

THE LEGACY OF HILDA TABA

ARTHUR L. COSTA, *California State University, Sacramento*
RICHARD A. LOVEALL, *California School Boards Association*

ABSTRACT: Today's educational policymakers face complex issues as they struggle to prepare students as thoughtful citizens and productive contributors to the economy simultaneously. Recent national trends indicate that more and more data are expected to be mastered as part of content standards. To ensure that what is learned is the most enduring, the following questions are posed and answered: How should facts be identified for mastery? What knowledge is the most lasting? How is content to be effectively used for maximum application? How can student achievement be best assessed? The late Hilda Taba left a valuable legacy in her seminal 1962 book, *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice*. In this work and other writings, she answered the important questions for educational policymakers of today.

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary reflections and bold actions. The daunting task facing the United States is to equalize educational opportunities for all its children at a time when more of our students come from homes with fewer economic resources. At the same time, society demands better-educated high school graduates.

With the development and adoption of curriculum standards throughout the United States, there seems to be a concerted effort for content coverage for coverage's sake. And now the federal government has entered the field with national annual testing requirements for grades 3 through 8. The intent of these trends is to create an even more powerful economy and a more informed citizenry for a continued strong democracy.

Coverage for coverage's sake seems to be a reinforcement of the American desire for immediate results, and, in education, *more* is better than *less*. In some states this trend of more is better is exemplified in recently adopted content standards in subjects such as mathematics. At a time when an analysis of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) report calls for a more in-depth treatment of fewer mathematics concepts at each grade level,



Photo by John Collier

some state standards reflect what William Schmidt of Michigan State would characterize as content “a mile wide and an inch deep.”¹

Although standards are a valued necessity, at issue is what and how to teach the most enduring, essential, and relevant knowledge in a society and for a world that are experiencing a meteoric knowledge explosion, unprecedented change, and an unpredictable future.

As state and national leaders debate the agenda of what content standards should be and how to teach to them, it behooves educators and policymakers to return to the legacy of Hilda Taba, the noted educator and disciple of John Dewey. Born in Estonia, Dr. Taba took her first degree at the University of Tartu and advanced degrees at Bryn Mawr College and Columbia University. In 1938 she became director of the Center of Intergroup Education, later the Center on Human Relations, at the University of Chicago. She was also a UNESCO professor at São Paulo, Brazil, and in 1951 became director of research at San Francisco State College. She authored seven books. Taba died in 1967.

¹William H. Schmidt, Curtis C. McKnight, and Senta A. Raizen, *A Splintered Vision: Science and Mathematics Education, Executive Summary* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), p. 2.

Taba's work in the '30s, '40s, '50s, and '60s with John Dewey, Benjamin Bloom, Ralph Tyler, Deborah Elkins, and Robert Havighurst prompted her 1962 hallmark work, *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice*.² In the book she sets out a process for determining what to teach and guidelines for how to accomplish the desired student outcomes. Her work delineates a definition of knowledge, its identification and use in a society. Taba lists three levels of knowledge: (1) facts, (2) basic ideas/principles, and (3) concepts.

Specific facts, according to Taba, provide a temporary source for acquiring ideas. Factual information is too vast, is increasing at too fast a rate, is subject to too much obsolescence, and is too difficult to retain even if it is useful. She cited research from the 1960s that indicated that 80 percent of disconnected facts are forgotten in two years or so.³ An example of the obsolescence of facts is starkly illustrated if one looks at a current map of Asia and Europe and compares it with a map from the era before the breakup of the Soviet Union. Memorization of the names of nations and their boundaries is rendered useless over time. With modern databases obtainable through the Internet, it is uneconomical to focus on the instruction, retention, and assessment of factual information alone.

To combat the problem of too much data and obsolescence, Taba used the process of sampling of facts as an effective tool to prune the first level of knowledge. Many sets of facts can support the next level of knowledge—ideas and principles. Even with organizing facts into ideas and principles, however, the numbers that can be mastered are also limited. How, then, are the most powerful basic ideas and principles to be selected? Taba said that *they must have scientific validity, must be learnable at the age level at which they are offered, and must have utility in our current culture*.⁴ To follow the first-level example of data obsolescence of maps with a more durable content, the basic idea or principle would be that *national boundaries are created by many factors, including natural features, wars, and whim*. Examples could be tropical African nations, such as Kenya and Nigeria, created as a result of European colonization and treaties, and the influences of religion, language, and ethnicity in the Balkans of Europe. Many other facts and examples could also be used to support the basic idea of establishment of national boundaries.

