn their ABCs. First off, there's a video: "A 20-minute tape to

build teacher confidence in modeling D'Nealian letters by clearly demonstrating formation of D'Nealian alphabets." That costs \$49.95. Then, for moms and dads who blithely assumed they could help their kids learn the alphabet, there's the "Parent Pack," containing explanatory letters and suggesting D'Nealian activities the whole family can enjoy, just \$5.95.

Like our old friend the alphabet, traditional textbooks, with their rigid reliance on quaint notions like "chronology," have also fallen from grace. Instead, thematic learning that crosses disciplines, an approach championed by John Dewey and the progressives in the days of yore, is once again the rage. Let's face it—textbooks have their faults. Many are mind-numbingly dull; by trying too hard not to offend, they also fail to please. In the hands of bad teachers, they're every kid's nightmare. But textbooks also have their good points: They convey a great deal of factual information, and they proceed in a logical fashion. Best of all, there's one for every child. Consider the costs involved in replacing them. Educators already pressed by the demands of teaching upwards of 150 students a day now face the challenge of putting together a "framework" they can use to squeeze together subjects as diverse as literature and math. Feel-good themes like "family" and "tolerance" often result.

Buying ready-made themes is an option for harried teachers of younger children. The J.L. Hammett Company catalog offers theme units for kindergarten through third-grade classes "that reflect things kids and adults love . . . friends, hats, money, pasta, and shoes!" The "pasta" book features everyone's favorites—Rigatoni, Shell, and Penne—dressed, for reasons that are not immediately clear, in marching band costumes. And pasta literacy comes cheap—just \$7.95, less than the price of an entree at your neighborhood restaurant.

No textbook—no test. It's as easy as that. Since critics charge that old-fashioned "pen and paper" tests measure only lower-level thinking skills, it follows that new thematic teaching requires a grading revolution.

Tests must now emphasize "authenticity"—what students can "do," instead of merely what they "know." A popular form of "authentic assessment" is the portfolio, a collection of work students choose to represent their best efforts

over the course of a semester, or even of a year. A bad idea? Not really.

But by the time it gets through the educational bureaucracy, portfolio assessment becomes not an art but a very expensive science. Dr. Edward Reidy, associate commissioner for curriculum assessment and accountability for Kentucky, which included authentic assessment in its 1990 education reform bill, says his state's program is "standards-driven." For example, "There are four levels of writing—novice, apprentice, proficient, and distinguished. We can describe the levels and illustrate them with samples," Reidy says.

In order to be certain that all teachers can separate the novice from the apprentice, Kentucky has undertaken a massive teacher re-education program that Reidy says includes workshops, videos, self-study guides, and released time, a.k.a. hours away from school. His best estimate is that the process will take several more years. But all the training in the world couldn't have prepared me for my first brush with authentic assessment. After splitting the education class in "teams," my instructor at Hunter College gave each group a "learning objective." The assignment: Find a way to assess the objectives authentically. Easy enough until we opened ours and read "students will understand and practice safe sex." Our professor's suggestion was as authentic as Times Square: Pair off students with their usual sex partner and listen in on some x-rated pillow talk.

Schools have also accepted the reality that a student's beliefs about his own abilities have a dramatic effect on learning, and that many kids face crises that spill over into the classroom. But is an 87-lesson crash course on self-esteem the answer?

If so, Constance Dembrowsky's Institute for Affective Skill Development curriculum package is a steal at \$299. So too are her six audiocassettes, "Self Esteem in the Classroom: The Experts Speak," (\$59.95) and "Wind Trails," a collection of quotes Ms. Dembrowsky uses in speeches and seminars. But at \$995, the reproducible Student and Parent Activity package seems a bit steep—until one learns that schools can use federal drug abuse education dollars to subsidize programs like these.

"The Rainbow Curriculum," New York City's attempt to drill respect for all cultures—including

gay and lesbian—into its schoolchildren, backfired loudly last year. Hate crimes rose, the religious right began running candidates for local school boards, and Joseph Fernandez, a school Chancellor as brash as the city itself, got the heave-ho.

Teachers seeking to incorporate different cultures into the curriculum already have the finest resource available: the kids themselves. If boards of education want experts representing Hispanic, Asian, African-American, or Irish culture, they need look no further than the fourth row. If teachers encourage respect for differences by their own actions and by the way they run their classrooms, real lessons can be learned.

Institutionalizing tolerance, on the other hand, can be costly. Consider Crayola's multicultural products intended for the classroom. Why did this line of paint, crayons, and markers that run the skin-tone gamut come into being? "It's not that we're trying to be politically correct," says Mark O'Brien, Crayola's media communications specialist. "It's that we're listening to consumers—the teachers and the general public." Right. It couldn't be the kids who were clamoring for "burnt sienna" and "sepia." One of the great joys of running with the sevensomething set is the freedom from the literal thinking that affects grown-ups. Everyone knows that skin can be red, pink, even green. Barney is purple, for pete's sake. It's called "using your imagination," and it's a lot cheaper than buying two sets of crayons.

Improving schools won't be easy, and it certainly won't be cheap. But instead of throwing money away on fads, educators should invest in common sense—a much maligned lower-level thinking skill currently out of vogue among reformers. Want kids with high self-esteem? Smaller classes would allow teachers to treat their students as individuals, not as standardized test scores. Want to show children their education is important? Start by fixing up the dilapidated buildings which send the opposite message loud and clear. Want kids to respect differences? Stop segregating them into separate school tracks. Who knows? If schools wise up, they could start a trend. □

# "More Champagne, Ms. Mitchell?"

*The other side of the Travelgate story and why the media didn't tell you about it*

by Dan Cogan

The close reader could sight the traces of a guilty conscience. At the height of the controversy over President Clinton's dismissal of White House travel office staffers, White House correspondent Michael Frisby wrote in *The Wall Street Journal* that "Billy Dale, the travel office director, and his troops have frequently been called the 'best friends reporters have on the road.'" Trying to account for the uproar over the firings, *Time* magazine's Margaret Carlson revealed that the "White House failed to take into account that the travel office had a powerful protector in the press, which has long been pampered by the plush level of accommodations." Beyond these discrete admissions, readers had little to go on. Frisby briefly mentioned stories of reporters smuggling expensive foreign rugs past U.S. Customs as Billy Dale graciously looked the other way; Carlson offered a few digs about family members tagging along for a flat \$100 rate, and favorite drinks being provided without reporters having to ask. But after a full week's coverage of what the press grandiosely dubbed "Travelgate," their own appetites, dalliances, and secrets were firmly under cover.

Was it a collective oversight that the vast majority of news accounts didn't tell readers what the travel office actually *did*? Or were reporters simply wary of letting on that they had reason to miss the folks being given the heave-ho?

"The travel office had nothing to do but feed and care for the press in the most lavish way possible," said one correspondent who joined the press corps last year and who requested anonymity. "The travel is first class plus. One trip to Kennebunkport, I got on the plane, and there was lobster, roast beef, and really good wines whenever you wanted it. Money was no object."

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*Dan Cogan is a reporter at the New York Observer.*