

BRAINLESS SAMENESS

*The Demise of One-Size-Fits-All Instruction
and the Rise of Competency Based Learning*

BOB SORNSON



Brainless Sameness

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Introduction

Four decades of school reform initiatives have drained our optimism. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Fool me repeatedly with A Nation at Risk, Goals 2000, No Child Left Behind, Standardized Assessment Systems on Steroids, 21st Century Schools, scientifically research based programming, evidence based programming, charter school options, privatization, and the Every Student Succeeds Act, and the shame becomes amorphous as we disengage from the belief that any government led “reform initiative” will produce meaningful results.

Politicians pontificate, fads and educational buzzwords come and go, and islands of educational success fail to move to scale. The pressure on teachers to perform continues to increase, and in turn the pressure on our children increases. Many schools have become joyless places in which there is a constant race to “cover” content and test students. Play, beauty, nature, social relationships, self-regulation, character, classroom culture, art, and music suffer the indignity of being marginalized or eliminated from the curriculum.

Poor, minority, brain diverse, and other vulnerable students are exposed to the damage of a system that treats all kids as if they should be ready for one-size-fits-all high-pressure instruction. One-size-fits-all instruction eats neurodiverse and other vulnerable students for lunch.

Without a clear vision for the schools we want for our children there can be no clear plan of action. The shouting begins. Loud voices compete, and thoughtful planning is neglected. The interests of politics, the power of bureaucracies, and the lobbying of the educational industrial complex prevail. School districts cycle through reading and math programs without great success. National Assessment of Educational Progress outcomes are stagnant, and we continue to fall behind the educational outcomes of other nations.

The general public has become disillusioned and disengaged. It’s better not to think about problems over which you have no control. The parents of nearly 10 million children, more than 17 percent of all school-age kids, have left traditional public schools for private schools, charter schools or homeschooling. In some communities a majority of affluent families have moved away or found alternatives to the public schools. As of 2014, 35 states were spending less on education than before the 2008 recession. We’ve lost confidence in our public schools.

And therefore it is time to choose. Will it be continued disillusionment or fundamental change?

Asking adults to change their thinking and their patterns of behavior can be a fearful thing and much resisted. Opponents of reform contend that poverty is the real problem, rather than what we do in our schools. They argue that using student test results to assess teacher quality is unfair, and that school choice has taken the more motivated students out of traditional public schools. Opponents of fundamental change argue that our schools are already doing the best we can under the circumstances that we are given. They argue (without conviction) that covering a slightly different set of content standards, or devising a new and different testing structure, or altering the evaluation system we use for teachers, or purchasing a new math series, or using a more aggressive pacing guide will somehow lead us to better outcomes.

Fortunately there are some among us who see this as a time of enormous opportunity to build a system designed to meet the needs of individual learners. Rather than blaming the students, the parents, and the teachers for our inadequate results, they see an opportunity to design a system that is built upon a different framework.

“We covered it and tested it” is simply no longer a sufficient premise for a learning system that works in the 21st century. Personalized competency based learning systems are based on a completely different systems architecture:

- In creating a model for instruction that better meets the needs of modern learners, we have to create a systems architecture that can consistently produce far more **students who love to learn** and continue to learn for life.
- This new systems design must be attentive to the **development of the whole person**, including social-emotional skills, problem-solving skills, and positive character.
- The system must be designed in keeping with everything we know about human learning, and more than lip service must be payed to **instructional match, intrinsic motivation, deep understand and application, differentiated instruction, the importance of safe and connected classroom culture, and the importance of art, music, movement, nature, and beauty.**
- This new systems architecture must value **meeting the learning needs of individual students**, rather than giving top priority to covering the content standards du jour.
- The architecture of our new system must abandon “test and sort” in favor of **assessment for learning**. Assessment is most valuable when educators can use that information to thoughtfully design learning for each student, rather than ascribe grades and move on to the next chapter without allowing students to deeply understand and enjoy what they are learning.

- To serve the needs of our children, this systems design must take a radically different view of how to deliver “school”, so that **all children**, not just a fortunate few, receive the instruction and practice time to build every essential skill along a pathway to higher level skills, at their own instructional level, for as long as it takes.

