

The trouble with education jargon

"All social engineering is preceded by verbal engineering."

Those wise words are often repeated by Msgr. William Smith, a New York-based Catholic theologian and bioethicist.

George Orwell made the same point a half-century ago, when he invented Newspeak for his book *1984*. The purpose of that language was to make "crimethink" impossible by purging the lexicon of dangerous words.

Our modern education establishment proves the point: Who controls the language, controls the means of discourse; who sets the vocabulary, sets the terms of debate; and who teaches our children, creates the matrix of meaning that is the framework of thinking for the next generation.

The generators of jargon at the nation's graduate schools of education have always had as one of their self-appointed tasks the constant renewal of a meta-language that was invented for a variety of reasons: to "professionalize" education to the point where parents and laymen have no idea what "pedagogical personnel" are talking about; to create a cloud of puffery to inflate grant applications, district reports, and academic articles; and to rationalize, justify and encrypt what is actually going on in some of our classrooms.

Of late, this meta-language has been used to make it nearly impossible to set clear, enforceable standards for education. But just as Odysseus was cursed by Poseidon to find a land where there was no word for *oar* so he could tell the people there about the sea, those of us who believe in restoring "accountability" to our schools must reconstruct the vocabulary of education so it includes words like "success" and "failure."

Look, for instance, at what has happened to the "tests" you and I took as youngsters. We no longer test children; now we take "assessments" of their "skills." If a student is likely to produce a "sub-optimal result" on a "written assessment," we provide "alternatives," such as performance evaluations, which might involve singing a song about a book rather than writing a report on it. Then

we try to discover from the song whether the student has met self-defined "task-oriented objectives."

But how does one grade such evaluations and assessments? Well, we don't have answers that are objectively right or wrong any longer; instead, we have "rubrics" under which the evaluations are evaluated.

The days when a student would receive several grades on an essay — one for spelling, one for grammar, one for rhetoric or composition — are gone, too. The



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have "portfolio assessments" instead of report card marks — gestalt of the gestalt.

Of course, learning in isolation only "enhances" a limited number of "skills," so "cooperative learning" (which we used to call "cheating") is part of the "learning environment" for

many children. The kids love this because they have already figured out that the hardest-working student in a "cooperative learning group" will carry everybody's burden, and the rest of the group

Flanagan once said, there is no such thing as a bad boy (or girl) — just those in need of "behavior management." (In fact, "managing behavior" could be one of the "skills objectives" in a child's individualized learning program.)

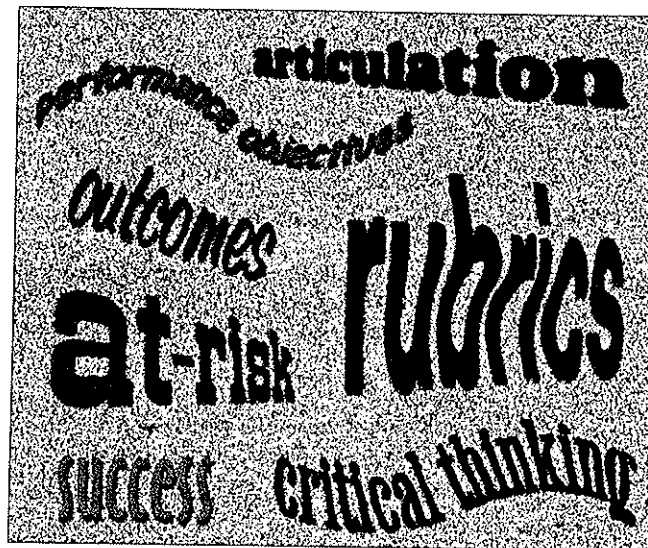
Apparently, it's irrelevant whether a child knows when the Civil War started, or can compose a grammatically correct and tightly structured paragraph, or can spell chrysanthemum, or can calculate the area of a triangle, or can even sit still for 15 minutes at a time. What's important is what sort of progress students have made in filling their portfolio in accordance with their self-directed "learning contract."

The problem is that all this quaint language, while making it impossible for educators even to discuss objective standards of learning, has robbed our young people of the training they will need for life outside the ivory tower.

No employer will be pleased with a presentation that shows style and talent but no comprehension of the job at hand. No client will sign a contract with a firm that meets only self-created goals. No police officer will consult a person's behavior-management goal contract before arresting him for assault. No publisher will be interested in a historical novel by an author who sets her action in the wrong decade, and no editor will hire a reporter whose spelling and grammar are so bad it takes more time to correct articles than to write them.

Education bureaucrats have tried to engineer measurable standards out of our schools by wrestling words out of our language. To a great degree they have succeeded, but what they have not done — what they cannot do — is wrestle the fact of success or failure out of life itself. Eliminating failing grades doesn't prevent students from failing at life, and life is the ultimate test of the success or failure of a student's teachers.

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separate grades have been replaced by "holistic grading," under which the gestalt of the piece is the great matter at hand, even if the essay is written in something that is not quite English.

Now, "assessing the proximity of a student's progress toward learning objectives" is not something that's easily done by a single "evaluative instrument," so we

can enjoy playtime — or "unstructured interpersonal creative dialogue on an alternative topic."

A classroom full of such students, all pursuing "individual creative learning objectives" when they are supposed to be participating in their "cooperative learning environments," could get a bit noisy, but not to worry: There are no undisciplined classes or disruptive students any longer. As Father

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