

Why Don't We Start from Students' Problems?

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»»» This essay is dedicated to some HMS teachers who do their best. «««

I am against a lot of things (of course, not everything) that are happening at the Hunter Middle School (HMS), a pseudonym for the middle school where my daughter goes. Then, why are we still sending our daughter there? Well, I think it is a great opportunity for my family to learn about the real-life problems involved in the mainstream educational setting. And the problems are what motivate us (at least me). So, the way I look at the HMS is totally different from most other parents. For example, let's think about our school district's motto, "Providing a Foundation for Life." And many other parents might actually *believe* in it. For me, it is more like "providing foundational problems for life."

One of the main complaints I have about the HMS (and many other schools too) is that students rarely have opportunities to explore their own interests. It is practically impossible to sustain intrinsic motivation in such an environment. And I think intrinsic motivation is the single most important factor in learning (e.g., see Kohn, 1993; Deci & Flaste, 1995).

The source of the problem, as I see it, is that virtually everything comes top-down from adults. It would be impossible to get really interested in anything when they are forced to do various things. This must be the same for adults too. I suspect you would rather work on *your own* problems than someone else's. So, if students start from *their own* problems, regardless of what, they *must* be interested (e.g., inspiring stories in Dennison, 1969; Harrison, 2002; Holt, 1976; Neill, 1960). Of course, most such problems will not show up in the list of topics prepared by adults. For example, students' "problems" may well include: not doing homework, avoiding rules, gaining more freedom, etc. In addition, these do not appear as "academic" subjects or even worth tackling. But are they really *not*? And what can we do about them? I will come back to this point later.

The adults involved in most educational settings already have their agenda. Some on the list may come from the state government (and other organizations) and some others, from their own profession, religion, etc. I think it is natural that adults have their own opinions about what students should learn. However, I don't think adults have the right to enforce them onto students. My ideal picture of facilitators (including adults who are normally called teachers) is that they are capable of identifying students' own problems and guide the students to "address" those problems and learn from that experience. Note that not all the problems are solvable. In fact, most interesting and important problems are open-ended and would not have

unique solutions. By the way, usual school problems with a unique, expected answer, in my opinion, has virtually no practical values. As for students' problems, capable facilitators will be able to face them open-mindedly and create a truly active learning experience for students and also for themselves. Of course, very few teachers are trained in this kind of learning and facilitation. So, I cannot realistically expect most teachers to be able to do such a thing right away, even if they are willing.

Still, I think it is important to explore the possibility of starting from students' problems; but there are many issues with the current mainstream approaches. First, if students are forced to follow adults' agenda, many of them must resent it from the very beginning. Of course, there are students who are already trained to follow adults' agenda, e.g., cleverly enforced by their parents (my impression is that the modern parenting practice too is excessively controlling). Some tactful students would follow the instruction, even if they are not interested in. Some students must have also "learned" that obedience is the key to a "successful" adult life. But what are students *really* learning through this kind of experience? The disastrous consequence of the current education practice is quite obvious. Very few adults remember what they are taught in school. Very few adults can make good use of the knowledge and skills learned in school. And for a lot of adults, whatever learned in school does not seem to be helpful for making a good decision, e.g., during elections. In a sense, the current mainstream education has never graduated from the antiquated form of factory worker education (in which they are trained to vote for, of course, the factory owner). So, this suggests that what is actually being taught in school is nothing but the ability to mindlessly follow instructions. The way in which teachers/parents educate students/children must actually be reflecting how these adults have gone through during their own childhood for the first place. Compare this to some of the most distinguished people in diverse fields. Many of them have resented and/or avoided school.

Now, back to the main point of this essay: i.e., starting from students' problems. Naturally, there are many questions about how to actually do that. Will we be able to "cover" the required topics? Will the students be able to learn *anything*? Can we really do such a thing within the current educational framework? And there must be many more questions. The short answers to these questions can be rather negative, well, *unless we change our framework*.

For example, if we start from students' problems, it is very unlikely that we can "cover" much of the state requirements (or anything on adults' agenda). My personal opinion is that those state requirements are ridiculous and nothing to do with *real* learning. If the facilitators pay a serious attention to what students need to learn, they must not be able to stand those state requirements.

Whether students can learn meaningful things from their own problems will undoubtedly depend on the facilitators' ability. If the facilitator has limited skills and experience in guiding self-directed learning, as in the case of most teachers today, they will certainly face a lot of difficulties. And the outcome can be disastrous. Unfortunately, this was most likely what happened when alternative, progressive education was emerging several decades ago. The general population was unable to see the fruit of such a movement. However, if the facilitators

can guide students properly, the amount of learning from this kind of learning experience can be enormous. The facilitators will need to help students clarify the nature of their problems, do the research, propose/implement/evaluate solutions. Such an activity may or may not involve areas with which the facilitators are familiar. The facilitators need to be honest about what they can and cannot do and willing to tackle problems that are not in their comfortable areas. Even after a lot of time, students may not be able to solve their problems. Actually, both the students and the facilitators must be prepared to accept that there could be no reasonable solutions to the students' problems. The important point here is that students *attempt* to solve *their* problem primarily *on their own* with the help of the facilitators. Facing the reality that many problems do *not* have an easy solution is also an important lesson.

