

Reforming Education: Are we inviting students to the reform?

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Introduction

Social action research was born in the basement of the University of Idaho's School of Education in 1975. It was created by Dennis Sandow who taught in the basement's preschool for children with significant developmental delays. We preschool teachers studied the children's language development. In doing so, we would create experiences designed to elicit children's language, or recursive coordination of action. In the presentation of the experiences, we would collect data on the languaging of the children. At the end of the school day we would meet together and review the data we had collected for each child. We did not do so to identify the problem child but to identify our teaching practices that could be improved and lead to the children's development and happiness. Today social action research creates reflective conversations on how social, biological and financial wellbeing are created in self-organizing collaborative social systems. The reflective action created at the University of Idaho preschool in 1975 remains a central practice of social action research today.

Inviting students to the reform

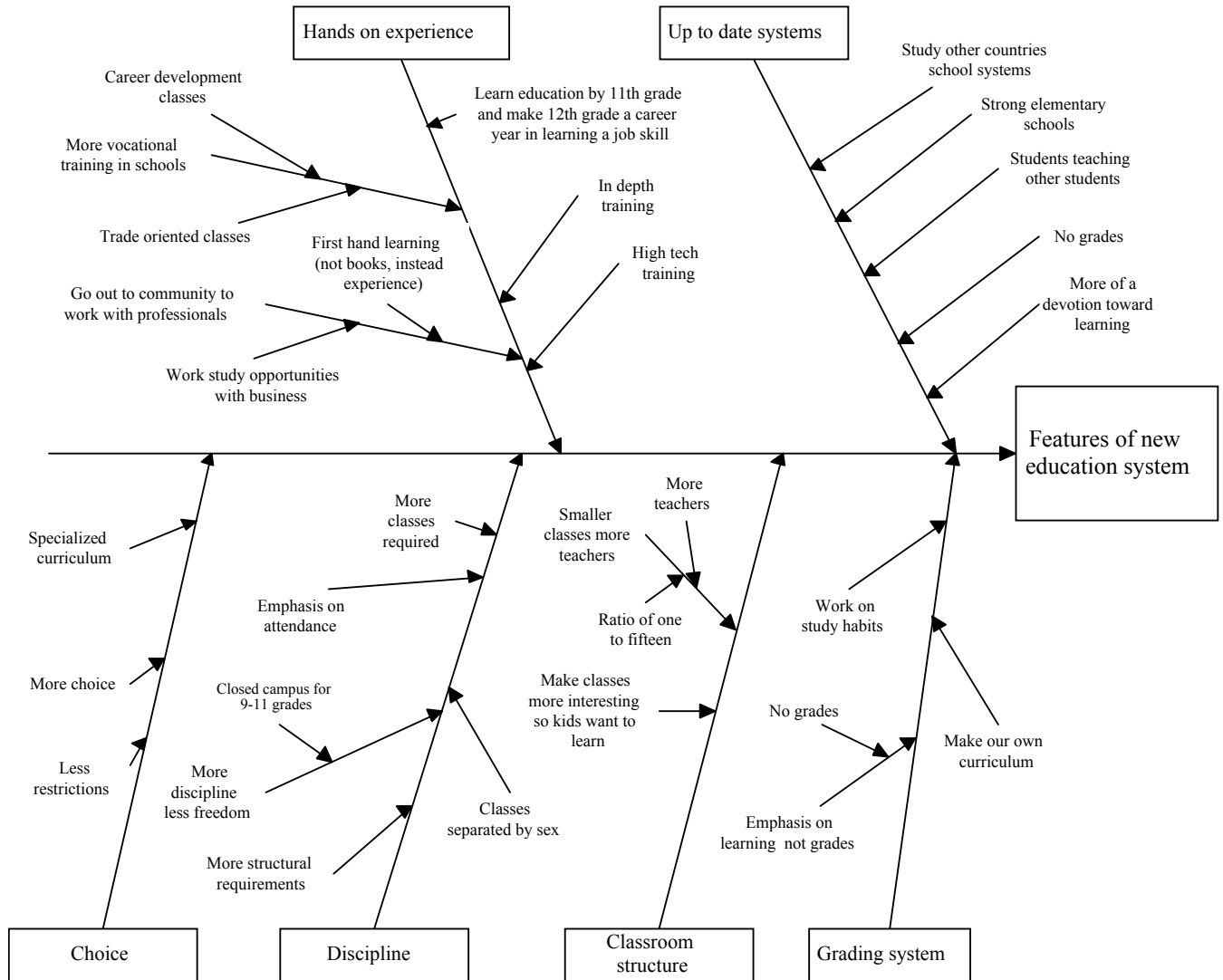
In 1990 the United States was the world's largest debtor nation. Concerns arose about her competitiveness [1]. In Oregon, the Governor and the state legislature, framed a strategy for Oregon to become competitive in the global economy [2] and a Progress Board for creating a vision and measuring our progress [3, 4]. The strategy was a human investment strategy maintaining that the future of high paying jobs belonged to the best educated students and workers in the world. A workforce development strategy was created using Oregon's community colleges [5]. In the domain of education a education reform law was passed to help prepare students for high skilled jobs [6]. As a research assistant at the University of Oregon practicing social action research I became curious- were we inviting students to participate in the reform?

