

When Good Ideas Go Bad

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If good ideas had expiration dates, it would make life a lot easier. When good ideas go bad they take us by surprise and it is not usually a happy surprise. The following three good ideas seem to have reached their expiration dates.

Deregulation is always a good idea. The electricity industry in the state of California is a case in point. In 1996, the California Legislature voted to deregulate the state utilities. Deregulation was supposed to produce competition among utilities and result in an array of choices and reduced utility costs for the consumer. By the summer of 1999, San Diego energy consumers had a preview of what was to become the California energy crisis. Dentists in Southern California experienced monthly utility bills that spiked to three times normal. What followed was a cascade of increasingly bad outcomes for the California consumer.

It is hard to admit when a good idea has gone bad. The usual reaction of those not immediately impacted is not to question the soundness of the idea. Bad outcomes are attributable to poor execution and extenuating circumstances. Eventually, rolling brownouts and soaring utility costs became common throughout the state. Dependable, low-cost electricity was not available. For dentists in the Bay Area, backup generators and procedure rescheduling became the norm. By the winter of 2000, we were all ready to agree in this case, deregulation was a good idea gone bad.

Term limits, what a great idea: Make it impossible for individuals to hold the same political office for an indefinite period of time. Throw the rascals out and



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make sure government offices are filled with people from outside the governmental establishment. Make sure each elected official knows his/her days are numbered. They would have to be nimble and responsive to their constituents' needs and desires. Term limits are a good idea until we find out the elected officials can never achieve the independence and longevity necessary to make the tough decisions.

Political power shifts to the lobbyist and PACs and those groups in turn finance ever-increasingly expensive election campaigns. What was supposed to produce new *everyman* candidates produces, instead, a game of musical chairs with candidates scrambling for assembly, senate, and county seats, according to how many years they have left and which seats are coming available. Term limits is an idea gone bad, but not bad enough for us to do anything more than tinker with it at this time.

Finally, there's problem-based learning in dental education. What a great idea: Make education more real. Hone the student's ability to research and discover on his/her own. Develop a skill students can use for the rest of their lives. Forget the lecture hall and its unnatural didactic model of learning. Let the complexities of case analysis draw on all the student's deductive reasoning

to explore, learn, and apply principles in a real environment. How could this not be a great idea?

Problem-based learning has spawned dental classes made up of small learning groups comprising eight students and one facilitator. The facilitator does not act as a teacher because the problem should drive the learning experience. The student researches and critically thinks his/her way to the appropriate treatment plan. At this point, this is where the good idea starts to go bad.

Think back to how unfamiliar and disjointed dental school training seemed at first. What we do every day seems so familiar to us now. But it takes only the task of training of a brand-new assistant to remind us of the nonintuitive nature of our activities. A good friend confided that he did not understand for months into dental school that we were waxing up crowns. He had never seen a crown. He was totally unfamiliar with the concept of a crown. For a long time, he thought the hours we spent in lab waxing and carving were all just an exercise in morphology.

Imagine now, a student who has never seen a distal extension removable partial denture. A facilitator told me he gave up, took pity on a student who was grappling with just such a concept, and brought in

an array of partial dentures so the students in the learning group could see them. Like fish trying to imagine fire, it was difficult for the students to knowledgably apply concepts so outside their experience. A sound grounding in the “how” of dentistry is necessary before the “why,” and “when” can make much sense.

The small learning groups also wreak havoc with the student-faculty ratio. In a class of 80 students, one teacher must be replaced by 10 facilitators. Excellent faculty abandons the problem-based programs for schools with traditional teaching models where their experience and knowledge can be appreciated and utilized. There is so much material to cover in a dental education; it is very helpful to have those with experience give some indication of priority of importance.

Problem-based learning as the dominant model for dental training is a good idea gone bad. It will always have an important role to play in the more conventional lecture-based model. In the form of case presentation, problem-based learning is how we all continue to learn every day.

The goal is still to provide dental students with the best education within a limited timeframe and to sharpen their heuristic skills, and better prepare them for a life of continued learning. Achieving that is an ever-changing challenge.

It is important to recognize when a good idea goes bad and try another good idea. The practice of review, re-evaluation, and change should not be limited to energy, politics, or dental pedagogy. We need to constantly check the expiration dates on our ideas and practices. Change is what makes us able to adapt, cope, and thrive. It is what makes us active participants instead of innocent bystanders. ■■■■

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