This book offers a careful look at how we came to have our traditional education system, and how it met the needs of a different time. By looking back at the past we can take on the task of change without casting blame, but with understanding. We will consider the systems design of the curriculum driven one-size-fits-all educational model, why it no longer meets our needs, and how to devise a system which can deliver a better future for our children and for ourselves as educators.

The most exciting point of this book is that personalized competency based learning systems are blossoming in every corner of our nation, and in most countries around the world. This is it! The time of greatest innovation, change, learning, collaborating, starting, fixing, improving, constantly improving our schools has begun. There could be no more exciting time to be an educator. The time for rethinking and recreating our learning systems is now.

Bob Sornson, 2018

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"Bob Sornson offers us a much better way. In a personalized competency based instructional system teachers must know their students, maintain data systems so that we absolutely know what students are ready to learn, and find ways to give students high-quality instruction for as long as needed to achieve deep understanding. Instead of cogs in a failing system, we could be professionals again."

**GAIL FREY, PRINCIPAL, MORENCI
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

BOB SORNSON

BRAINLESS SAMENESS

AVAILABLE SEPTEMBER 2018

"As required by his task, Sornson pulls no punches in this book, being clear about the reasons for so called education reform's failure, while also offering an inspired vision for helping students and schools fall in love with 21st century learning that really matters—to the learner and to society itself."

**JOE BROOKS, EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY WORKS
INSTITUTE**

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BRAINLESS SAMENESS

AVAILABLE SEPTEMBER 2018

"Do not read this book if you are committed to keeping schools pretty much as they are. But if you want more children to fall in love with learning, build a strong belief that they are capable learners, and build skills for the 21st century, then by all means embrace every word in *Brainless Sameness*."

JIM FAY, CO-FOUNDER OF THE LOVE AND LOGIC INSTITUTE

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AVAILABLE SEPTEMBER 2018

"One-size-fits-all instruction can never produce the outcomes we need for our society, and consistently fails to give vulnerable kids a fair chance to become successful learners. Treasure this book, and use it to re-shape our schools."

TOM WATKINS, MICHIGAN'S STATE SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS, 2001-05

BOB SORNSON

BRAINLESS SAMENESS

AVAILABLE SEPTEMBER 2018

Chapter One

Time for Disruptive Innovation in Our Schools

Decades of “school reform” have produced exactly what? In pursuit of better education outcomes for our children we have continued to rely on a system of teaching that was never designed to help all kids become good learners or love to learn.

During the last several decades of school reform we have debated which content standards to require and how to pressure teachers to cover all the content. We have considered how to assess students at every grade, how to evaluate teachers, and how to rate our schools. But we have never stopped to really consider whether this system has the capacity to help us achieve our goals, and whether it is simply time to upgrade to a different design system that will allow far more of our students to become capable learners for life.

This recalcitrance to change the systems architecture of our schools is especially astounding when we consider the long-standing availability of a different model. Personalized competency based learning is not a new or unfamiliar concept in our homes, in education for the building trades, driver education, medical education, or in every aspect of technology education. It relies upon on-going observational formative assessment to adjust instruction **so that learners get what they need, at their level, for as long as necessary to achieve complete proficiency.** It offers the promise of much improved learning outcomes, more joy in the classroom, and the development of students who want to be learners for life.

And yet our schools continue to perseverate on using a one-size-fits-all “coverage” model that dates back to the days of the prairie schooner bumping slowly across the vast expanse of our nation more than 150 years ago.

Brainless Sameness is a call to action:

- To the parents whose children are worthy of a system that taps their potential and inspires a love of learning
- To local, state, and national leaders who want to live and work with citizens who have the skills to learn and work, and the character to build strong communities
- To young women and men with the intelligence and skills to teach, who want a system that allows you to be a professional and to be successful opening a world of opportunity to your students
- To education leaders who have grown weary of archaic bureaucratic burdens that limit innovation
- To frustrated learners who want your personal learning needs recognized and addressed by the schools you attend

To create this future, we must first understand our past. The origins of our standardized coverage-based system are linked with good leaders and good intentions. But a system designed for the agrarian and early industrial age cannot adequately serve the children in the age information and learning. Consider this brief history.