Sheldon High School Eugene, Oregon

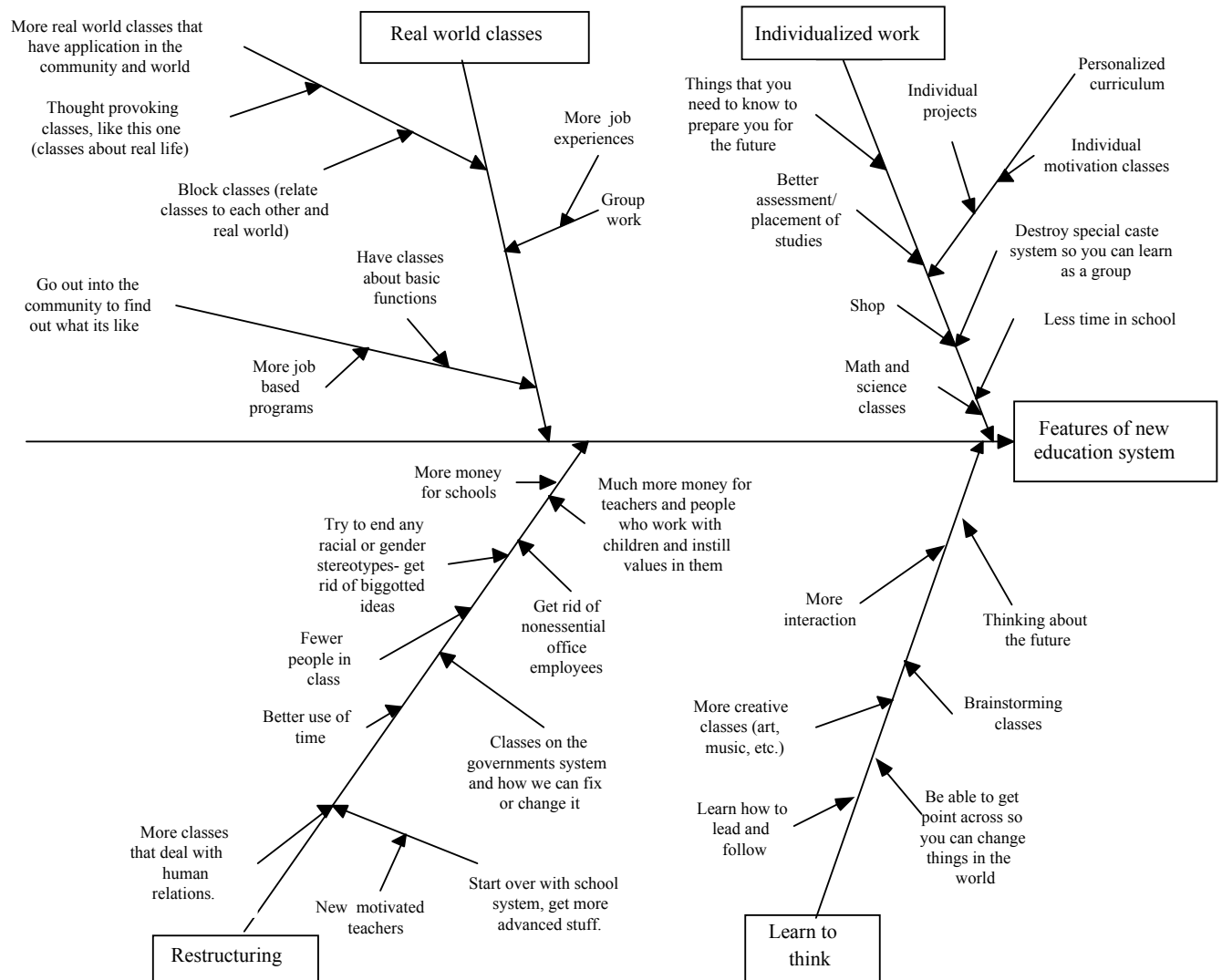
I studied Oregon Benchmark data developed by the Progress Board [3, 7] and it validated that the county I lived in, as well as the state, was seeing growth in teen pregnancies, homelessness, high school dropout rates and juvenile arrest rates. I compiled this data in the form of trend line graphs and went to visit Jim Ford, the principle of Sheldon High School. I told him that I would like to learn what the students had to say about the future of education. Many if not most educators would have kindly escorted me out the office. But Dr Ford invited me to meet with his senior history teacher Ernest Loudon. When Ernest heard of my interests he invited me to join his three class periods of seniors.

