

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Institutional R2M: Good or Evil?

Sir:

In the last issue of *EfH*, Jason described the phenomenon of “Regression to the Mean” as a metaphor for institutional change and the phenomenon that many innovative institutions will, over time, revert to tradition.

I wish to challenge Jason’s basic premise, which assumes that the initial innovation was right, and that subsequent changes are regressive. Why should this be the case? Is it not possible, or even inevitable, that the initial revolutionary approach contained many untried elements some of which proved, in hindsight, to be ineffective? If so, then it follows that additional changes should occur, which might well look conservative and traditionalist.

Certainly, at McMaster, we can point to specific examples:

First, the school’s initial emphasis on self- and peer-evaluation was a reaction to the tyranny of examinations, and also an inevitable consequence of the 1960s culture when the school was spawned. We ended up replacing a tyranny with a vacuum. Surveys of graduates, dating from the first few classes, uniformly maligned the evaluation non-system. And our performance on the licensing exams went from bad to worse, because students didn’t know what they didn’t know.

Second, we initially placed little emphasis on knowledge, and heavy emphasis on skill—problem-solving, clinical reasoning, etc.—on the basis that knowledge was going to go out of date. In doing so, we massively underestimated the centrality of knowledge in expertise. We are now rediscovering strategies to ensure that students know enough to function effectively. But it has taken decades to move faculty away from the notion that knowing something is bad, and problem-solving is good.

When we attempted to rectify some of these problems, for example, by introducing progress tests, we discovered that there is nothing more conservative than a committed evangelist. We encountered enormous opposition—from both old faculty who were concerned that a “domino theory” would prevail and once we made one change toward the centre, the whole curriculum would revert to a traditional approach, and from students who, having invested considerable energy in understanding the hidden curriculum of the present system, were loath to have a new one introduced.

Changes did eventually occur. But they awaited the ascendancy of a new generation of pragmatists who were able to take a fresh look at the process. And we didn't lose the baby with the bathwater. We still do problem-based, small group learning about the way we always did.

In general, Jason's observations may well be true. But some qualifiers are necessary.

- (a) Innovative approaches are not always better than traditional approaches. And the more innovative it is, the more likely it contains elements which are worse.
- (b) Innovations may become the new "mean" to which others regress.
- (c) Regression to the traditional mean is not necessarily undesirable, but such changes are more difficult in places which have a reputation for innovation.

Sustaining innovation is sometimes desirable. But blind adherence to innovation can be every bit as destructive as unthinking traditionalism.

Professor Geoff Norman
Assistant Dean, Educational Research,
Health Sciences Centre, McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario L8N 3Z5
Canada