

FROM THE TRENCHES

Can We Trust “Best Practices”?

by *Edward G. Rozycki*

One way of looking at success patterns . . . is that people who are in high positions have never been in one place long enough for their problems to catch up with them. They outrun their mistakes.

—Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes*¹

Step Right Up, Folks!

The latest version of the Philosopher’s Stone, labeled “Best Practices,” is to be found in the magic-kits of sundry “experts” who batten off the anxiety of those confronting potential disasters, natural and social. What should we do to prepare for a terrorist attack, an earthquake, a tsunami, a meteor impact, a supernova, or even falling standardized test scores in public schools? Bring in the charmer with Best Practices!

Like the whiskey in Deadwood, however, where the “best in the house” may be little more than rotgut, so “best practices” may be little more than hastily distilled activities backed up with little, if any, systematic evaluation. American education is a vast junkyard of curricular innovations that in their own heydays were promoted as panaceas for much that ails the schools and society. Who can forget—if they can remember—teaching machines, 4-MAT, mastery curriculum, Writing Across the Curriculum, Transcendence, Values Education, Behavioral Objectives, Life Adjustment, Great Books, Competency-Based Learning, Teacher-Proof Curriculum, the Junior High School, Performance Contracting, Industrial Education, Suggestopedia, the Project Method, Computer Literacy, The New Math, The Pedaia Proposal, America 2000, the Open Classroom?

It’s not that good ideas and usable methods were lacking there. It’s that we live in a culture where people expect too much, in too short a time, for too little an investment in resources. Production pressure from the Impatient Powerful converts many a long-term promise into a slapdash failure.² So it is that the huckster with the nimblest tongue and the

quickest escape harvests the only benefit of many an innovation: its initial sale.

Examining “Best Practices”

How might we go about assessing what is promoted as a best practice, even if we do not personally possess the expertise to finely evaluate the techniques or technologies involved? Looking back over the junkyard of educational innovation—and considering the countless wasted hopes it represents—it is clearly foolish to trust someone merely on his claim to be an expert. What recourse have we, if we lack specific knowledge to evaluate a proposed practice?

There are some common-sense measures we can take. For example, we might not be doctors, but we can safely assume that if our symptoms are not helped by a doctor’s treatment, it is not unreasonable to consider alternatives. Also, we know that findings reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* are preferable to those in the *National Enquirer*. Common ailments, we may assume, ought not require extraordinary treatments. We know from experience that some things, though uncomfortable, are tolerable. Other problems take care of themselves.

In a similar manner we can evaluate a proposed intervention or practice by looking for certain positive characteristics and being on the watch for certain warning signs.

Positive Characteristics

Positive signs that a purported best practice can be trusted fall into three types: firm basis, proper focus, and reasonable expectation. We should check whether the basis of a practice is broad experience and uncontroversial theory. The more pedestrian the core knowledge for the practice, the less uneasy we will be about its use.³ If the practice goes beyond previous experience, is it based on reasonable extrapolation from that pedestrian core? Would an insurance company give us low rates to cover the possibility of failure? If not, consider forgoing it.

Also, is the practice based on speculation or wishful thinking? Bolstering a student’s self-esteem has been offered for years as a treatment for low performance. But research seems to indicate that self-esteem plays a minor role, if any, in improving achievement.⁴

Second, does the “best practice” we are reviewing focus precisely on our need? Or is it a stretch to bring it into our context of application? People tend to think of persons wearing uniforms as deporting themselves more appropriately than those wearing casual dress. And so it is that school boards are tempted to impose dress standards or uniforms on students. But student bodies are not cadres of persons in uniformed service, even if they are dressed to look like them.⁵

Does the “best practice” we are reviewing address expectations? Is what is expected prevention, avoidance, amelioration, or restitution? A practice that works very well for prevention, say, may do little if our goal is restitution. Locking the barn door is pointless once the cow is gone. Wise educators know that “bad schools” cannot be changed in mid-stream, that expecting quick turnaround is most likely to be a waste of resources. Preventive procedures, for example, may need to be instituted at the beginning of a school year to be effective.

Negative Characteristics

There are several warning signs that the supposed “best practices” may be of questionable value.⁶ They are metaphor; “new bottles”; testimonials; indifference to organizational need; and sloganeering.

The first is using simile or metaphor to extend a practice from a tried-and-tested domain into a new one.⁷ “Seeing whether kids are learning is like monitoring a river for salinity. You need repeated testing.” By virtue of similar metaphor, workable educational programs are being wrecked on the shoals of No Child Left Behind.⁸

Another sign that ought to raise suspicions is presenting “old wine in new bottles,” especially if a new, trademark-registered jargon has been devised to present it. Reward and punishment has long been inaccurately translated into the operant-theory language that rolls so trippingly and ineffectively off the tongues of would-be scientific pedagogues.⁹ Left-brain-right-brain is another popular container for “pretty-much-the-same-old-stuff.”