²Hilda Taba, *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962).

³Ibid., p. 212.

⁴Ibid., p. 175.

Abstractions and concepts represent the third level of Taba's knowledge hierarchy. Examples at this level are the concepts of multiple causation, interdependence, and number and measurement. Using maps and the geopolitical information at the third level, for example, the applied concept would be multiple causation. To apply the concepts and basic ideas learned from content used in levels one and two, students would be asked to predict what would happen if similar sets of circumstances occurred on other continents. Taba believed that this third-level knowledge is the most enduring and is usually a product of many experiences over a long period of time, often taught in many content areas. The more abstract the principle or generalization that is learned, the greater the possibility of transfer. Justice, for example, denotes abstract qualities of behavior, according to Taba, and can be associated with many facts and basic ideas.⁵

Once the hierarchy of knowledge in Dr. Taba's epistemology has been determined, how is the content learned? Research results continue to support Taba's strategies of how the brain processes information and the conditions that facilitate meaning:

- D. Hofstadter states: "We are prepared to see, and we see easily, things for which our language and culture hand us ready-made labels. When those labels are lacking, even though the phenomena may be all around us, we may quite easily fail to see them at all. The perceptual attractors that we each possess (some coming from without, some coming from within, some on the scale of mere words, some on a much grander scale) are the filters through which we scan and sort reality, and thereby they determine what we perceive on high and low levels."⁶

- Our brain and central nervous system filter an enormous amount of sensory input. A million bits of information per minute come pouring into our brain—and we certainly can't attend to all of them. Instead we generalize, fitting information into already stored patterns and categories or building new classification hierarchies to accommodate the new information.⁷

- The human brain is a pattern-finding organism.⁸

⁵Ibid., pp. 175–178.

⁶D. R. Hofstadter, "Analogy as the Core of Cognition," in *The Best American Science Writing*, ed. James Gleick (New York: Ecco Press, 2000).

⁷Patricia Wolfe, *Brain Matters: Translating Research into Classroom Practice* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001), pp. 74–87.

⁸Lawrence F. Lowery, "The Biological Basis for Learning," in *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking*, ed. Arthur L. Costa (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001).

- A steady source of positive emotional support exists.⁹
- There is stimulation of all the senses (but not necessarily all at once).¹⁰
- An atmosphere prevails free of undue pressure and stress but suffused with a degree of pleasurable intensity.¹¹
- Novel challenges are presented that are neither too easy nor too difficult for the child at his or her stage of development.¹²
- Social interaction occurs for a significant percentage of activities.¹³
- Active participation exists rather than passive observation.¹⁴
- There is development of a broad range of skills and interests that are mental, physical, aesthetic, social, and emotional.¹⁵
- Frequent uses of comparison and classification are provided as monumental cognitive capabilities.¹⁶

The process of evaluating student achievement of content begins once content standards have been established. Such evaluation often results in high-stakes testing. Policymakers seem to agree that of the three recognized types of evaluation (informal teacher devices, teacher-made paper-and-pencil tests, and standardized tests), nationally normed tests are the most commonly accepted and used. They are economical, provide data to compare a given class with standard scores, and represent a systematic measurement of progress. The limitations of standardized tests cited by Taba in the '60s still hold true today—that the tests are devised largely for measuring the mastery

⁹Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1995), p. 97.

¹⁰Renate Caine and Geoffrey Caine, *Education on the Edge of Possibility* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1997), p. 104.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹²Maurice J. Elias, Joseph E. Zins, et al., *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1997), p. 10.

¹³E. G. Cohen, "Talking and Working Together: Status, Interaction and Learning," in *The Social Context of Instruction*, ed. P. L. Peterson, L. R. Wilkinson, and M. Hallihan (New York: Academic Press, 1984), pp. 171–187.

¹⁴Renate Caine and Geoffrey Caine, *Making Connections: Teaching and the Human Brain* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1991), pp. 156–157.

