

From Norman Rockwell to Evelyn Wood: Shortcuts in American Education

Spring 2014 (April 1st to May 3d five week session)

Instructor: Robert L. Hampel, Professor Emeritus, University of Delaware

In this class, we will read and discuss one chapter each week of the instructor's 2017 book, *Fast and Curious*. Students may buy the paperback or receive the chapters by email for no charge. The paragraphs below describe the material in the book:

Robert L. Hampel, *Fast and Curious: A History of Shortcuts in American Education* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017). Available from Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and Rowman & Littlefield. \$32.00

"A Fascinating Money-Making Art Career Can Be Yours!" Norman Rockwell promised in an ad for his Famous Artists School, where 24 home study lessons would turn talent into cash. If you preferred to read, the former President of Harvard said you could devote 15 minutes a day to the classic books he personally selected. And if you were a high school junior *pained by Twain* or *mangled by Melville*, spend a dollar for the little yellow Cliff Notes version of the novel you might or might not have read.

Shortcuts. Professor Robert Hampel's book, *Fast and Curious: A History of Shortcuts to Education* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), starts with Norman Rockwell's correspondence school and ends with Evelyn Wood's speed reading classes. Along the way he looks at Classic Comics, Paint by Numbers, shorthand, Cliff Notes, phonetic spelling, Teach for America, three year bachelors degrees, law school at the YMCA, and other streamlined paths to education.

"I began the book when a friend predicted that legal drugs that would soon wipe out his field, educational psychology. Everyone would be focused and motivated with the right pills." Bob soon broadened the scope of his research. There were many ways Americans in the past tried to make education less onerous.

One cluster of shortcuts he calls the "faster and easier" options. Students would supposedly save both time and effort. Experts would reveal the tricks of the trade in short simple lessons. The precursor of what we now call distance education—correspondence schools—was the most popular faster/easier shortcut. More people enrolled before the Great Depression than started

college. Arthur Murray dance studios began as home study lessons; so did Charles Atlas' bodybuilding course. The largest school in the world wasn't Harvard or Yale; it was the Famous Artists and Famous Writers schools, enrolling over 150,000 students by the mid-1960s, including a blonde cheerleader who Rockwell had sketched in 1938.

A second cluster of shortcuts are the "faster and harder" options. In exchange for a burst of strenuous effort now, save time and effort later: that was the offer extended by many universities. Finish Harvard in three years? Get a M.D. degree six years after high school? Become a teacher without any courses in education? Unlike the faster/easier options, many of the faster/harder pathways were entirely legitimate, free of hyperbolic and deceptive claims. Students who wanted to save time could find the express lanes, but the eager few found that the majority of their classmates had no interest in picking up the pace. For instance, more than half of Harvard freshmen today could finish in three years or earn a masters in four; approximately 3% do.

Bob is often asked, "are they any shortcuts to learning? Is that possible?" In his opinion, the faster/easier shortcuts are often risky, and the faster/harder shortcuts require enormous focus that minimizes the side of education that lets us explore, make mistakes, and change our minds. He thinks that the best shortcut for most of us is a strategy: we need to approach our education as we would undertake serious pursuit of a sport. He recommends deliberate practice: for instance, don't just hit balls at a driving range, work on particular shots and you get advice from a coach. Otherwise the pursuit of learning (or golf) can become aimless and frustrating.

And beware of anyone who tells you that education can be effortless. Shortcut advocates often made extravagant claims. As they aroused hope, they encouraged unrealistic dreams. The shortcut that many ambitious people needed most was a keener awareness of inflated and disingenuous appeals designed to get their money.

