



# The Attitude Problem in Education

Don Berg

# Uncharted Territory

The attitude problem in education today is similar to the longitude problem that plagued Western European shipping interests for over 400 years. In about 1300, the compass, as we now know it, was developed in Italy and allowed European shipping to reliably navigate North and South, which fueled a boom in economic and political activity. But, if sailors ventured out of sight of land for very long, they could not reliably figure out where they were East to West, with tragic results. Because of a miscalculation of longitude on the 22nd of October in 1707, “In one terrible evening, Britain paid a nearly unbearable price. 2000 of her finest fighting men, a beloved, courageous leader in the form of Admiral [Sir Cloudesley] Shovell, and three of Her Majesty’s finest fighting warships were lost...” (Britannia.com). In response to this and many previous tragedies, the King of England offered a Longitude Prize of what would today be over \$10 million to anyone who could figure out a reliable method of determining longitude on the open ocean. The reward stood unclaimed for decades, and when a reliable method was finally introduced by John Harrison (an utterly unknown rural clockmaker) the prize money was withheld for decades more due to political maneuvering by powerful advocates of a more popular, but less accurate method championed by a well-known astronomer.

The point for education is that we are in a period when we do not provide full access to the open oceans of human potential. We are losing the potential for entrepreneurial, vocational, and artistic genius in children and teachers around the world because the majority of schools navigate by academics alone. Academic schooling facilitates only a partial liberation of the human spirit. We have liberated some people, in some places, in some ways by making due with the limited academic tools available. While the missing piece of the longitude puzzle was obvious, the missing pieces of the attitude puzzle are not. Academics are the established North/South reckoning in education that has gotten us where we are now, while the East/West reckoning of attitude remains a mystery to most.

The unsolved mystery of attitude in academic classrooms currently results in both children and their teachers suffering. I have faith that they are doing the best they can with what they have, but also realize there is something wrong. The crucial components we have to work with in education are the moral path, priorities, and the metaphors we use to guide our expressions of those priorities along that moral path.

Mainstream academic classroom schooling is organized to

- travel the moral path of discrimination,
- make academics the first priority, and
- use the “delivery” metaphor to provide guidance about how best to attain academic achievement and systematically discriminate between those who deserve punishments and rewards.

What I propose as an alternative is re-organizing elementary schools to

- travel the moral path of fulfillment,
- make attitude the first priority, and
- use the “cartography” metaphor to provide guidance about how best to attain optimal states of mind and systematically support everyone in the learning community (a.k.a. the entire school) to serve the common good as well as managing their self-interests.

Unfortunately, the U.S. Government’s strategy for addressing challenges in education in the form of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, and similar high-stakes testing regimes, is to re-dedicate our schools to the moral path of discrimination, the priorities of academics, and the delivery metaphors of industrial thinking in a post-industrial world. NCLB has been an unreliable fix in elementary schools. While it may have accomplished some good results in some places, though I don’t know what those might be, it has failed in significant ways (i.e. the Reading First Program) and for predictable reasons given the limitations of re-applying the original ideas of industrial design again.

## PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND THE POTENTIAL FOR DISASTER

The situation parents face today is like the situation a minority of lowly NASA engineers were facing on January 28th, 1986. NASA had successfully launched 23 previous Space Shuttle missions. However, the temperature that day was 10 degrees colder than any previous launch had ever been, with ice forming on the launch pad. Despite the warnings from below, the higher-ups at NASA chose to go ahead and launch Challenger under those difficult circumstances. On this particular mission, Christa McAuliffe was aboard to become the first teacher in space. Viewing the launch that day from the grandstands at the Launch Control Center were Christa's parents Edward and Grace George Corrigan, her husband Steven, her children Scott (9) and Caroline (6), and Scott's entire third grade class. Everyone was elated to see the Challenger lift off the launch pad, but horrified 73 seconds later when the shuttle disastrously disintegrated, killing all aboard.

