

WHY AMERICANS LOVE EDUCATIONAL SHORTCUTS:

A conversation with Robert Hampel

From correspondence courses to CliffsNotes, Americans have always looked for ways to avoid the slow, hard work of academic learning.

By **Rafael Heller**



ROBERT HAMPEL is a historian of education who also studies contemporary educational policy. Since 1985, he has been professor, and has twice served as interim director, at the University of Delaware School of Education, in Newark. From 2002 to 2012, he was the secretary/treasurer of the

national History of Education Society, and at present he is collaborating with eight other historians on a sourcebook for the history of education survey course. He earned his bachelor's degree from Yale and a Ph.D. from Cornell.

Hampel has published dozens of journal articles and magazine pieces, including a number of articles in *Phi Delta Kappan*. His most recent book is *Fast and Curious: A History of Shortcuts in American Education* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017). Also, he is author of *The Last Little Citadel: American High Schools since 1940* (Houghton-Mifflin, 1986); coauthor of *Kids and School Reform* (Jossey-Bass, 1997), and editor of *Paul Diederich and the Progressive American High School* (Information Age Publishing, 2014).

PHI DELTA KAPPAN: As Johann Neem explains in this issue of *Kappan*, some Americans have always wanted the public schools to provide a liberal education, giving students opportunities to read great books, study the academic disciplines, discuss big ideas, and expand their minds. But over the last century, many of our school systems have backed away from that mission, in part because the liberal arts have been seen as irrelevant to most students (since what they really need are job skills), and in part because many Americans are suspicious of intellectuals and don't want their children to be like them.

But as you describe in your most recent book, there's one more reason why liberal education has fallen out of favor: It takes a lot of *time and hard work*. When it comes to education, we prefer shortcuts, whether it's taking a correspondence course, reading CliffsNotes, or watching a YouTube video.

ROBERT HAMPEL: Correspondence courses are a great example. Starting in the 1890s, it became incredibly popular to take classes

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through the U.S. mail. By the 1920s, there were several hundred correspondence schools to choose from, and enrollments reached about a half million people each year. The largest outfit, the International Correspondence Schools in Scranton, Pennsylvania, had more students than any other educational enterprise in the country.

Most of the people who signed up were men in their late 20s or early 30s who had dropped out of high school, back when hardly anybody graduated and went on to college. But then college enrollments began to soar in the 1920s, and suddenly all these younger workers with diplomas were getting the promotions and pay raises. They worried they were being left behind, so they signed up for correspondence courses, hoping for a quick and easy way to learn a new skill and land a better job.

The vast majority of courses were on vocational topics and were marketed as training, not education. For \$100 (\$1,200 to \$1,500 in today's money), you could take a course on bookkeeping, say. If you finished the lessons, you might be able to recoup the \$100 by getting "the fat pay envelope," as one advertisement put it. So correspondence courses were primarily for men who couldn't afford to quit their job

and go back to school, but who wanted to do better in life — in fact, one correspondence school called its newsletter *Ambition*. The dropout rate was very high, but for those who finished, these courses restored hope and sometimes enhanced their careers.

KAPPAN: You write that some people also saw correspondence courses as a shortcut to becoming cultured. How popular were courses on topics such as literature, history, and the arts?

HAMPEL: The liberal arts courses were always less popular than the vocational courses. However, the ones that focused

on leisure time activities sold quite well. For instance, courses that taught you how to play the piano were very popular. And Arthur Murray's dance studios began as a correspondence school, which is amazing when you think about it — people learned to dance

by studying diagrams that came in the mail.

Of the people who did take liberal arts courses, some saw it as a way to acquire middle-class respectability. You could show your neighbors that you knew how to waltz, for example. But there was also the possibility that creative talent could earn people money. In the 1960s, for example, one of the most popular correspondence schools was the Famous Writers School. It supplied a modest dose of liberal education while also improving your writing so that you could freelance in your spare time. When you signed up for the course, you got several books with tips on good writing, along with a set of 24 assignments. Then, once you completed them and sent in your work, an instructor would send them back with comments and suggestions.

KAPPAN: Who provided the feedback?

HAMPEL: The Famous Writers School recruited a dozen very well-known authors who served on an advisory board. But the comments came from a full-time staff of 50 or 60 experienced writers who were not famous. The school eventually ran into trouble with the government because several of its ads were misleading. Many people thought, "Oh my gosh, Bennett Cerf, the head of Random House publishing, will be giving me

The liberal arts courses were always less popular than the vocational courses.



"Slow down! There's a left turn coming up!"

comments on my writing!” But that wasn’t true. Cerf helped create the texts, but he never graded papers.

KAPPAN: In this case, it was false advertising, but it’s interesting that somebody like Bennett Cerf was such a powerful draw, and not just for the kind of person who’d be attracted to the Famous Writers School — Cerf was also a regular on the TV game show *What’s My Line?*, so he was a genuine celebrity. What does that say about the public’s attitudes toward intellectuals? Americans didn’t want to slog through difficult books and spend a lot of time studying big ideas, so why did they treat an intellectual like Cerf as a big deal?

