

Lindsey Ferstle  
Unit 4: Curriculum Inquiry, or What's Worth Knowing?  
March 14, 2010

### Different Strokes for Different Folks

A curriculum specifies what is to be taught in schools. Throughout education, there has been an ongoing debate about how curriculum should be specified, organized, and taught. The Progressives argue that we should do more with less, while believers in the Core Knowledge approach argue that we should teach broad and general knowledge. While it is easy to argue for one side or the other, both arguments have strong points and firm beliefs.

Howard Gardner, author of *The Disciplined Mind* and *Multiple Intelligences*, is a passionate believer in the progressive approach. His vision of education is, "...one firmly centered on understanding. An individual understands a concept, skill, theory, or domain of knowledge the extent that he or she can apply it appropriately in a new situation." He feels that, "One can never attain a disciplined mind simply by mastering the facts—one must immerse oneself deeply in the specific of cases and develop one's disciplinary muscles from such immersion." Rather than approaching education like so many systems that, "...survey knowledge and skills that seem important and decide to cover them all," Gardner feels that "...time is short and there is too much material. Thus, the fatal weakness of an approach that strives to cover the ever-expanding knowledge waterfront." Gardner's central goal in education is to immerse students in a deep understanding of what is true or false, beautiful, good or evil.

Rather than focusing on broad knowledge and skills, Gardner feels that we should do more with less. Gardner says what's worth knowing are in the discipline families of science, mathematics, the arts, and history. "Students should probe with sufficient depth *a manageable set* of examples so that they come to see how one thinks and acts in the manner of a scientist, a geometer, an artist, an historian." He further explains that the purpose of this approach is not, "...to make students miniature experts in a given discipline, but to enable them to draw on these modes of thinking in coming to understand their world." Rather than understanding everything, students should gain understanding of the world around them. These ideas all support Gardner's ideas of truth, beauty, and goodness and the essential need for variation in teaching techniques.

E.D. Hirsch believes in a very different method towards pedagogy called the Core Knowledge approach. In his approach, students will be taught a variety of subjects and gain a broad general knowledge while using selected specific examples. The Core Knowledge curriculum is, "heavily focused on content, vocabulary skills, and nonfiction books," which are areas that Hirsch finds to be lacking basic knowledge. He believes that schools need, "...to impart basic knowledge rather than simply teach students the skills they need to become better learners."

Hirsch's Core Knowledge approach states that you need to have broad knowledge of a variety of facts before you can have deep understanding. "If we want to make sure that students have the background knowledge they need to be good readers, we must give them a good general education—that is, an

education in literature, science, history, and liberal arts. That is the *only* kind of education that can build good readers. Period.” This statement summarizes Hirsch’s content-based approach to education in stating that children need to build on prior knowledge in a variety of subjects.

Howard Gardner and E.D. Hirsch have very strong and different approaches to educational inquiry. Gardner believes that teaching a few disciplines in depth is the best way to promote understanding. In contrast, Hirsch believes that students need a set curriculum and background knowledge on a variety of subjects. Each theorist is entitled to his own beliefs, values, and interests or as the Sly and the Family Stone said it best, in their hit song “Everyday People,” there are different strokes for different folks, but we’ve got to live together.