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The immediate cause of the Challenger disaster was the failure of an O-ring in the right solid rocket booster supplied to NASA by Morton Thiokol. The unusually cold weather contributed to the disaster because the O-rings became especially brittle under freezing conditions. But the ultimate cause was determined to be the culture of NASA. Despite the fact that "partial failures" were not

part of Morton Thiokol's design for the performance of the O-rings, NASA decided that the "partial failures" recorded on all 23 previous flights were simply normal, not a dire warning sign. NASA, with its "can-do" organizational attitude, was more interested in making do with what had worked before than investing in the correction of a *potential* problem in the solid rocket boosters, as recommended by a few lowly engineers.

Parents today have already chosen to launch their children into a world of challenging conditions. The question is whether their suppliers—schools—are providing the right stuff to get the job done. Most parents are like NASA, they just want to do what has worked well enough before on the assumption that their child will not be one of the failures. A few parents are like the NASA engineers who knew about the potential for disaster in the O-ring components, but had their concerns drowned out by the cultural attitude that prevailed.

The "partial failures" that mainstream parents tolerate in education are motivational amputation and a commitment to the minimal developmental influence of adult behavior while virtually neglecting the far more substantial developmental influence of peers. Motivation is the fuel for human action. Just like the rocket fuel that powers the Space Shuttle, the two components of motivation, internal and external motivators, have to be mixed in order to be effective.

Peer culture in many, particularly urban, elementary schools is practically a "Lord of the Flies" affair that teachers and parents try hard to ignore. Careful analysis of the research into what makes a long term difference in children's lives shows that peer culture is a significant factor, more significant than parenting behaviors according to Judith Rich Harris in her book *The Nurture Assumption*. As MIT Psychology Professor Steven Pinker puts it in his book *The Blank Slate*, "Socialization—acquiring the norms and skills necessary to function in society—takes place in the peer group. ... Children are not just attracted to the norms of their peers; to some degree they are immune to the expectations of their parents."

Academic teachers in classroom schooling are like low-level engineers at Morton Thiokol and NASA—they work with the specifications they are given, but don't have direct control over how their part fits into the whole system or how it gets used. Academic classroom schooling creates a situation in which children are under the autocratic control of their teacher. The teacher is provided with a set of external motivators and expected to move the children so that they accept delivery of the units of knowledge, skill, and information that teachers are charged with providing. Teachers are a key part of the academic schooling system and they oversee a third to a half of the waking hours of their students. But, providing leadership within the peer culture of students is not one of their official duties. They are simply expected to exert their authority to manage student behavior, which forces them into the role of a powerful outside adversary automatically invoking in students—who are genetically programmed to identify with their peers—the reflex to resist threats to their in-group's domain.

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## THE ACADEMICS FIRST SYSTEM

What academic schooling values above all else is symbol manipulation, more commonly known as the 3R's of Readin', 'Ritin', and 'Rithmetic. If children accumulate enough of the right marks that show they correctly manipulated symbols at the right time and place, then they get rewards, and if not they get punished (even if only indirectly.) Since teachers give marks and might be biased by sympathy for the children in their care, they have to be held accountable for producing the right results by the state. The results that teachers are held accountable for are the proper manipulation of symbols under controlled conditions, also known as tests. So, the state administers tests, and if the children get the right marks on those tests and their teachers have given them all the right marks of instructional bookkeeping, such as grades, the teachers have done their job and that's what passes for education. An academically educated child is one who is an obedient symbol manipulator.