HAMPEL: Cerf seemed reassuringly normal. Many people thought intellectuals were out-of-touch weirdos and freaks. Red-blooded all-American males weren’t supposed to be obsessed with literature. But there was a period, especially in the 1950s, when television producers tried to sell the public on the idea that some people could be both well-read *and* the all-American boy next door.

The best example is the quiz-show scandal (portrayed in the 1994 movie *Quiz Show*) involving Charles Van Doren, who was a literature professor and the son of well-known writers. When he went on the game show *Twenty-One*, the producers helped him cheat, so he could keep winning and they could keep him on air for a while. They portrayed him as this incredibly knowledgeable but also charming guy, whereas his main rival was the stereotypical brainy dork. There was another game show on the radio, called *Quiz Kids*, that also tried to sell the idea of all-American intellectuals. The point was to suggest that the young boys and girls on the show were super smart and well-read, but they were also wholesome and played sports. Looking back on the show years later, one panelist told an interviewer, “We were expected to be not only abnormally brilliant, but brilliantly normal.”

But those were outliers. For the most part, TV and radio shows celebrated *intelligence*, not intellectuals. They featured people who were smart and quick and could recall bits and pieces of information, but not people who were devoted to the intrinsic joy of learning. While Americans have always been wary of intellectuals, they’ve always respected intelligence in business and politics. As historian Richard Hofstadter observed, that’s the type of person who lives *off* ideas rather than lives *for* ideas.

KAPPAN: But in your book, you do give one example of a shortcut that was supposed to introduce ordinary Americans to intellectual culture. Tell us about the Harvard Classics, which offered a sort of antidote to correspondence courses.

HAMPEL: In 1909, when Charles Eliot retired from the presidency of Harvard, he thought it would be a valuable public service to sell what he called the “five-foot shelf” — 50 venerable works of fiction and nonfiction. It was meant to be a starter kit for people who wanted to become well-read.

Harvard’s board of trustees let Eliot and his publisher call it the Harvard Classics, which was a huge marketing coup. Here you had a stamp of approval from the nation’s best-known college president, who ran Harvard for 40 years. But from the start, Eliot disliked the advertising. He never thought it should be quick or easy to read great books. As he saw it, the message should be that these are important cultural touchstones, and it’s worth it to do the hard work of reading them carefully. But the marketing team pitched the idea that people only needed to set aside 15 minutes a day for reading. That message was alluring: Do a little at a time, it won’t be that difficult, and you’ll make quick progress though the classics. Better yet, wonderful things will happen as a result. You’ll become more cultured. You’ll gain respect. You might even see your career take off. Apparently, that was appealing to many people. The best estimate is that 20,000 sets were sold each year in the 1910s and 1920s.

So Eliot’s idea was to democratize access to intellectual content, making it available to nearly everyone. But the advertising appealed to Americans’ desire for easy shortcuts, in this case a shortcut to the *appearance* of being well-read. Presumably, some people did read some of the books, but it’s likely that most people put them on the shelf for display. There’s a wonderful *New Yorker* cartoon in which a man is looking at his tall bookcase and says, “I wonder if the Harvard Classics are still up there. Yep, there they are.” Of course, he doesn’t take a book down to read. That’s not the point. The set was a symbol of middle-class respectability that doubled as *bookaflage* — handsome red bindings as interior decoration.

KAPPAN: You write about another well-known shortcut, CliffsNotes, which seems like the inverse of the Harvard Classics. When people buy CliffsNotes, they really do read them, mostly to avoid having to read the sorts of books Eliot was recommending. So how did they get their start?

HAMPEL: They’re named after Clifton Hillegass, a textbook distributor in Nebraska. In 1958, he came across a Canadian company with a line of Shakespeare summaries, and he thought he could sell similar material directly to his contacts in U.S. bookstores. Within six years, sales exceeded one million copies annually.

What’s interesting is that he didn’t see them as a shortcut.

In his mind, they were a study aid, meant to help students understand the literature they were reading in school. It didn't take long for him to realize that students were using them in place of the original, but that was not his intent. Inside the front cover was the capitalized warning, THESE NOTES ARE NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE TEXT ITSELF OR FOR THE CLASSROOM DISCUSSION OF THE TEXT. Throughout his life, he respected intellectual labor. He had a master's degree, and he loved to read. Later, he endowed a professorship at the University of Nebraska.

At one point, he created a separate version of CliffsNotes that included a famous text in the center, a glossary on the left, and commentary on the right. The idea was that kids would actually read *Romeo and Juliet*, say, and when they needed help with a word or didn't understand the plot, they'd look to the side for guidance. In fact, he hoped this would become his best-selling product. But it didn't do very well. Most students preferred the abbreviated version.

KAPPAN: What did teachers think of CliffsNotes? Did they like the version with the whole text included?

