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## And What Do You Mean by Learning?, by Seymour B. Sarason

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online has not been a nationwide priority. As such, students and teachers flounder through, utilizing the best approaches known to them. Fabos recommends a full-scale overhaul of the Internet and its commercial evolution, calling for the creation of a publicly funded national educational portal, which could compete with commercial vendors. The author advocates that schools move from a critical reading of web pages to a critical literacy approach to the entire Internet: "Critical literacy acquaints students with the social, historical, political and economic dimensions of all texts" (p. 139). Another step, Fabos maintains, is to steer students away from commercial search engines, while introducing them to subject gateways. These gateways would rely on content editors to organize the information into subject categories. To this end, new protocols are being developed which make these gateways easier to search and navigate. In closing Fabos states that

until there is a national policy for organizing educational internet content that even approaches the scale of the "educational challenge" to wire every school, vast amounts of online information will be undetected and underused. Organizing web content is the next educational challenge. (p. 160)

In this reviewer's opinion, a project of such magnitude will not happen unless a full-fledged awareness campaign is launched, educating not only the teachers, but the general public about the "misinformation superhighway" that is running rampant in the schools of America.

*Stacey Atwood is principal of St. Thomas More Catholic School in Munster, Indiana.*

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## **AND WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY LEARNING?**

SEYMOUR B. SARASON  
HEINEMANN PUBLISHERS, 2004  
\$20.00, 216 pages

*Reviewed by Michael P. Joseph*

Throughout the book, *And What Do You Mean By Learning?*, Sarason makes an attempt to explain the true meaning of learning, describing it as a

process, a way, a personal reaction to something outside one's self. Sarason focuses attention on the classroom as the central structure where learning normally takes place. Sarason argues that unless clarity and consensus of the distinguishing features of productive and unproductive learning in a classroom context are gained, the improvement outcome is doomed. Sarason also claims that no educational reform intended to have an impact on all schools should be supported before its claims have been studied, analyzed, and evaluated in a small number of pilot studies. Reforms should be given the measurable effect of something systematic. Moreover, Sarason notes that sometimes the measurable aspects can occasionally be adjusted. In other words, the individual being evaluated by the pilot studies can achieve the desired results in other ways. Using an example from personal experience as a clinical psychologist, Sarason describes a situation involving a mentally retarded patient named Andrew, who made improvements after a simple change in his setting, representing a measurable area. Andrew, according to Sarason, consistently refused any attempt at being tested in the normal way. The point Sarason is making in the book is that in another setting, Andrew obtained the desired results of living a normal life.

Productive and unproductive learning is also a resounding theme throughout the book. Sarason mentions that what Dewey's approach called for was a program of research to clarify and substantiate the definition of learning. Dewey, regarded as the father of the educational institution in the United States, recognized the importance of education. Moreover, Dewey's intent according to Sarason was to understand exactly how learning takes place within an individual and that this learning would allow the individual to become a productive member of a democratic society. Sarason claims that, unfortunately, no one was sympathetic to the understanding of the real meaning of learning that Dewey envisioned.

Sarason portrays the educational system as a monster in terms of its vastness, which makes it difficult to correct with just one maneuver. Even with this much time spent on educational research, Sarason states that the real questions are still not being asked. What exactly is learning? Is it contextual? Sarason tries to establish a beginning point to the educational journey by assuring the reader that "you cannot comprehend infant learning without understanding parental learning" (p. 34). The author does a great job of explaining the relationship of the individual and the parent even from the fetal state and describing the intense preparation that a parent makes to welcome a baby. More importantly, Sarason focuses on the purpose of the book, to determine what kinds of learning occur between the parent and the child at an early stage. Learning, in Sarason's opinion, does occur, and the author implies that parents learn new things about each other and about the child

that they are about to parent. Sarason takes the infant and parental learning into the arenas of home and school contextual learning. Sarason's focus here is to identify the common problem found within the educational system – finding an obvious connection between the home and school environment. Parents are unaware that this connection or context of learning exists in the two different environments. The author goes on to say that teachers likewise are either unaware or unwilling to see the connection between home and school as two distinct entities. Sarason holds teacher preparation programs accountable for having failed teachers in their preparation for working with each student's individuality. Moreover, the author indicates that teachers who appear to have a handle on how to work with individuality were already gifted in their ability and did not receive this training from teacher education programs.

Sarason poses the question, how can teachers make learning more interesting to students? Teachers must begin to forge a relationship with the students before the academic school year begins. The purpose of this suggestion is to increase motivation and develop a context of caring that would foster a willingness on the part of the student to attend school. Sarason further states that this concept would not be a thrilling one for teachers or school systems because of the financial responsibilities involved, but it is indeed a worthwhile one in that it ensures that contextual and productive learning will take place within the educational system.

Sarason identifies the classroom as based on the observable view of the school environment and gives 15 rather interesting ideas that certainly evoke the inevitable truth embedded within Sarason's words. "The Horse Story" (p. 80) paints a clear picture of how, educationally, we have been riding a dead horse. Sarason states that teachers continue to teach as they have always done. In other words, being able to think critically would certainly assist teachers in distinguishing that a method is not working, and they should be content to move on from the learning experience.

Sarason identifies a disconnect between administrators and classroom learning. The analogy of a teacher as a slave and the administrator as the master is the direct result of the pressures that teachers are feeling from the principals and administrators who are obviously disconnected from the learning environment and hand down objectives without any understanding of the requirements. At the same time, Sarason is quick to point out that administrators are just as much the victims as the teachers. They themselves are responding in most cases to the higher authority. Sarason notes that teachers are being required to take on a greater responsibility under the disguise that the more knowledge the teacher has, the better he or she is at passing on that knowledge. Sarason continues to question reform movements

and legislation aimed at improving student learning that do not first identify what is meant by actual learning.

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## **BREAKING RANKS II: STRATEGIES FOR LEADING HIGH SCHOOL REFORM**

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS  
AND THE EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE

AUTHOR, 2004

\$22.00, 220 pages

*Reviewed by Vicki Kilgarriff*

This publication is the follow-up to the 1996 *Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution*, which challenged secondary school leaders “interested in transforming high schools into zones of achievement, high expectation, and continuous improvement” (p. xiii) to tackle the issues of school reform. The goal of the first book was to point out that all students were not learning and to make educators believe that they could. Nearly 10 years later, this follow-up focuses on achievement strategies to make sure that secondary school students are meeting the benchmark standards that federal and state legislation now require: “Most principals and teachers took their first steps down the path to educating the nation’s children because they wanted to make a difference in the lives of individual students by helping them acquire a love of learning” (p. xv).

This publication is about change and reform of educational systems, curriculum, and structures to be sure, but it is equally about personal change and reform beginning in the heart and attitude of each individual educator: “If you begin to see yourself differently in your work and in the way you help others see the wisdom of change, your school will change” (p. xv). From the outset, *Breaking Ranks II* pays attention to its own advice to determine the needs, to help others recognize the needs, and to work together to promote improved student performance. The principal of the school is the leader, orchestrating change and motivating the school constituents to come along.