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The job of each person above the student in this hierarchical system is to assist “the System” in making discriminations between those who deserve rewards and those who deserve punishments. Accountability is a fancy code word for systematically passing judgment on the character and abilities of children and their teachers. The school system is acting in the role of the good strict father who has a God-given duty to ensure that all children are punished and rewarded according to their obedience to those who know better about what is right and good for them. Those who

know better about what is right and good for children (and teachers) have studied education for many generations and are confident in their righteous judgment that the academic 3R's are the primary lesson that every single student in our school system must learn. Academics, by this way of thinking, are the most elemental aspects of what is important to being a successful human being today. Therefore, it is the rightful obligation of teachers to be held accountable for delivering these units of knowledge, skill and information that constitute the academic subjects that the system asserts—through uniform state standards—are necessary to achieving a basic education, starting in elementary school.

Given this point of view, when they named the No Child Left Behind Act, they meant that the children in the system will all be equally pushed towards their ultimate academic destiny. No child will be denied what they deserve, where deserving means getting their just punishment or reward according to how well they are judged to have obeyed the requirements of the school system. From the moral perspective that informed the design of the law, it may have been quite successful, depending on how you judge what different children in different places with different socio-economic status deserve. Putting academics first provides the basis for applying this system of judgment in education.

## ANALYSIS OF THE ACADEMICS FIRST SYSTEM

The academic system has worked very well for students who are either embedded in a well-connected community or mature enough to temporarily forgo their autonomy in order to learn the cultural conventions of an academic discipline. However, it does not work when kids do not yet have adequate cognitive maps of reality that enable them to have the mature perspective necessary to consciously forgo autonomy on a temporary basis. Academic classroom schooling is also potentially damaging to children who have not yet experienced the consequences of making meaningful decisions and bearing full responsibility for them within a well-connected community.

Consider the deepest cultural sources of the assumptions that

- symbol manipulation is primary,
- the system is responsible for judging students, and
- teachers are responsible for delivering academic units to students as the means to achieve both student symbol manipulation behaviors and righteous systematic judgments.

The current method of organizing classroom schooling that dominates world-wide is based on the assumptions of what

- Riane Eisler calls “Dominator Hierarchies” in her book *The Chalice and the Blade*,
- Daniel Quinn calls the “Taker Story” in his *Ishmael* series,
- Sharif Abdullah calls “Breaker Consciousness” in his book *Creating A World That Works For All*,
- David Korten calls “Empire” in his book *The Great Turning*,
- George Lakoff calls “Strict Father morality” in his books *Moral Politics*, *Don’t Think Of An Elephant*, *Thinking Points*, and (with co-author Mark Johnson) *Philosophy In The Flesh*,
- Mark Johnson calls the “institution of morality” in his book *Moral Imagination*, and
- what I will call here the moral path of discrimination.

Most of these authors would probably agree that sanctioning the moral path of discrimination as a means of organizing society as a whole arose within the last 5,000 years or so, although the experience of strict father families may be as old as family groups. In its most extreme form today—as religious literalism, which interprets religious texts to be absolutely objective accounts of historical fact—it asserts that our entire universe is around 5,000 years old. This moral path assumes that the well being of our society is caused by individual human control over complex social systems. Our elementary schools, which successfully produce many obedient self-interested symbol manipulators, were designed to do so from a similar world view—though, perhaps, in less extreme form.

## People other than religious literalists have arrived at an account of our past that is far richer and more satisfying.

Fortunately, people other than religious literalists have been able to examine the evidence of the past directly. They have arrived at an account of our past that is far richer and more satisfying. In his book, *Thank God For Evolution*, Rev. Michael Dowd celebrates the integration of religious and scientific accounts of the world and our place in it. In this glorious account of our past we have inherited a fantastic legacy of heroism that spans over billions of years. Our ancestors have successfully faced threats on every scale before, from the personal to the global. Based on the scientific account of our past we can see the following important milestones:

<b>Decade Scale</b>	
Computer Technologies	~50 years ago
<b>Century Scale</b>	
Pre-computer Media (radio, telegraph, etc)	~100 years ago
Science	~500 years ago
<b>Millennia Scale</b>	
Mathematics	~3,000 years ago
Reading/Writing	~5,000 years ago
Agriculture	~10,000 years ago
<b>Tens to Hundreds of Millennia Scale</b>	
Spoken Language/ Storytelling	~50,000 years ago
<b>Thousands of Millennia Scale</b>	
Origin of Life (Optimizing States of Mind)	~4,000,000,000 years ago