¹⁵Marian Diamond and Janet L. Hopson, *Magic Trees of the Mind: How to Nurture Your Child's Intelligence, Creativity, and Healthy Emotions from Birth Through Adolescence* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), pp. 107–108.

¹⁶Ronald Brandt, "On Teaching Brains to Think: A Conversation with Robert Sylwester," in *Developing Minds: A Resource Book for Teaching Thinking*, ed. Arthur L. Costa (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001), pp. 170–174.

of factual knowledge.¹⁷ Their inability to measure the more complex and creative forms of mental activity such as divergent thinking—a trait encouraged and prized in this increasingly entrepreneurial society—is one dilemma of the “more content is better” expectation and policy. Taba cited a 1946 recommendation by the National Society for the Study of Education that continues to ring true: “In looking for evidence of the understanding, there is a need to broaden the base of the observations by employing evaluative procedures which go beyond the usual kinds of pencil and paper testing.”¹⁸

The national debate rages about coverage of content standards and norm-referenced and criterion testing. Yet Jeffersonian logic would lead Americans to aspire to the development of critical thinkers using the most powerful, lasting knowledge available. Teaching students to think is a goal that should guide policymakers’ decisions regarding what content to teach and how to assess it, for in the long run, what is learned should be the most durable knowledge.

Taba, when visiting a prestigious Eastern university in the 1960s, was ushered into a facility where a huge mainframe computer was being used to develop one of the first teaching machines. The director excitedly asked her what she thought of the program. She quickly answered, “Million-dollar machine, ten-cent idea.” She was resolute in her opinion that content should be selected carefully in order to be used over time by an educated citizenry to advance the economy and democracy simultaneously. With the billions of dollars being invested in education, the million-dollar principles and abstractions/concepts need to be mined, while the ten-cent ideas are culled.

As policymakers wrestle with equalizing educational opportunities for all children and preparing citizens for an increasingly complex society and world, it is a most opportune time to revisit Dr. Taba’s work and consider its application to current educational thought and practice. What Taba wrote in 1962 rings true today:

One scarcely needs to emphasize the importance of critical thinking as a desirable ingredient in human beings in a democratic society. No matter what views people hold of the chief function of education, they at least agree that people need to learn to think. In a society in which changes come fast, individuals cannot depend on routinized behavior or tradition in making decisions, whether on practical everyday or professional matters,

¹⁷Hilda Taba, *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962), pp. 216, 317.

¹⁸National Society for the Study of Education, *The Measurement of Understanding*, Forty-fifth Yearbook, Part 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), pp. 45, 326.

moral values, or political issues. In such a society there is a natural concern that individuals be capable of intelligent and independent thought.¹⁹

Although this article showcases Taba's process for selecting content, that is only a small part of her work. She is recognized as a significant influence in educational thought throughout the world. Recently, Jane Bernard-Powers revisited Taba's contributions as an educational theorist.²⁰ At least one doctoral dissertation heralds her as a trailblazer in the area of curriculum development.²¹ Her worldwide reputation is exemplified by an international education conference to be held at her alma mater, the University of Tartu, this year. The conference celebrates the hundredth year of her birth and her influence as a renowned educator.

The Pasternak poem from *Dr. Zhivago* read at her funeral captures her contributions for the future.

You in others—this is what you are.
 Your soul, your immortality, your life in others.
 And now what?
 You have always been in others and you remain in others.
 This will be you—the spirit that enters the future
 and becomes a part of it.

Truly, her legacy is steeped in the tradition of American educational philosophers and will continue to be a beacon to those who wish to educate broadly and deeply.

ARTHUR L. COSTA is Professor Emeritus at California State University in Sacramento; phone: (303) 683-6146; e-mail: artcosta@aol.com. RICHARD A. LOVEALL is Director of Executive Search Services at California School Boards Association; phone: (916) 669-3293; e-mail: rloveall@csba.org.

¹⁹Hilda Taba, *Curriculum Development: Theory and Practice* (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1962), p. 215.

²⁰Jane Bernard-Powers, "Composing Her Life: Hilda Taba and Social Studies History," in *Bending the Future to Their Will: Civic Women, Social Education, and Democracy*, ed. Margaret Smith Crocco and O. L. Davis Jr. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999).

²¹Mark M. Isham, "Hilda Taba, Pioneer in Curriculum Development" (doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1984).

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