Mimetic and Transformative Approaches


At its most fundamental levels, education is rather simple. The goals are to help each student to learn some basic facts and skills and to be a creative thinker and problem solver in using the basic facts and skills.

Even at the time of Socrates, about 2,400 years ago, two major quite different approaches had emerged on how to best accomplish these educational goals. In a mimetic approach—think of the word mimic—the teacher and the text are seen as unquestioned repositories of knowledge. Students are expected to memorize information and then, when requested, to feed back the information that has been presented to them.

The Socratic method is representative of a second approach to education, often called a "transformative" or progressive approach. In a transformative educational system, the teacher is more of a coach, and there is greatly increased emphasis on stimulation of each child's individual expressive, creative, and learning powers (Gardner, 1989).

The Mimetic Approach

When there is a fixed body of knowledge and skills to be learned, a mimetic approach is quite efficient. A behavioral learning theory can be used to carefully subdivide and sequence the materials to be learned. Almost all students can master the basic skills and learn the basic facts. Thus, almost every student can learn to perform at an acceptable level on a predetermined set of tasks.

This approach works well in an unchanging or very slowly changing society. Over a long period of time, perhaps many decades, the optimal curriculum content and instructional process is developed. Students who do especially well in the system, as measured by standardized competitive exams, are allowed to obtain the higher education and the leadership positions that allow them to perpetuate the system.

The Transformative Approach

The transformative approach is better suited to dealing with individual differences in students and to a more rapidly changing world. This approach is well suited to the incorporation of cognitive learning theories.

As mass public education developed in the United States well over 100 years ago, the mimetic system dominated. The name "Grammar School" is suggestive of the major instructional effort the elementary schools aimed toward having students master the basic skills of correct spelling and grammar. Even today, we still see a major emphasis on using basal texts to teach spelling and grammar in an (misguided) attempt to improve student writing skills.

Successive waves of immigration into the United States created a melting pot that lacked a uniform set of centuries-old traditions and that challenged the mimetic educational system. Thus, "progressive" educational systems developed, and these often incorporated many of the
transformative approaches. Our current educational system is a blend of mimetic and transformative systems.

**Information Age Infrastructure**

The education of a student begins at home, well before the student enters school. Much of a student's education comes from outside of school. Thus, it may happen that a student is exposed to a mimetic approach to education in school and a transformative approach outside of school, or vice versa.

The same dichotomy may hold for education that is oriented toward being a creative problem solver using the tools of the Information Age. A student may receive extensive in-school instruction in the use of such tools, and yet have no access to them outside of school, or vice versa.

The Information Age tools require an extensive supportive infrastructure. This infrastructure can be created within a school, or it can be created within a community or nation. Thus, one might computerize a school, community, or national library. One might network a school, community, or nation. One might educate a few select teachers through a few select teacher training institutions in the use of the computer-based tools, or one might move toward all teachers mastering such technologies.

Throughout the world, the political and educational leaders in each country are working to develop a variety of solutions to their country's educational problems. Every country will need to have a number of citizens who are both global and national citizens who function well in global and national political and economic arenas. Such people must deal comfortably with the telecommunication, transportation, and computer systems that have become everyday tools in many parts of the world.

Thus, each country has to rethink its teacher education system and its school system. Moreover, each country is faced by the problem of developing and maintaining an infrastructure that allows and supports the Information Age telecommunication, transportation, and computer systems that are needed if the country is to participate in a global economy. Restructuring for the Information Age cannot be accomplished merely by changes to schools!

**Recommendation**

Students need an education that prepares them to deal with technology and with change. To prepare students to deal with technology, we need an extensive infrastructure both inside and outside of school that is designed to support such technology. To prepare students to be creative problem solvers in the face of rapid change, we need a transformative approach to education.

**Reference**