The system of education we have been struggling to improve for decades is based on the 1840s Prussian educational system, brought to Massachusetts by Horace Mann, and adapted in the early 1900s to more closely resemble an industrial assembly line. The system is designed to “cover” content, test students, sort them by giving test scores and grades, and then moving on to the next unit or lesson. In the mid-1800s and early 1900s, the use of standardized instruction was a reasonable strategy for a system with limited resources and lack of emphasis on the importance of learning for all students.

Throughout the history of American education, schools relied on local control, based on the belief that parents and community leaders were more responsive to the needs of the children in a community than someone far away in the state capitol. But as the age of technology and innovation emerged during the last half-century, the need for improved student learning outcomes became clearer. States established more regulations, demanded more reports, increased state authority over graduation requirements, and increased testing requirements.

State grade level content expectations began to guide the development of curriculum, instructional programming, curriculum maps, pacing guides, and district assessment systems. We added more content expectations based on the notion that high quality teachers “covered” more content with their students. By covering more content we predicted that kids would achieve some better understanding of all the things education experts might put on standardized achievement tests.

But covering more content in our schools did not lead to better learning outcomes on national or international tests. Increased state control, with all the regulations and bureaucracy it created, failed to improve outcomes. We were covering more, and testing more, but our children were not learning more.

The students in some communities were clearly doing better than the students in other communities. Educators in higher performing communities chose to believe that this was the product of better curriculum and better instruction. In poor communities teachers had similarly covered the content standards, kept up with the pacing guides, completed state and district assessments, and done everything the school reformers had asked without showing positive results. In these communities the students, their parents, and a lack of support for schools were quickly blamed for poor outcomes.

While states were cranking up the pressure in their own way, the disparity between learning outcomes among the states began getting more attention. Each state had its own system of content standards and its own accountability tests. This lack of consistent comparable data made it hard to accurately identify state and local community winners and losers. NCLB (2001) required state testing every year starting in third grade, and further required that states show annual yearly progress toward improved outcomes. **Many states managed to show**

“improvement” by simply changing the cut scores on the state tests they managed. They literally changed the yardstick by which students were named “proficient” so that there was the appearance of greater proficiency without any improvement in learning outcomes. Neat trick!

The manipulation of state data made the system of federal controls and sanctions worthless, and so national school reform leaders quickly moved to develop common standards (CCSS) and common assessment systems. The opportunity to apply for hundreds of millions of Race to the Top and other federal funds was used as an incentive to get states to voluntarily choose to abandon state control over instructional content standards and testing. Forty-five states quickly succumbed and committed to the implementation of national standards and testing systems.

Decades of “school reform” have led us to today. The CCSS are politically unpopular, and many states have stepped away from them. The national tests, PARCC and Smarter Balance, have produced poor test scores and more students identified as non-proficient. Local districts and states have struggled to accept and defend these scores, and many states have withdrawn their commitment to use these assessment systems. Many experienced educators, having grown tired of the pressure to cover and test, have chosen to leave the profession they love. Many young women and men choose not to become teachers, citing not only the poor pay, but also the desire to work within a professional culture that allows them to feel respect and appreciation.

Having listened to political promises to “fix our schools” for so long, the American public is disillusioned. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results continue to deliver the bad news that American schools are not improving learning outcomes, and compared to other advanced nations we are quickly falling behind.

The Prussian cover/test/sort educational system served its purposes in an agrarian and early industrial society, which was to expose students to a smattering of content and identify a small group as “academically” proficient. But this system is poorly designed to help a large majority of students fall in love with learning, identify what each student needs to learn, allow instruction and support until all basic learning skills are developed, and personalize instruction allowing each student, with effort, to continue to progress at her own pace toward higher levels of learning.

Cover content, give tests, and sort students. Our existing system does this effectively, year after year, until a vast majority of our students have been sorted away from the love of learning, sorted away from the economic and social opportunities that are part of the age of innovation, technology, and learning. Poor, minority, and other vulnerable students are especially susceptible to the damage of a system that treats all kids as if they should be ready for one-size-fits-all high-pressure instruction.

So, what is the way forward? The irony is that by choosing to use heavy handed accountability systems that push us toward an ever more standardized, superficial, fragmented and meaningless learning, we have completely failed to improve test scores and academic learning outcomes. We have stripped away much of the sense of community, joy, play, and social learning from our schools as we hold onto an archaic educational system that was never designed to help large numbers of students become quality learners for life.

