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Are Education Journalists Objective or Players in the Game?

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An Interview with Richard P. Phelps: Are Education Journalists Objective or Players in the Game?

Conducted by Barry Garelick

Richard P. Phelps, who resides in Asheville, North Carolina, is the author of Standardized Testing Primer, Kill the Messenger: The War on Standardized Testing and other books about testing and the founder

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of the [Nonpartisan Education Review](#). His views on standardized testing provide a counterpoint to the popular view that standardized tests play a large part in what’s wrong with education today. He maintains that testing, when done right, is valuable and actually improves education outcomes—and provides detailed explanations on what constitutes testing “done right”.

Richard manages the [Nonpartisan Education Review](#), an online publication that provides a forum for those interested in education issues but who—in Phelps’ words—are “put off by the closed and censorial education policy groups affiliated with the political parties.” As an education writer myself, I have come to value what Phelps’ Review has to offer, since I also have found the venue for educational writing rather narrow. I was therefore interested to interview Phelps and explore his views on how the politics of the education establishment maintains control over what gets written about and published in the press. (Full disclosure: I am on the editorial board of the [Nonpartisan Education Review](#)).

Q 1: Do you believe that the education establishment has control over what gets written/published in the press?

Phelps: There are two education establishments. On one side are the stand-pat public-school vested interests that resist any encroachment to their power and control but, ironically, often portray themselves as innovative and democratic. They consolidated control over education school hiring and ideology—and consequently education research and teacher training—more than a quarter century ago. Yet, they somehow manage to convince journalists that they have had nothing to do with running our public schools lately, and the simultaneous deterioration of US public school quality. Others, such as allegedly nefarious corporate interests and school-bashing politicians must be at fault. So long as the education establishment can get away with this—playing their progressive education



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fiddle while our public schools burn—and have the casualties blamed on others—they can maintain the conceit of continually wanting to fix things through degrading, incessant “innovation”. It’s cynical, but can work so long as journalists and politicians continue to take what education insiders tell them at face value.

The education establishment censors and suppresses information in several ways, including:

Dismissive Reviews, whereby it is declared that no research exists to support a disliked education policy. For example, there exist thousands of studies—most of them randomized experiments—dating back a century and across dozens of countries demonstrating strong benefits to administering frequent tests with stakes to students. But, education insiders continue to declare en masse that no such research exists. And, if no contrary research exists, there would appear to be no need for a public debate on the issue. So long as no journalist ever challenges them on such statements, dismissive reviews will remain a standard tactic for avoiding issues.

False Outrage, whereby, allegedly, the manner in which criticism of their work—even if that work be outright fraud—is characterized as lacking politesse or sufficient respect for the eminence of the education research world’s grandees. Recently, through simple, straightforward research in public information sources, two California mathematics professors uncovered a clear case of research fraud committed by a Stanford education school professor. Instead of addressing the issue, the Stanford professor cried “intellectual persecution” and an online petition was signed within days by thousands of supporters nationwide, condemning not the fraudster, but the two who had uncovered the fraud. On other beats, investigative journalists would be all over this story, helping to expose the fraud. Not in education.

On the “other side” of education policy issues is the other education establishment, the tiny group of think



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tankers and academic economists and political scientists roughly assembled around the publication, Education Next, and the Koret Task Force on K-12 Education. There had been much more intellectual diversity among sources education journalists turned to for counterpoint on education policy stories. Then, around the turn of this century, Paul Peterson, a Harvard political science professor, Erik Hanushek, a Stanford economics professor, and Chester A. “Checker” Finn, Jr., the president of the Thomas P. Fordham Foundation, pooled their resources to cement their legacy as the “official” anti-education-establishment establishment. Former students of Peterson’s now occupy most of the education policy posts at nationally-focused think tanks; Checker Finn’s favorite former assistants now run the Fordham Foundation and edit Education Next; Erick Hanushek’s spouse runs another think tank. Other favorite former students or office workers of theirs and affiliated others, such as Bill Evers, Paul Hill, and Tom Kane, proliferate education news stories. Two former Paul Peterson students now help train a third generation of Peterson grand-students at the Walton Foundation-funded Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, located near Walton’s Bentonville headquarters.

