Science as a Way of Knowing

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With Noah In the Audience
EDUCATING AMERICANS FOR THE 21st CENTURY:
A plan of action for improving mathematics, science and technology education for all American elementary and secondary students so that their achievement is the best in the world by 1995

A REPORT TO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE AND THE NATIONAL SCIENCE BOARD

THE NATIONAL SCIENCE BOARD COMMISSION ON PRECOLLEGE EDUCATION IN MATHEMATICS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
My goal is to stimulate some discussion

- More questions than answers
- Speak about the context in which education occurs
Over-arching science education questions

• **Who** needs to know about science and technology?
• **What** do they need to know?
• **How** should we teach them?
Who needs to know about science and technology?

- Everybody
  - Does everyone need to know the same things?
  - Not really
Science and technology are imbedded in every aspect of modern life

- Environmentally sustainable development
- Need for renewable energy sources
- Information and communications technology
- Universal access to education
- Poverty and economic opportunity
- Technology-based manufacturing and jobs
- Intellectual property rights
- Terrorism
- International security
- Natural disasters
- Science and technology capacity building
- Vaccines and medical therapies against infectious diseases
- Quality and accessibility of health care
Science and technology are imbedded in every aspect of modern life

- To be a modern citizen, one needs familiarity with science
- Does that mean “to be comfortable with” or “know the details of” science?
  - At least “be comfortable with”
  - At least know about science
  - Details may be less important for “all people”
To be a part of the modern workforce

• Need comfort and familiarity with science and technology
• Ability to use and adapt to technologies
• How much detail of S&T do future workers need?
Many countries are recognizing the science-economy (jobs) imperative

- US
- China
- India
- European Union
- Israel
- Japan
- Australia
- Belgium
- Sweden
Even if they don’t work in STEM fields, every person has a STEM-related life.
Science and technology are imbedded in every aspect of modern society

- To be a modern citizen, one needs some kind of relationship (familiarity?) with science
  - Confront science and technology every day
  - Regularly make science-related decisions
    - Consumer decisions
    - Health decisions
So, what do they need to know?
There are, at least, two ways to think about science education content

- Education in science
- Education about science
AAAS has been involved in “what should be taught/learned” since before 1990
Some AAAS over-arching guiding principles

• Science literacy is important for all students, not only those electing science careers.

• “Science” includes natural science, social science, mathematics, and technology.

• Reform must be structured around powerful, meaningful goals.

• Curriculum should cover less material but at greater depth.
What is science literacy?

- Familiarity with the nature of science as an enterprise and how it operates
- Awareness of important ways in which mathematics, technology, and the sciences depend upon one another
- Key concepts and principles of science
- Capacity for scientific ways of thinking
- Knowing that science, mathematics, and technology are human enterprises and what that implies about their strengths and limitations
- Ability to use scientific knowledge and ways of thinking for personal and social purposes
Is detailed content the most important issue in the modern era?

- Most information is accessible with a click
Education about science

• Science the enterprise
The purpose of science is to tell us about the nature of the natural world

- Science can tell us much
- But has its limits
Science depends on reliable and reproducible observations

- Most of the time
  - There can be “one-time events”
    - Neutrinos
    - Higgs bosons
Most scientists would flunk the “what is the scientific method” question, but…

- The idea of systematically testing hypotheses is critical
- Hypotheses are not just guesses
- Theories are not “guesses” or “personal beliefs”
Science the enterprise

• What is science?
  • What’s the goal of science?
  • What are the criteria for science?
  • What isn’t science?
• What are the limits and potentials of science?
  • Observable
  • Reproducible (usually)
Most attention has been devoted to education in science

- Learning objectives
- Standards
AAAS has been involved in “what should be taught/learned” since before 1990
Benchmarks for Science Literacy

- Released in 1993, Benchmarks provides a set of learning goals for the ends of grades 2, 5, 8, and 12.
Atlas of Science Literacy (2001)

- Illustrates the relationships between individual learning goals and shows the growth-of-understanding of ideas
Weather and Climate
Common educational standards enable cooperation and consistency without too much coordination
This all sounds good and straightforward

- But science education is one of the more contentious issues at the intersection of science and the rest of society
Arguments abound

• What **should** be taught?
• What **can** be taught?
  • And where
Controversy around science education is part of a broader set of tensions between science and the rest of society.
The science-public relationship is experiencing some significant turbulence
People generally still respect science and technology....
Figure 7-15
Public confidence in institutional leaders, by type of institution: 2012

NOTE: Responses to As far as the people running these institutions are concerned, would you say that you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?

Science and Engineering Indicators 2014
Figure 7-10
Public assessment of scientific research: 2012–1979

- Benefits of scientific research strongly/slightly outweigh harmful results
- Benefits of scientific research are about equal to harmful results
- Harmful results of scientific research strongly/slightly outweigh benefits
- Don’t know

NOTES: Responses to People have frequently noted that scientific research has produced benefits and harmful results. Would you say that, on balance, the benefits of scientific research have outweighed the harmful results, or have the harmful results of scientific research been greater than its benefits? In this figure, “Benefits...overwhelm harmful results” and “Harmful results...outweigh benefits” each combine responses of “strongly outweigh” and “slightly outweigh.” Figure includes all years for which data were collected. Percentages may not add to 100% because of rounding.


Science and Engineering Indicators 2014
They have little understanding of what is and is not science

- 60% of Americans believe in extrasensory perception
- 47% still do not answer “true” to the statement: “Human beings developed from earlier species of animals”
- 41% think astrology is somewhat scientific

Science and Engineering Indicators, 2004
Science-society tension can also result from

• Tarnished image of science
• Widespread misunderstanding
  • Vaccines and autism
  • GMO’s
• Political or economic inconvenience
  • Climate change
• Conflict with peer group beliefs
• Conflict with core human values
Current scientific issues that abut against core values

- Embryonic stem cell research
- Studying “personal” topics
  - Sex
  - Genetics of behavior
- Teaching “Intelligent Design” versus evolution in science classrooms
- Origins of the universe
- Synthetic biology
- Neuroscience – mind/body issues
This science-society tension has consequences

• Science is less able to serve societal needs
• Public support of science is undermined
• Society wants to exert influence on what science is (or is not) done
• The receptors for science input into policy are less receptive
Science education is significantly affected by these tensions

• What is taught?
• Where?
• How?
The latest attempt to bring religion into the science classroom
Evolution on the Front Line:
An Abbreviated Guide for Teaching Evolution,
from Project 2061 at AAAS
We’ve learned a lesson here!
Never pit science against religion!

- They ask different questions in different domains
- “Keep religion out of science classrooms”
  - Whether you talk about it elsewhere is not our business!
What does all this say about formal education?
1. We need to make sure *all* young people learn *about science*

• As well as learning *science content*
“Taking Science to School” Framework for Science Proficiency (K-8)

- Know, use and interpret scientific explanations of the natural world
- Generate and evaluate scientific evidence and explanations
- Understand nature and development of scientific knowledge
- Participate productively in scientific practices and discourse
2. Students need to get enough science and technology to thrive in the modern world

- Comfort/familiarity with science
- Ability to use and adapt to technologies
- Have all career options open to them
In case you haven’t guessed…

- I favor national standards
- I favor national assessment tools
Over-arching science education questions

- **Who** needs to know about science and technology?
- **What** do they need to know?
- **How** should we teach them?
Science
You can’t start young enough

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