We are overdue for a systems change. For decades as a nation we have clung to this consistently ineffective system. We reformed it by adding content expectations, lots of assessment, and lots of pressure. In recent years we have drained much of the humanity that somehow had managed to survive by the grace of good teachers and curious learners. All that is left is a race to cover dry, personally meaningless facts and concepts that might be included on a standardized test so that some bureaucrat can pretend that our results are better than dismal.

Given the demands of the standardized learning systems architecture, it is amazing that some schools (not all) have managed to hold onto a humane culture, find a few moments in which teachers can build caring relationships with their students, and work so hard to inspire their students to love learning. Imagine what these educators could do within a system that is purposefully designed to create a nation of learners!

It is time for a systems change to a personalized system of learning that allows far more students to become good learners and great people. Such a system is based on far different design specifications which are based on considerably more accurate assumptions about human learning:

- At the same age, all students are not alike in their experiences, rates of development, and learning readiness.
- Some students need more time to learn a concept or skill, but are fully capable of learning well if given sufficient time.
- All students learn better when offered instruction at a level of challenge that allows for high rates of success.
- Students work better in a community in which they feel safe and connected to others.
- Paying attention to the development of the whole child recognizes the importance of social-emotional intelligence and also supports academic learning.
- Pushing kids into a frustration zone, in the name of academic rigor, causes students to disengage from learning, stop trying, and even to misbehave and disrupt the classroom.



In the 1840s the prairie schooner was the vehicle of choice for travel on the Oregon Trail, an overland route between Missouri and the Pacific Northwest and California. The box of the schooner was about 4 feet wide and 11 feet long. Its cover was made of cotton canvas, and it had no suspension. The schooner was pulled by teams of horses, mules, or oxen, and its average rate of travel was about 2 miles per hour. At about this same time we began to use the Prussian model of standardized grade level curriculum with students in American schools, exposing them to a little bit of reading, math, and civics. Only a very few students stayed in school for more than a few years, most of them seeing that academic learning was not particularly important for their lives.

Today we live in a world in which learning matters for all our students. While our vehicles for transportation have changed enormously, and we see the results of transformational innovation in almost all aspects of our lives, schools have remained resistant to significant change in the way we deliver instruction. We still focus on making lists of content standards for all kids in the same grade. We offer one-size-fits-all instruction, and use grades to identify better students. We manage to help a few students become self-motivated and successful learners, but allow a vast majority to experience learning frustration and disengagement.

In the 1840s Horace Mann established a system of public education which reasonably served the community learning needs of those times. But for the last fifty years our education system has been failing a vast majority of our students, failing to keep up with the advancement in other nations, and failing to help students develop skills for success in the age of information and technology.

We are overdue for a systems change, and we need the shining stars, the innovators, the change-makers, and the world-shakers to overcome entrenched barriers to innovation and build a new model of purposeful and joyful learning for life.

We need educators who refuse to be dumbed down, de-professionalized and demeaned by standardized one-size-fits-all one-best-way scripted and rigidly paced instructional systems.

We need leaders who are ready to innovate, who will not accept a system which is failing our vulnerable students.

We need builders who will make the long-term commitment to construct systems that are more humane, more equitable, and far more effective for all learners.

We need thoughtful men and women who won't accept flimsy excuses or pathetic political responses to questions which challenge the status quo.

Will we hold onto the idea that all students should be ready to learn the standard content on the same day and in the same way, or are we ready to acknowledge that we are all different in our development and that serving the learning needs of children requires us to develop our ability to personalize learning to allow for the amazing diversity amongst our students?

Will we continue to work in schools modeled after factories from a bygone era, or do we commit to rediscovering the joy of great teaching and learning and building systems which connect discovery, learning, and joy?

Will we continue the falsehood that somehow with yet another list of one-size-fits-all content standards or the newest assessment system we will eventually bring improved outcomes? Or will we step beyond those fallacies and design a system that respects individual difference and values the development of the whole child?

We have an abundance of science to help us understand the different ways in which children develop and learn. We have the technologies to track individual development and support crucial learning at each child's instructional level. We have the capacity to build learning systems in which:

- practically all students become successful readers and mathematicians
- individual students find and develop their unique core of interests and aptitudes
- learners develop the social-emotional intelligence to understand themselves and others
- children develop the grit and character needed to build lives of purpose

How long will we wait?