HAMPEL: Well, Hillegass claimed that 45% of all teachers approved of the regular version of CliffsNotes and that thousands of teachers bought them and used them in the classroom. He even hired a teacher to write a CliffsNotes guide for teachers on how to use CliffsNotes to improve their teaching. And from the start, some teachers did use CliffsNotes as a study aid, in the same way they might show students a movie version of *Romeo and Juliet* before digging into the text.

People have also argued that CliffsNotes are useful because they give students examples of what it looks like to write an analysis of a literary text. When asked to write a paper about a novel or play, most students have no idea what they're supposed to do. In fact, Spark Notes — which was created by Harvard students in 1999 to compete with CliffsNotes — usually includes a section called "How to write a literary analysis." And for many students, that's very helpful.

As for the other version of CliffsNotes, with the full text included, Hillegass tried hard to get teachers interested. For instance, he gave away thousands of copies at annual meetings of the National Council of Teachers of English. But they never caught on. I suspect most educators were leery of the brand. Maybe some teachers used CliffsNotes

in their classrooms, but my impression is that most teachers hated to see students giving in to this temptation to avoid the assignment.

KAPPAN: My recollection from high school is that the kids who read the CliffsNotes would mock those of us who actually read the assigned book. And isn't that part of the appeal, knowing that you've gamed the system? In fact, doesn't that make you the smart one, since you've found an easier way to get by? Historically, a lot of Americans have been hostile to intellectuals because they come across as weirdos and elitists who hate traditional values. But it's also tempting to see intellectuals as suckers, right?

If they were really so smart, why would they spend all this time poring over books?

The message was alluring: Do a little at a time, it won't be that difficult, and you'll make quick progress though the classics.

HAMPEL: Sure, there's some of that in the popular view of intellectuals. As I said before, Americans have always respected practical intelligence. We admire people who think

quickly, solve problems, and get things done efficiently. So it's easy to criticize people who've spent immense time and effort to develop their intellect. You hear that a lot when people talk about graduate school: "You're kidding, you took *eight years* to get your Ph.D.? What's wrong with you?" I took six years, and I've heard the same question/criticism, including my mother's advice in Year 6: "Bob, just get the damn thing done."

Part of the appeal of shortcuts like CliffsNotes has always been that you can put one over on the experts. They spent years studying their subject, but if you're smart, you can get their secrets for a few bucks. Some of the correspondence schools ran advertisements that said, in effect, our experts didn't have the help that we're offering you. Poor Norman Rockwell had to figure it all out on his own, but now people like you can become competent artists in no time. To many people, that was tremendously attractive marketing.

KAPPAN: You mentioned the eight-year Ph.D., which brings me to my last question. If Americans love educational shortcuts in general, then why have so few shortcuts been adopted by schools and universities, in particular? In your book, you describe a number of times when educators tried to shorten the amount of time it takes to get a degree, but those efforts never took off. Why not?

HAMPEL: Americans have always claimed that schools and colleges are inefficient. In high school, for example, why

do you have to study algebra if you're never going to use it in the rest of your life? Why do college professors make you sit through long lectures that often repeat what's in the textbook? Can't the B.A. and the M.D. degrees be combined in six years rather than stretched over eight years? It's not just students who feel this way — so do many educators. So it's no surprise that various reforms tried to accelerate and streamline education. That doesn't necessarily mean easier, though. As I explain in my book, most of these reforms aimed to make schooling “faster and harder,” so you earn the diplomas sooner if you are motivated, focused, and diligent.

In my book, I discuss Simon's Rock (created in 1966 in western Massachusetts) where the goal wasn't just to bring a few extraordinary students to college early — thousands of mature adolescents could start at age 16. The founder of Simon's Rock felt we underestimate young people and waste their time, so why not encourage them to leave high school after the 10th grade? That's what made Simon's Rock so interesting. It wasn't just a program for extremely gifted students. The idea was that almost everyone should finish high school and move on two years sooner.

But these reforms rarely spread, whether the idea was to make high school shorter, reduce college to three years,

or cut the time it takes to get a Ph.D. Many colleges and universities made these options available — and some still do — but only a small number of students have chosen to accelerate their learning in these ways. It's hard to say why that is, but I suspect that people take the traditional K-12 and four-year college model for granted. Also, people care about the nonacademic benefits of being part of a cohort, going to prom together, hanging out with close friends, and so on. Plus, most children and their parents see age 16 as the time to get a driving license and a part-time job, not to move away from home. It's true that in recent years, many more students have enrolled in Advanced Placement courses and taken advantage of dual enrollment, so it may look like we're finally beginning to see an acceleration of high school and college. But keep in mind that students don't have to leave high school early to take advantage of these programs. They can still go through the traditional rites of passage.

So, while Americans love educational shortcuts, they see school as more than just an educational experience. It's also a developmental setting, with valuable social and personal benefits. Most people don't want to rush through their childhood, just the books they are told to read. ◀

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