The milestones go backwards from our most recent innovation in symbol manipulation, the computer, and notes the rough time scale of each major advance in the complexity of our abilities. Most importantly I ask you to notice three things;

- 1.** The history of all the various forms of literacy extend back only about 5,000 years which coincides with the transition from oral to written history and how long religious literalism claims the universe has existed.
- 2.** Agriculture and spoken language both pre-date literacy. Remember that with the development of agriculture, in particular, our species developed whole new ways of organizing how we control our own and other people's behavior for the common good. (see Guns, Germs and Steel by Jared Diamond)
- 3.** All forms of symbol manipulation, including our pre-literate ability to tell stories and use language, are built upon the foundation of our ability to achieve optimal states of mind.

What, you ask, is an optimal state of mind? In short, achieving an optimal state of mind is the method that all living organisms use to survive. Other than being the legacy of all our living ancestors extending back around 4 billion years, optimal states of mind are the ability to achieve a balance within our body/mind (which are not separate in any meaningful sense) that enables us to make use of both

- our ability to attend to everything important that is happening right now in this moment and
- our abilities to look into the past and future to get an accurate sense of what can and should happen in subsequent moments.

If we lose our balance in this particular challenge, we can get lost in an unreal fantasy about the world as we wish it could be or get completely absorbed in all the infinite details of the universe of the moment. In either case we may fail to anticipate either an immanent threat or a valuable opportunity and, ultimately, lose a chance to make a lasting contribution to life and humanity.

If you have experienced flow, the state of focused effortlessness that is described by high performers in every field when they are able to lose themselves in an activity (in a good way), then you have experienced the primary example of an optimal state of mind. The more mundane versions of optimal states are usually described in neutral to positive terms like being focused, happy, satisfied, etc. While non-optimal states are described in negative terms like rage, confusion, depression, etc. All of our emotions are potentially optimal depending on the situation, so it is not simply experiencing certain emotions. In his book, *Flow*, Psychologist Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi (pronounced Me-high Chick-sent-me-high) says it is the ideal match of the challenge of a situation with our abilities to handle the situation. Thus, it is also a moving target. As our skills and abilities increase the level of challenge necessary to achieve the flow of optimal states of mind also increases. The legacy of life

itself is our drive in every moment to achieve an optimal state of mind. This is what, I assert, is the most basic lesson, the primary goal, and what should be the most elemental aspect of education.

The dominant academics-first education system has been built on illusions about what is most elementary to our existence, how we fit into the grand scheme of existence in the universe, and how to go about effectively educating our children to make the best of the existence we share with them. It is easy to understand how we mistook academics for the primary goal, but it is wrong to continue to sacrifice children's peace of mind to that mistake.

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When academics are taught, they should be taught with high expectations according to high standards by effective means. (Yes, the moral path of discrimination has a proper role to play in an attitude first system.) But, they should not be taught until *after* the student has demonstrated that they are bringing into the academic classroom the right attitude for instruction to be effective. The dominant classroom strategy in primary education sacrifices children's peace of mind on the altar of academics by forcing them to do activities they may not be in an appropriate state of mind to do. Coercion leads to an anxious mind and stressed body that can also lead to psychological disengagement and diminished motivation to participate.

Another problem is that organizing the relationships between teachers and students using the autocratic power structure that empowers teachers to be behavioral dictators gives very little room for children to develop internal motivators. Some kids develop just the right amount of internal motivation, so the academic classroom is not a problem for them. However, the academic classroom can become a significant problem for kids who have either an abundance, a scarcity, or wide fluctuations of internal motivation. For kids who have problems in the classroom, the result is the suppression of internal motivations in the midst of overwhelming external motivators. But, even for the kids who do not have difficulties in the classroom, problems may arise later in life because they lack the abundance of internal motivation that is most valued in the “real world.” Fitting into the academic system of external motivators denies most children opportunities to develop more internal motivation.

