

## Glenn's Slightly Verbose Philosophy of Education, or, "Why Do We Have to Learn This?"

Perhaps this single most frustrating question posed to the typical teacher (usually in the form of a nasal whine emanating anonymously from the dark netherworld of the back row of the classroom) is: "why do we have to learn this?" It is this question, more than any other, that is likely to cause a teacher's jaw to tense, ears to redden, fists to clench, and voice to boom out explosively one of two responses:

- a) "Because I'm the teacher and I said so," or;
- b) "Because it will be on the test next Tuesday."

Yet, despite the apparent disrespect and affront to authority, it is a question that should be asked more often. Teachers in particular should constantly ask themselves this question about their curricula. Too often, we sit back smugly and pat ourselves on the back after designing a lesson that masterfully achieves its objective of, say, explaining consonant blends, without taking the time to ask ourselves: "Why do I want my students to know about consonant blends? What is so inherently wonderful about consonant blends that my students' lives will be enriched by learning about them?" If the answer, (as it is in this case), is "not a whole lot," then perhaps one should ask oneself: "then why am I doing this? What is my ultimate goal?"

Imagine the following conversation between a teacher and a student:

"Today we're going to learn about consonant blends."

"Why?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What is so inherently wonderful about consonant blends that my life will be enriched by learning about them?"

"Well, nothing, of course . . ."

"Then why are we doing it?"

"Well, uh, we need to know about consonant blends because they can affect the way you divide words into syllables?"

"Oh"

"Now then, sometimes you see groups of letters--"

"Why do we need to divide words into syllables?"

"It can help you learn to spell better. Also, if you're writing and you need to split a word onto two lines, you can only split it between syllables."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

"Of course not. That's why I'm here, Stanley, to teach you these things. Now, then, sometimes letters--"

"So what?"

"Excuse me?"

"You said I could only split a word between syllables. So what? Why do I need to know that? Why do I need to learn to spell?"

"It can help you to communicate more effectively in your writing."

Eureka! There it is! The real goal of the lesson is not to learn about consonant blends, it is to communicate effectively through written text. Now the next question becomes: "is this the most effective way to teach students to communicate effectively through writing?"

This is where I part ways with many teachers. Traditionally, lessons on consonant blends were viewed as building blocks toward effective writing. Once the students have all the building blocks mastered they can begin to write effectively. This is a skill building approach. Too often, however, this approach loses sight of the ultimate goal; the skills, or building blocks, *become* the goal. But the only value of the building block is as a tool to help achieve the ultimate goal. There is nothing inherently valuable about the building block itself. The building block is merely a means to an end, and by focusing too heavily on the means we often lose sight of the goal.

By focusing on the ultimate goal rather than the skill, teachers can often “leapfrog” over the skill-building drills. The process is simple: *determine what the ultimate goal is, and then make that the assignment.* As students are doing these assignments, certain skill deficiencies are likely to arise. That is the point at which you teach specific skills. There are three advantages to this approach. First, you are teaching a skill whose need has become apparent, so the skill is more relevant to the student. Second, because the skill-building lesson arose from a specific need, students have an opportunity to immediately put the skill to work for them. Finally, by letting the students’ needs determine the lesson, you are not wasting your time or theirs teaching them something they already know.

So what are the ultimate goals? Many of them are obvious. Why do we need to read? To gain entertainment and information through text. If we are teaching students to derive enjoyment from reading, then we need to start off by reading interesting and enjoyable things to them. The next step is giving them interesting and enjoyable things to read, and let them practice. When it becomes clear that an awareness of the rules of phonics would facilitate a student's enjoyment of reading, then those rules should then be given to the student. But the goal is in the enjoyment, not the process, of reading. If our goal is learning to derive information from text, then one can have the students practice research, but remember that the true goal is not to acquire specific information or to develop research skills. The goal is learning to use information to improve lives.

To teachers, math appears so eminently practical that it is easy to overlook how abstract it appears to most primary students. But most mathematics can be made practical to the students. The key is to determine the ultimate goal, and teach that, incorporating the math tools into the lessons as the needs for them arise. Instead of teaching fractions, build a bookcase. Instead of teaching decimals, initiate a classroom economy. Instead of teaching percents, charge taxes. Teach the goal, and use the tools.

Ultimately, all education is vocational education. We are helping children to acquire career—whether the career is as a plumber or a history professor or a brain surgeon.

Sometimes the ultimate goal of a subject is not readily apparent. It can often be recognized by asking oneself, “who uses this information in the outside world?” In general, if you don't know why you are teaching something, don't teach it; your students probably won't know either.

Many teachers bemoan the fact that ninety percent of what their students learn they forget immediately after the test. This should be a clue. We must overcome our desire to control the flow of information in the classroom. We do not need to be the final decision maker of what is learned. If most of what is learned is quickly forgotten, then what are we worrying about, anyway? What is it that we are trying to achieve?

As our society moves beyond the industrial revolution into the information age, it is

no longer possible for an individual to retain enough information to thrive socially and economically. It is time to move beyond the goal of simply imparting information. It is time to begin teaching processes: ways to approach problems; ways to assimilate and manipulate information; ways to view and interpret the world; ways to interact socially.

Basically, we have stuff we already know, stuff we haven't a clue about, and a gray area between these two different stuffs--stuff we almost know. It is in this area that most of our learning occurs. In order for information to be useful, there has to be some similar knowledge already there that the new information can be referenced to. Unfortunately, in every classroom, every student will have a different "gray area." As long as teachers maintain an ironclad grip on the flow of information and the definition of knowledge, a sizeable percentage of the class is doomed to fail or be mind-numbingly bored. Good teachers open the floodgates, not constrain them. It is important that all students move forward—push the gray area out into the haven't-got-a-clue range. Assessment should not be a routine of "repeat back to me everything I just told you," but rather a chance to "show me what you can do with what you've learned." All students have a wealth of information stored up inside them. It is the responsibility of the teacher to recognize it and to push it forward, wherever it goes.

Good teachers provide inspiration. The world is an interesting, exciting place, and it bears closer investigation. Helping students appreciate this is the ultimate lesson plan objective. The single most important gift a teacher can give their students is a passion for learning. The good teacher teaches the student to value the knowledge that he or she already possesses. Once the students learn to value their own knowledge, it becomes much easier to teach that student to value learning, and once that happens, our job is forever changed.

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