

# Disaster By Design

This very article began with my opening a text file, like so:

*bi nidotrt*

Wait, that's not right! I looked at the keyboard, and realized that one hand was one key too far to the right. I reset my hands, and typed

*vi disorder*

... and here I am. Why invent the word "disorder" to refer to my topic, rather than use "disorder"? Because "disorder" presumes a correct order, and difficulty arises from failure to follow that "correct" order. But there are times when the desired "order" is itself the problem.

Experienced coders and engineers know that following a bad plan will lead to bad outcomes. It is not enough to "use a map" to find one's way from Los Angeles to New York City, when one's map of choice happens to be Giovanni Schiaparelli's map of the canals of Mars.

Our schools do badly because their map, their plan of order, has very little to do with the 30 or so children in our particular class.

The plan of order, the curriculum, may be based on putatively excellent research – about the behavior of other children, placed in similar kinds of Day Prisons, asked to cope with a similar kind of enforced "order" to reach similar externally-imposed goals.

However, experienced scientists know that it is important to ask the right questions. A generation of astronomers devoted themselves to drawing detailed pictures of the "canals of Mars," before realizing that these canals were not reflective of the actual terrain.

If we are all compelled to be "on the same page," it soon becomes evident that some students are quite beyond that point. They may already be reading Harry Potter fluently, and we are providing See Dick Run, and other vapid texts. They may already be comfortable with binary arithmetic and exponentiation, and they're forced to plod through single-digit addition and subtraction. And there are other students who need a great deal of help just to "keep up with class."

Imagine instead, an outing at a large game emporium. You could usher the children through, saying "now we do Dance Dance Revolution. Now we do the boxing game. Now we do this, followed by that."

Or, you could simply give each a fistful of tokens, turn them loose, and watch as they dance, box, drive cars, and fly to the stars.

In a school environment, this kind of freedom might look something like Democratic Free Schools, but perhaps with less organization imposed from without, and more self-organization.

Schools as we know them have imposed a plan of order which was adopted from the military; from the Prussian military, to be precise. Today's educational plans are like those drawn up by elderly generals: fighting the wars of centuries past, not the war of today.

But if a teacher has 30 students – or perhaps 150 students, in multiple classes – it's easy to miss these details. Too much happens, in too many places. Who is competent enough to read 30 faces at once, to distinguish the joy of learning from the tears of having a lesson sail over one's head, or the boredom of yet another wasted day?

The assignment to impose order, as undertaken by most teachers, is inherently impossible – and it would be bad for the children if it were possible. It won't be solved by "working harder," it won't be solved by issuing more tests. It requires that one put away the flawed plan of order, rethink what is going on, ask "what do real children actually want?" – and listening and adapting.