The academic focus of schools has also enabled school officials to avoid being held accountable for the negative peer culture that exists in many schools. The peer culture of too many schools are a gauntlet of bullies and dog-eat-dog playground politics where the meek and mild have no effective recourse when they are wronged. A scant few adults expected to manage teeming hordes of children at recess by wielding the power of punishment cannot be realistically counted as providing leadership in peer culture.

## AN ATTITUDE FIRST SYSTEM

On the moral path of fulfillment, the school is going to take on the role of the nurturing parent who has a duty to ensure that every child is guided to achieve optimal states of mind by engaging with a community of peers (people of like interests, not age-mates) in a practice of cognitive cartography. Fulfillment results from the alignment of cellular, personal, group, societal, and ecological levels of reality to achieve a balance of the various needs across all levels.

Putting attitude-first means focusing on creating situations in which people contribute their unique talents and gifts to the common good.

Attitude is literally an orientation in space, but in this metaphorical application to states of mind it means an orientation of the mind to the world in which it is situated. When putting attitude first, the community accepts that every individual has blind spots about the world, with a bias towards their own interests. The inherent orientation of individuals is biased and incomplete, thus everyone needs to be held accountable to their community for ensuring that their actions ultimately serve the common good, not just their own interests. Putting attitude-first means focusing on creating situations in which people contribute their unique talents and gifts to the common good.

Cognitive cartography is the process of mentally mapping experiences of the world and how to reliably gain access to optimal states of mind regardless of the objective circumstances. Mapping is more than just collecting bits of data, it is establishing relevant relationships between the points of data to enable a navigator to find their way at some later time. In education the goal is to produce a person who can confidently navigate our complex world, even when they encounter circumstances that are unprecedented, thus skills of both navigation and cartography are necessary for the long-term.

## A functional community holds everyone accountable to the process of balancing the interests of all five levels of reality.

An attitude first school is not concerned with the character and abilities of individuals, because a functional community evokes from its members the characteristics and abilities that God (an inclusive term for the integration of all the levels of reality) has called them to contribute to the common good. A functional community holds everyone accountable to the process of balancing the interests of all five levels of reality. What matters most in an attitude-first school is a functional community that demands of everyone the 3R's of respect, responsibility, and resourcefulness. When the community is functioning properly, the individuals will find their way.

While the community is not concerned with the character and abilities of individuals, it is concerned with the pattern of states of mind that individual's experience. Consistent patterns of negative states of mind indicate that the community may not be supporting that individual appropriately. For the best interests of both the individual and the community, an assessment of the support that individual needs must be done. Then, a judgment needs to be made about whether or not the community can provide the necessary support.

The ultimate outcome of an education system should be educated people. An educated person is able to perceive accurately, think clearly and act effectively on self-selected goals and aspirations. The educated person has an effective practice for cognitive cartography; mapping out reliable routes to optimal states of mind that they can utilize independent of their circumstances. The educated person has a positive attitude in which they exercise control over their states of mind through both their internal mind/body processes and taking action externally to align the different levels of reality in which they are embedded. Finally, an educated person realizes that they have blind spots about the world and that they cannot maintain accurate perception, clear thinking, and effective action without a supportive community that engages them in on-going correction of their inherent bias towards self-interests and the short-term.

An attitude-first education system will make the community the most fundamental unit that needs to be managed, not individuals nor classrooms. Accountability for results would rest on the qualities of the community. Do the members of the community have equal opportunity to solve problems, pursue goals and have fun? Where problems are conditions that lead to non-optimal states of mind, goals are personal experiments in accessing optimal states of mind, and having fun is the default collective social experiment when problems and goals are not personally evident. Do members of the community have equal access to commonly held resources, methods to acquire more resources either commonly held or personally owned, and the freedom to use resources in service of solving problems, pursuing goals and having fun? Are the processes of conflict resolution and resource

allocation in the community fair and equitable? The quality of each learning community should be evaluated on these questions by both the members of the community as well as neutral outside observers.