I shared Oregon Benchmark data on teenage pregnancy rates, high school drop out rates, homelessness, juvenile arrest rates in our community and US debt balances and then asked each of the three classes to create a new educational system. I also quickly shared a common quality improvement tool known as a fishbone analysis. The students spent the remainder of the class working in groups to discuss the features of a new educational system.

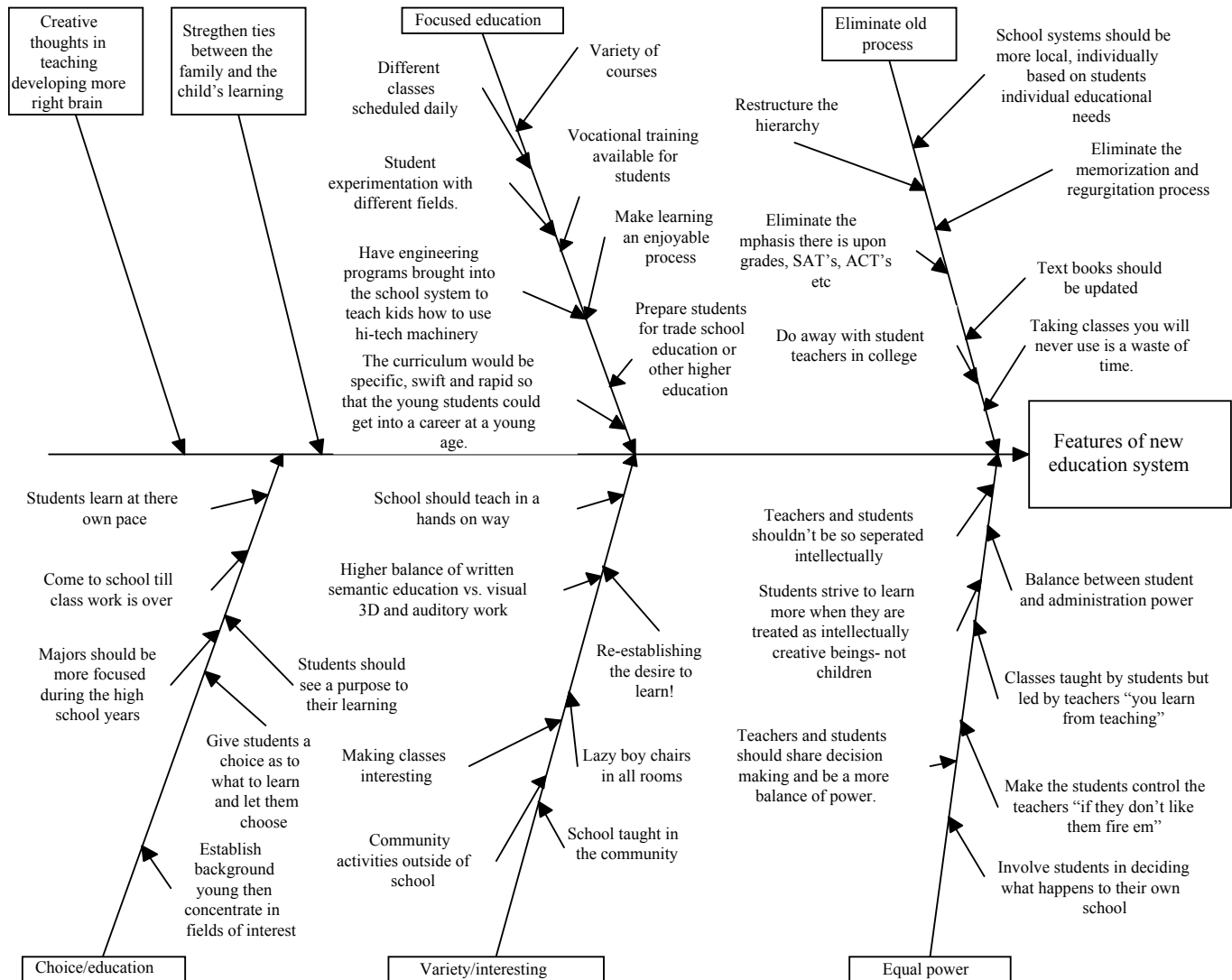
Period 1.



Period 2.



Period 3.



Summary

In education students learn (or do not learn) the content being taught and the culture of education. In lectures, teachers teach students that education is a unidirectional relationship where the students passively receive the content be transferred to them. The Biology of Cognition explains that living is knowing and that knowledge is not transferred but realized in a flow of action [8]. Education reform occurs in a consensual coordination of coordination of actions in a closed social network of conversations. In

this social action research project at Sheldon High School we invited graduating students to reflect on education reform as legitimate participants of education reform.