How the Ed Next group gate-keeps what the public gets to hear is simple—those who honor their eminence are acknowledged by them as worthy—invited to participate in panels, cited and referenced in group publications, and mentioned to journalists as good sources for stories. Those who criticize their work, or their censorial and aggrandizing behavior, are ignored, shunned, or ridiculed (witness, for example, [how they treated Myron Lieberman](#), one of our country’s foremost experts on school governance and labor relations, after he criticized them for making policy proclamations on a topic they had made little effort to learn.

Worse, the Ed Next group mimics one of the education

establishment's most effective and unethical tactics—they declare other research (and other researchers) nonexistent, even on topics with voluminous research literatures. Not only do naïve (or careless) journalists fall for this ruse—thus finishing their pursuit of stories prematurely—they typically report the “dismissive literature review” as fact (i.e., that there exists no other research on a topic other than that conducted among the think tankers). To my observation, journalists rarely attribute the dismissive review to the source by writing, “X says there is no other research...” or “According to X, his is the first study to...”. Rather, they typically transmit the falsehood baldly as fact—no other research exists —...ergo one needn't bother to look for it, and the genuine “other side” of issues is ignored in their stories.

Education journalists are addicted to the Ed Next group for counterpoint, seemingly never questioning their credentials, nor feeling any obligation to diversify news sources. Certainly, members of the Ed Next group have expertise. It does not, however, extend to any and all education topics, as some education journalists seem to assume. Ed Nexters and the other policy wonks they acknowledge as worthy of attention have trained as academic political scientists and economists, and a few have worked as congressional staff. Thus, they tend to know about education governance, political processes, education finance, and labor economics.

They know little about curriculum, instruction, psychology, or assessment. Moreover, aside from an occasional year or two as teachers in their youth, they tend to have no familiarity with day-to-day work inside the education industry, as education administrators, analysts, program evaluators, or assessment developers.

The EdNexters' lack of relevant training and experience does not always discourage them from offering policy prescriptions, however. Nor does it discourage journalists from asking for them. So long as journalists

source their counterpoints from the well connected but unknowledgeable, they will not source them from the knowledgeable, but unaffiliated.

Massive bodies of evidence and theory are ignored by US education journalists simply because they rely on small, homogenous, and unrepresentative groups to represent vast, heterogeneous realms of evidence and opinion.

US education policy formation is rife with fraud, censorship, and information suppression. Journalists in other fields tend to be very interested in such things. Not our education journalists.

Q2: You've written many articles about education and have published many at the Nonpartisan Education website. The articles you've published are critical of aspects of education, such as inquiry-based approaches, student-centered learning, and the dearth of solid essay writing in history and other subjects. Yet in the mainstream press (both hardcopy and internet based), the articles written are almost always sympathetic with the trends of which you and others are critical. Do you agree there is a lack of objectivity in such reporting? What might be the reasons for that?

Phelps: Education journalists are players in the game, and wish to continue as such. That means playing up to those in power, just as those in power play up to them.

Most US education journalists are fully integrated into one or both education establishments. Look at where Education Week reporters, for example, go to work after their stint at Ed Week—they work for the establishment organizations that they, allegedly objectively, covered while on the beat. Ed Week itself publishes stories on demand. Groups pay to have the topics that interest them covered. Of course, Ed Week says that they cover those topics objectively—believe them if you like—but, meanwhile, they have let private, monied groups with agendas determine what their

stories will be. So long as Ed Week covers the issues that matter to those who can pay them, it will not cover the issues that matter to those who cannot.

On other beats, journalists maintain an independence from the vested interests they cover. In US education, they do not.

As for education journalists' support of US education's incessantly "innovative" fads in curriculum and instruction, the two establishments largely agree on this. As you might remember from your time in the DC area, Michelle Rhee ran the District public schools in a manner that education-oriented conservative foundations seemed to love. But, her curriculum and instruction policies came right out of the radical constructivist playbook. Teachers were told that if students didn't learn, it was the teacher's fault. Teachers were rated poorly if they did not keep all students in their classes engaged at all times, as good edutainers must do.