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In an attitude-first system, teachers are the facilitators of the community governance structure and exchange processes, and may manage day-to-day school operations. Teachers are responsible for aligning the context, ensuring that the power structures and exchange processes are resulting in the achievement of optimal states of mind within the community. Academic content is the responsibility of instructors who deliver content in classes with clear behavioral guidelines that enable students to learn quickly and efficiently.

## IN CONCLUSION

The fundamental flaw in our existing school system is that it is designed to mass produce obedient self-interested symbol manipulators when it should be mass producing socially interdependent state of mind optimizers.

Education is the most reliable and consistent path to human liberation. Our obligation to provide a whole society-wide system for education is born of the realization that the reality that oppresses the ignorant is so bewilderingly complex that no individual person, nor any given sub-set of people, can liberate anyone but themselves—by their own cognitive mapping of their place in this complex reality. Alas, to liberate some at the expense of others is to ignore the interdependence of all living things, and ignoring reality is both the literal, and the linguistic, essence of ignorance. Thus, we must provide access to liberation for all, or the ignorant may act inadvertently against our collective interests and precipitate the demise of our species. Our destiny as a species is interdependent with the destiny of all other living things and it is only by assuring the widest possible liberation of all beings that we can eventually discover how to live sustainably in peace and harmony with our mother earth from whose womb our existence flows and can be denied in the future.

If you are familiar with Dava Sobel's best-selling novel or A&E's excellent, award-winning TV mini-series—both entitled *Longitude*—about John Harrison and his life-long effort to claim the Longitude Prize for developing a sea-worthy chronometer, then you might have anticipated that this example could be setting me up as a latter-day John Harrison. I am certainly, like Harrison, a complete unknown in the fields that would be affected by my work and the democratic method of schooling I advocate is an underdog to the more popular and widely known mainstream methods of schooling. However, if there were an "Attitude Prize," I would not try to claim, nor deserve to win it. My role is, hopefully, more like a combination of Rupert Gould's and Dava Sobel's. In the 1920s, Gould recognized the historical value of the chronometers that Harrison had built many generations before, and Sobel told the stories of Harrison and Gould in a way that brought them to a wider audience. I have

simply recognized that the work of many who have gone before me is worthy of being given more consideration than they get now and I am telling the story of that work.

If anyone has ever deserved an “Attitude Prize,” then it would have been either Marietta Johnson (1864-1938), who founded the School of Organic Education in the USA in 1907, or A.S. Niell (1883-1973), who founded Summerhill School in the UK in 1921. I have merely articulated in a new way what the founders of democratic schools like these put into practice generations ago. Democratic Schools have pioneered practices for attitude-first education, and we need only pay attention to what’s already working and figure out how to adapt it to an even greater diversity of communities. There are over 70 democratic schools world-wide that have matured past their first decade of operations, including the schools founded by Johnson and Niell, and hundreds more that are striving to reach that level of maturity. If we ask nicely I am sure they would be willing to share what they have learned. (Hopefully, without giving us too much attitude ;-)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Don Berg has over 15 years of experience leading kids of all ages in a diverse range of settings that does not include the formal classroom. He grew up in public school classrooms and when he found his passion for working with children he reasoned that since the classroom did not serve him well as a child it would not serve him well as a teacher, either. He is the author of the book *Attitude First* (Trafford, 2004) and was a teacherpreneur (entrepreneurial teacher), home schooling other people's kids for about 5 years. His latest creation is the web site [Teach-Kids-Attitude-1st.com](http://Teach-Kids-Attitude-1st.com).

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