

Coming of Age

Education will become a mature profession only when external pressures force it to do so.

By Douglas Carnine

"It is hard to conceive of a less scientific enterprise among human endeavors. Virtually anything that could be thought up for treatment was tried out at one time or another and, once tried, lasted decades or even centuries before being given up. It was, in retrospect, the most frivolous and irresponsible kind of human experimentation, based on nothing but trial and error, and usually resulting in precisely that sequence."

Dr. Lewis Thomas

This quote could very well describe the field of education today. It was, however, written about pre-modern medicine.

Education could benefit from examining the history of some other professions. Medicine, pharmacology, accounting, actuarial sciences, and seafaring have all evolved into mature professions.

A mature profession is characterized by a shift from judgment of individual experts to judgments constrained by quantified data that can be inspected by a broad audience, less emphasis on personal trust and more on objectivity, and a greater role for standardized measures and procedures informed by scientific investigations that use control groups.

For the most part, education has yet to attain a mature state. Education experts routinely make decisions in subjective fashion, eschewing quantitative measures and ignoring research findings.

What might cause education to develop into a mature profession? Based on the experience of other fields, it seems likely that intense and sustained outside pressure will be needed. Dogma does not destroy itself, nor does an immature profession drive out dogma.

The metamorphosis is often triggered by a catalyst, such as pressure from groups that are adversely affected by the poor quality of service provided by a profession.

Seafaring

The public's revulsion at the Titanic's sinking served as catalyst for the metamorphosis of seafaring. In the early 1900's, sea captains could sail pretty much where they pleased, and safety was not a priority. The 1913 International Convention for Safety of Life at Sea, convened after the sinking of the Titanic, quickly made rules that are still models for good practice in seafaring.

Medicine

The metamorphosis of medicine took more than a century. The initial pressure on medicine came from life insurance companies that demanded quantitative measures of the health of applicants and from workers who did not trust "company doctors."

Pharmacology

The Food and Drug Administration, founded in 1938 as part of the New Deal, initially accepted both opinions from clinical specialists and findings from experimental research when determining whether drugs did more good than harm. Then the Thalidomide disaster led to the Kefauver Bill of 1962, which required drugs thereafter to be proven to be effective and safe before they could be prescribed, with little attention paid to the opinions of clinical specialists.

Accounting

The catalyst that transformed accounting in the United States was the Great Depression. To restore investor confidence, the government promulgated reporting rules to guard against fraud, creating the Securities and Exchange Commission. The American Institute of Accountants established its own standards to fend off an imminent bureaucratic intervention. External pressures had become so great that outsiders threatened to take over and control the profession via legislation and regulation.

In general, it appears that a profession is not apt to mature without external pressure and the attendant conflict. Metamorphosis begins when the profession determines that this is its likeliest path to survival, respect, and prosperity.

The education profession is currently under intense pressure to produce better results. The increasing importance of education to the economic well-being of individuals and nations will continue feeding this pressure.

In the past — and still today — the profession has tended to respond to such pressures by offering untested but appealing nostrums and innovations that do not improve academic achievement.

At one time or another, such practices have typified every profession, from medicine to accounting to seafaring. In each case, groups adversely affected by the poor quality of service have exerted pressures on the profession to incorporate a more scientific methodology.

The best way for a profession to ensure its continued autonomy is to adopt methods that ensure the safety and efficacy of its practices. The public trusts quantified data because procedures for coming up with numbers reduce subjective decision-making. Standardized procedures also are more open to public inspection and legal review.

Education experts should hasten the process by abandoning ideology and embracing evidence. Findings from carefully-controlled experimental evaluations must trump dogma.

Only when the education profession embraces scientific methods for determining efficacy and accepts accountability for results will it acquire the status — and the rewards — of a mature profession.

(Dr. Carnine is Director of the National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators in Eugene, Oregon. Adapted from a longer article at www.edexcellence.net)