Inside the classrooms, the District schools were a progressive educator's dream. And, still, trainloads of money arrived from conservative foundations, the same conservative foundations that support the Common Core, despite its now obvious radical constructivist turn, and its lowering of math standards above grade seven.

These foundations also support the organization Rhee founded after her tenure in the District, Students First. Students First funds political candidates in primary and general elections who support the Common Core. Indeed, Students First backs candidates running against strong supporters of traditional education, where the traditionalists oppose Common Core.

Simply put, the traditionalists are out of power. And, to my observation, education journalists have little interest in such folk.

Still, as you know, there does exist a modicum of dissension on curriculum and instruction issues among the EdNexters, despite their almost universal lack of expertise, and that small bit of intellectual diversity is refreshing.

On another topic the EdNexters know next to nothing about—testing and measurement—there seems to be complete agreement. To a person, they have fallen for a variant of establishment mythology most commonly associated with Harvard education professor Daniel Koretz—to wit, there exists no evidence that high-stakes tests have any benefits, but they cause test-score inflation (i.e., artificial test-score gains over time) via “teaching to the test”. Koretz’s is a not atypical establishment conceit: thousands of studies disproving his assertions are declared not to exist; his primary piece of evidence is a single study he conducted a quarter-century ago in a secret place with secret tests; he claims he cannot do any more such studies because not one of the thousands of state and school district testing directors will let him, and the tests he used back then were only considered “high-stakes” under an obscure definition of the term that no one uses anymore (the tests that allegedly caused “score inflation” were actually no-stakes tests administered without test security). It’s falderal...and dogma within the Ed Next group.

It should be a topic ripe for spirited discussion in the media. But, so long as education journalists restrict their sourcing of information for the “other side” of testing policy stories to the Ed Next group and their loyal followers, there will be no such discussion.

Q 3: There are certain institutions like the Hechinger Institute that provide training in educational reporting. Do you feel that such institutions are making inroads into providing objective and investigative reporting on education issues?

Phelps: The Hechinger Institute disappoints, if the

product of its efforts can be judged by what is published in the Hechinger Report. I see no improvement in the behaviors mentioned above, for example. Hechinger journalists rely on the highly visible, most heavily funded, and easiest-to-reach for expertise, even if those sources have no training or experience in the topic at hand. They're too trusting of information supplied by other journalists. They believe that education research and policy-formation are on the up-and-up and so those with the most prestigious credentials must be the most knowledgeable and trustworthy. They ignore sources' conflicts of interest. They believe dismissive reviews and report them as fact.

I detect little appreciation for the systemic importance of the intellectual diversity that our country's education policy-making so desperately needs. US education journalists seem quite content to source their stories from a narrow range of usual suspects.

Q 4: Any last remarks you'd like to say in closing?

Phelps: To be fair, not all journalists who cover education issues are as I have described above. Indeed, the journalists I have dealt with directly have represented their profession splendidly. But none of these journalists have been education specialists (i.e., members of the Education Writers Association (EWA), staffers at Education Week, or the like).

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Alan Vanneman ·

Oberlin College

Much of what Mr. Phelps says is valid, but he seems to believe that a "competent" education reporter would know as much about education as he does. This is unlikely. Also, I wonder why someone of Mr. Phelps' expertise would say that America's public schools are "burning". This is the standard complaint of upper-middle-class pundits who think every high-school graduate should be proficient in advanced calculus and have read all 36 plays of Shakespeare, not to mention Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France." I wonder why a nation with such terrible public schools has produced a post-secondary system that is the envy of the entire world.

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Mr. Phelps said: "For example, there exist thousands of studies—most of them randomized experiments—dating back a century and across dozens of countries demonstrating strong benefits to administering frequent tests with stakes to students."

Can he cite just one? Also is Mr Phelps

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