From this experience we learned that education reform occurred in a network of educators, administrators and legislators that did not include students. This results in a system designed for but not by students. We believe involving students can improve both the efficacy and productivity of education reformation. This work must be approached carefully and slowly. In the next social action research series I will present our validation of the student's features of a new educational system.

Please address comments or feedback on this social action research series to Dennis Sandow at dsandow@earthlink.net.

1. Lamm, R.D., *Crisis: The Uncompetitive Society*, in *Global Competitiveness: Getting the US back on track*, M.K. Starr, Editor. 1988, W.W. Norton & Company: New York. p. 338.
2. Goldschmidt, N., *Oregon Shines: An Economic Strategy For the Pacific Century*. 1989, Oregon Economic Development Department.
3. Oregon Progress Board, *Oregon Benchmarks: Setting Measurable Standards for Progress*. 1991, Oregon Progress Board.
4. Oregon Progress Board, *The Oregon Literacy Survey: Measuring adult's functional skills*. 1991, Oregon Progress Board.
5. Oregon Economic Development Department, *Oregon Works: Assessing the worker training and work organization practices of Oregon employers*. 1993, Economic Development Department.
6. Katz, V., *Oregon Educational Act for the 21st Century*. 1991, Oregon House of Representatives.
7. Oregon Progress Board, *Oregon Benchmark data*. 1994.
8. Maturana, H., *Biology of Cognition*, in *Autopoiesis and Cognition: Realization of the Living*. 1980, D. Reidel Publishing Co: Dordrecht, Holland.