Testimonials are a dead giveaway:

Dr. Samuel Simpkins, Sessimee City School District, says, “Our teachers and administrative staff found the best practices of the Action Antinomies Accommodation[®] program to be helpful and inspiring.”

Even if we could believe that the person making the testimonial was perfectly sincere, it would not settle issues of evaluative accuracy and generalizability respecting the previous outcomes of the practice.

Almost anything works in an environment of surplus. Practices that are indifferent to organizational scarcities ought to ring warning bells. So long as scarcity doesn’t sour anyone’s perspective, you can count on the Hawthorne Effect to generate positive results, even if the “best practice” is really ineffective.

“Best Practices” are, after all, another name for top-down teacher-proofing of curriculum. Lacking a strong scientific base, they are doomed to failure.¹⁰ Even with some scientific backing, they will likely fail if they impose substantial costs on the staff that must execute them.¹¹

The final red flag is sloganeering by the proponents of the “best practices.” Like testimonials, the arrival of this form of rhetorical filler indicates a paucity of knowledge and an excess of enthusiasm. (It is interesting to consider how, unlike implementing a new educational program, taking an aspirin for a headache does not require doctor or patient enthusiasm in order to work.)

Expectations and Fantasies

The gap between competence and expectation is filled with rhetoric. It’s hard to say “I don’t know” or “I’m not sure,” especially when one’s reputation or payment is on the line. The danger with being seen as an expert (even if one is, indeed, very competent) is that laypersons may expect more, so far as any expert is concerned, than is reasonable. Wishful thinking expands expectation. And so, to answer the demand, we speculate and give indications that, yes, we can handle that problem. Good theory may provide bridges to extend our competence.

But in these United States, where authority—in the common perception—can rest as much on ephemeral celebrity as on real competence, miracle hawkers and “entrepreneurs” can compete against the best-grounded expert. You can bet that a narrowly, if at all, tested, speculative, ballyhooed “best practice” that offers the quickest, broadest, least painful cure will beat out the sober contender most of the time.

Notes

1. Robert Jackall. 1988. *Moral Mazes. The World of Corporate Managers*. New York: Oxford, 90.

2. See Charles Perrow. 1999. *Normal Accidents. Living with High-Risk Technologies*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 339–40, on production pressures.

3. Compare Perrow, *Normal Accidents*, chapter 3, “Complexity, Coupling and Catastrophe.”

4. See Roy F. Baumeister, Jennifer D. Campbell, Joachim I. Krueger, and Kathleen D. Vohs. 2005. “Exploding the Self-Esteem Myth.” *Scientific American* (January): 84–91.

5. See Russell E. Eppinger. 2001. “School Uniforms: Does What Students Wear Really Make a Difference?” at <<http://muse.widener.edu/~egr0001/EDControversy/Eppinger.html>>.

6. See E. G. Rozycki, “The ‘Best-Practices’ Mythology” at <<http://www.new-foundations.com/EGR/Cannonfodder.html#best>>.

7. See Lee Clarke. 1999. *Mission Improbable: Using Fantasy Documents to Tame Disaster*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 4, “Apparent Affinities.” Accountability is such a metaphor—it ignores lack of causal connection between actors and outcomes, confusing reprisal with retribution.

8. A metaphor from physics might be more appropriate: the observer influences the observation. Standardized testing in schools, together with the prepa-

ration for it and the sanctions following it, does little good for already working educational programs. See E. G. Rozycki, "What Works? Under What Conditions? And Who Really Cares?" at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/EGR/WhatWorks.html>>.

9. See E. G. Rozycki, "Rewards and Reinforcers and Voluntary Behavior," at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/EGR/RewRein.html>>. The functional behavioral analysis required of special education teachers by state departments of education around the country tends to be neither functional nor behavioral, and hardly analysis. See also E. G. Rozycki, "Conjecture Pollution: Poisoning Educational Practice," at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/EGR/Conjecture.html>>.

10. See Richard F. Elmore and Milbrey Wallin McLaughlin. 1988. *Steady Work: Policy, Practice and the Reform of American Education*. Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation. Also, G. K. Clabaugh and E. G. Rozycki. 1989. "Politics, Consensus and Educational Reform," at <<http://www.newfoundations.com/PolEdReform/PolEdRef.html>>.

11. For an interesting example of adapting program demands to organizational needs, see the 1977 classic by Richard Weatherly and Michael Lipsky, "Street-level Bureaucrats and Institutional Innovation: Implementing Special Education Reform." *Harvard Educational Review* 47 (2): 194.

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