



Mick Waters,

Thinking Allowed on Schooling.

Camarthen: Independent Thinking Press, 2013. P/bk 240pp.

ISBN 978-1-78135-056-0

Alex Bitterman,

*The College Question: Why College (as we know it) Isn't
Working for the Millennial Generation.*

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Abstract

This review of two recent educational works offers a series of guidelines as to best educational practice. Both authors advocate the creation of new curricula focused on real-world issues, while permitting greater learner involvement in their education. There should be a radical expansion of resources in education, so as to develop greater decision-making on the learners' part; this could be achieved by allowing institutions more autonomy, free from government intervention

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At first glance the subject-matter of both texts might seem widely different. Mick Waters, a major thinker with a wealth of experience in shaping education policy in Great Britain at local and national levels, offers a

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thorough critique of the school system, examining the ways in which successive Ministers of Education from all sides of the political spectrum have reshaped educational policy, and considering whether their reforms have actually made any difference to the way in which schools are run. Alex Bitterman has compiled a guide to the American college landscape for prospective parents and students, providing a series of suggestions as to how parents and learners might select the best type of education beyond high school level.

And yet there exists an interesting connection between the two volumes; the issues Waters addresses are much as the same as those discussed by Bitterman. To cite one example: Waters spends considerable time describing “proper learning” in schools, which has nothing to do with passing examinations and everything to do with helping learners acquire practical skills “focused on the real world, the big issues of subject discipline and the world of work” (Waters 2013, p. 157). This requires schools to develop new pedagogical techniques: in addition to books and IT, Waters offers the following menu of effective learning platforms: “a piano keyboard, a nature table, a chess board, an ordnance survey map, an artist’s palette, a garden, a cooker hob, a dance floor, a screen print frame, a gym mat, test-tube [...] [and] an e-tablet” (Waters 2013, p. 159). Classes should be activity-focused with learners having direct input in the way their academic agendas are constructed. Educators should “Make the environment talk of learning [...] that pupils should be able to manage themselves” (Waters 2013, p. 169).

In Bitterman’s view, this kind of approach to learning yields positive effects, as prospective college or university entrants understand how “the desire to pick a ‘good’ school or ‘the right’ school” is fundamentally shortsighted (Bitterman 2013, p. 112). The best means to avoid this is for educators to “allow – with careful guidance – the student to chart his or her own course, possibly making mistakes in the process. By working through these missteps, students learn how to manage decision-making, crisis and risk” (Bitterman 2013, p. 114). The last word is significant: only by introducing the element of risk can learners acquire the capacity for self-determination. Bitterman calls for higher education institutions to be as flexible as high schools in offering flexible approaches to learning, allowing for a change of major while ensuring that the curriculum provides a solid foundation for future career growth and development (Bitterman 2013, p. 114).

For such approaches to learning to succeed, however, it is necessary to rethink prevailing educational cultures. Perhaps predictably, Waters calls for less government intervention and more emphasis on schools discovering how they can serve the communities they inhabit. Rather than concerning themselves with the outcomes of the latest inspection, they should deal with the atmosphere of antagonism that frequently exists between parents and educators. The need to share information lies at the heart of all successful businesses, in which “community values of respect and treating people with dignity [are] [...] upheld” (Waters 2013, p. 91). Only then, Waters explains, can schools formulate curricula encouraging learners to apply knowledge flexibly in problem-solving circumstances, supported and inspired by the community.

Bitterman believes that educators in high schools and universities need to understand changing times: learners of the so-called “Millennial Generation” have different expectations as compared to previous generations (Baby Boomers, GenX, etc.). Millennials are prone to public complaining; they are informal and do not respect social structures; and they want to be overachievers without necessarily putting in sufficient effort to achieve their goals (Bitterman 2013, p. 19). While such stereotypes might not necessarily cover all Millennials, they can help educators to understand how learners cope with the day-to-day experience of high school or university. By deconstructing such stereotypes, learners and educators alike can get to know one another better, and hence work towards achieving realistic learning objectives, which are necessarily different from those embraced by previous generations (including the learners’ parents).

Waters is highly critical of what he terms a game-theory conception of education, in which the psychology of teaching and learning gives way to the tactics of obtaining results for the purpose of institutional league tables (Waters 2013, p. 121). Schools are judged by results alone – exams, classroom observations, assessments – and their future funding from government depends on their obtaining satisfactory evaluations. Instead Waters wants schools to “believe in quality” – to produce effective writing, good projects or innovative experiments, while emphasizing the importance of accuracy and teamwork (Waters 2013, p. 205). Educators should stretch their learners’ intellectual and creative capabilities by asking for demanding pieces of work and giving fewer small-scale, spoon-fed exercises. In turn learners should be encouraged to ask searching questions and criticize certain aspects of educators’ work. This can only evolve through the creation of a non-threatening environment dedicated to the advancement of the learning community, unpressured by the need to achieve a certain level of efficiency (as determined by school inspectors).

Bitterman likewise identifies a fundamental problem with most universities and colleges; they have become so obsessed with achieving prominence in national league tables that they have lost sight of their original missions. He wants institutions to “think differently” by offering tailor-made combinations of

courses to individual learners that provide training in life-skills as well as expertise in their chosen fields of study. Only then can institutions achieve real improvement by transforming themselves “from slow-moving bureaucratic watchdogs to achieve research-driven assessors of success and efficiency” (Bitterman 2013, p. 45).

Both authors emphasize the importance of looking outwards. Waters wants learning to be both interactive and international as a means of expanding learner horizons as well as creating new transnational and transdisciplinary initiatives” (Waters 2013, p. 290). Bitterman believes that universities should create alternative models of curriculum design promoting greater learner involvement. While both texts are idealistic in tone, they offer practical advice as to how education at the secondary and tertiary levels might be rendered more learner-friendly. The issue is one of leadership: do principals and/or senior university administrators have sufficient imagination to put these ideas into practice? The solution, according to Waters, is for leaders to make promises to themselves; to establish an educational outlook that is “thoroughly committed to established and articulated principles [...] and never sways from a commitment to the young people whose futures we serve” (Waters 2013, p. 326). If such leaders exist, then many of the questions raised by parents and prospective learners about the pros and cons of college education might be readily addressed. Good leadership provides better awareness among everyone involved in the educational process.