

Tom Wright's Response to Petrina's Reaction

Thomas Wright

Reading Stephen Petrina's reaction to my recent JTE editorial was an interesting exercise. The numerous underlines he used and the misinterpretations he communicated caused me some concern. For example, I wondered how Petrina arrived at a statement that I "reluctantly" would accept bio-related and production as curriculum organizers. This statement reflects either a lack of careful reflection on what was written or a hidden agenda by the reactor. Two different systems were suggested for content organizers. Also, the term bio-related did not appear in the editorial and production appeared in an entirely different context.

However, the theme of the editorial was not on technology educator's favorite topic for academic discussion: *Which content organizers should we use?* The preoccupation with this topic has dissipated many people's energies from the real issue of the field: *How do we develop and deliver quality programs that people outside our profession will value?* To this end I suggested that diversity, as I interpret Petrina's understanding of the word, has not served us well for a number of years. Allowing each individual the freedom to define technology education in any way he or she chooses serves students and the profession poorly. However, the belief communicated by Petrina that curriculum freedom is a basic right of all teachers is not new. We've had this level of "diversity" for years. Michaels (1978), reflecting on industrial arts on the eve of his retirement, suggested that the field was eclectic. He indicated that the industrial arts teacher could "choose what appears to be best from diverse sources, systems, and styles" (p. 2). He then listed nine rationales that were in use for the field: historical-common heritage, workshop-learning by doing, skills-for-skills sake, industry-technology, creativity-problem solving-design, career awareness-occupational preparation, utilitarian-handyman, special needs learners. There's little wonder that even today industrial arts is hard to define and describe. It was anything that anyone wanted it to be and it was valued by few educators outside the field.

During the 1960's curriculum thought changed direction. There was basic philosophical agreement among curriculum reformers that the randomly focused, tools and material-based industrial arts was inappropriate and that in-

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dustry should be the new curriculum base. Within this context there were a number of approaches to teach about industry. This resulted in a common vision with alternate approaches and gave the field a spurt of growth and new recognition.

With the advent of a technology curriculum focus, the profession lost its industry-based vision and began to diversify. The technology camp led by Paul DeVore and the industry camp lead by Willis Ray and Donald Lux spent considerable time and energy advocating their positions. This discussion was good but the diversity caused the field to lose sight of its basic challenge: to alter industrial arts significantly to meet the needs of youth for the emergent information age. To address this problem the Jackson's Mill group concluded that if progress was to be made in changing industrial arts from woodworking, metalworking, and drafting, the change agents must compromise — sacrifice some of their diversity. This group agreed that (1) industry and technology and their impacts on society should be the focus of the emerging field, (2) the content of the field could be organized around the productive activities that humans have, are, and, most likely, will be engaged in, and (3) these activities are best understood by viewing them as systems.

In both of these instances cited above, there were change agents who had a vision for the field and there was a central mission agreed upon by many practitioners. The editorial that Petrina finds fault with suggests that this is a time when technology education needs a common vision. It is not one in which free-wheeling diversity will serve us well. Those who suggest otherwise may need a dose of reality. Public school and teacher education technology education/industrial arts programs are closing in nearly every state. The spate of curriculum reform documents of the 1980's almost totally ignored our profession as contributing to the general education of youth. Only Boyer's *High School* suggested a seminar on technology — not hands on/minds on technology education. This condition can be explained, in large part, because there is not a clear vision of the mission, goals, content, and practices of technology education that can be articulated to those outside our field.

We are in a crisis of credibility brought on by failing to reach a compromise on what is the central vision for the field and the essential contributions (content and processes) it can make to the youth of America. This crisis can be terminal if we continue to debate lofty issues among ourselves and fail to deal with the problems at hand: developing a credible product that other people value. This cry for action is not designed to “render voiceless” alternate curriculum models as Petrina suggests DeVore and I would do. However, it is to suggest that without some common vision of what is important, the field is left with little to “sell” to the general public. We may believe we are vital in the education scheme; but how many people outside technology education share our convictions? We live in a hostile educational environment of increased demands on student time, reduced electives, tight budgets, and a back-to-the-basics movement. Trying to be all things to all people under the rubric of diversity may let us be nothing to nobody.

Before we all rally under the flag of diversity-for-diversity sake, we need to list the advocates for technology education who are outside our field. If they are few, which I believe they are, then we need to decide how we develop allies. I believe the approach is fairly simple and I tried to explain it in my editorial. Simply put we must (a word Petrina reacts strongly to) decide what we are and what we are not. Then we must develop programs that can be clearly articulated. These programs cannot be solely based on an individual teacher's abilities, interests, and expertise. And finally, as I suggested in the editorial: we must resist the *product consumption mentality* presently being used by some change agents. We need not discard our curriculum structures and philosophical foundations with the same frequency as we do automobiles and clothing.

As much as Peterna dislikes the words "must," "all," and "challenge," I suggest that unless we are ALL in the fight together we will fail to meet the challenge. Another generation of young Americans will graduate technologically illiterate and technology education may well disappear from public schools.

References

Micheels, W. J. (1978). *Come Monday morning*. Washington, DC: American Industrial Arts Association.