Below, we take a look at a few possibilities, including an old story and some thought experiments. But before proceeding, here is a caveat. One commonly used technique to "motivate" students is "sugarcoating" whatever the topic. For example, our school district's STEM director always emphasizes to use games for learning math. This might work to some extent. But my opinion is that this kind of approach inherently depends on an extrinsic motivator and will never actually cultivate the students' real interest in the topic itself. The contrast would be somewhat like whether to prepare the food students want to eat or to sugarcoat the food adults want them to eat.

Now, here is an old story described by Carl Rogers (1980, pp. 274-275). He talks about a high school teacher called Dr. Anderson. Although this story is set in the context of a high school, not middle school, I think that the essence of this story would still apply.

Her courses have been titled Psychology, Human Relations, and the like, but they would be better labeled Learning Experience. The students discuss anything that concerns them--drugs, family problems, sex, contraception, pregnancy, abortion, dropping out, getting a job, the grading system--literally any topic. They have learned to trust her and one another, and the level of honesty and self-disclosure is amazing.

At this point, some of you may be thinking, "O.K., O.K., perhaps they get help in their personal adjustment, but do they actually *learn* anything?" They do indeed. Miss Anderson is a tremendous reader, and her enthusiasm for books is contagious. Her students are literally "turned on" by the chance to read the books they want on the subjects that interest them. And what books they choose! Some of the students are classed as slow learners, but they are reading Martin Buber, Søren Kierkesgaard, Erich Fromm, my books, Philip Slater, Wilhelm Reich, John Holt, A. S. Neil[I] (Summerhill)--you name it, they have read it. People tell her that these books are far too advanced for high school students: she just laughs and says that they love to tackle difficult challenges. They also choose the films they want to see, and plan community trips. They are excited, personally involved *learners*.

Miss Anderson has received the oddest and most flattering compliment a teacher could receive. In her school, if a student is found to have any connection with drugs, he or she is suspended and not permitted to attend school. There are quite a number of these. But they have found that if they skirt the parking lot, go in a back door, and take a

circuitous route, they can reach Miss Anderson's room without being observed. They know she won't throw them out, so they sneak into school to continue to attend her class. They are bootlegging their learning! And yet, people say that high school students "just aren't motivated."

This is an extraordinary example involving an extraordinary facilitator, who actually starts from her students' problems. Also note that this passage mentions the use of drugs. Do you see how Miss Anderson and Rogers himself would deal with that? They wouldn't think that the drug issue can be solved by, e.g., introducing a rule to limit one person at a time in a restroom. Unless we address the source of the problem, rather than trying to extinguish with superficial tools, the issue is guaranteed to stay.

Anyway, not just Miss Anderson, any keen facilitators will have no problem identifying students' problems. For example, suppose that there is a teacher in an ordinary public school setting. In no time, she will notice that most students don't like homework. In fact, not a single student may like it. So, she starts asking her students about their feelings and thoughts about homework (there are HMS teachers who do that). Some students might point out that homework interferes with their family time. Many students may have started to hate the subject because of the homework. And so on and on and on At this point, the teacher tells her students that homework is "supposed" to improve their academic ability (which is *not* strongly supported by research, e.g., Kohn, 2006) and asks them for their opinions. The discussion could go on in any direction. This might lead to a serious discussion about the students' future and the role of school in that context. This might involve some discussion of what learning is and how to promote it. The group might also explore the real skills useful in the future: e.g., open-mindedness, creativity, communication, cooperation, etc. Through such discussions, students could learn a variety of *real* skills, which they will need in their future, actually in school. But such activities will involve full of topics not prescribed in the state requirements. I can easily imagine some other adults/parents being extremely uncomfortable with such a scenario. However, I do think that this kind of experience is much more important for students than the state requirements.

If teachers did something like this under the current educational context, they could lose their jobs. Of course, that is not what I want. But there still are things teachers could do even in a conventional setting (some examples are discussed in Abeles & Rubenstein, 2015; our school district superintendent was receptive to this book when given as a gift). If the teachers can spare a few minutes at the beginning of each class, they could begin with checking in with each student. Anything new? Anything interesting? Any problem? For example, the teachers might discover why some students are often late to their classes. Even if there is no time to actually follow all the students' responses, just asking each student this kind of question can send the message that the teachers care about the students. The students will pick this up and will certainly respond to the teachers more cooperatively. At the same time, the teachers too could share their own stories, e.g., why they too are often late to school. Mutual understanding emerging out of such personal communication will surely lighten up the classrooms.

If the teachers learn that a student is experiencing a serious problem, they could refer that student to appropriate people, e.g., counselor. But the point here is that the *teachers* may start to understand more about why that student may not be able to concentrate on the subject matter. For anyone, including teachers, if there is a serious personal issue, it would be extremely hard to do something not related to the issue. By the way, this kind of attitude, i.e., to be sensitive to other people's situation, is consistent with an approach called Trauma-Sensitive Care or Trauma-Sensitive School (Craig, 2016). Across the country, a large number of organizations are realizing that paying attention to other people's circumstance first is essential for their mission. It is often referred to as "mental first aid." Note that first aid would be needed when people get injured. In this respect, it is actually more important to pay attention to why students are (mentally) injured for the first place. Unfortunately, the main source of injury may be home and school. Along the same line, just "actively listening" to their students (or any other people) can be an awesome skill for anyone (Rogers, 1961, 1980). In this era of over-controlling world of education, students must be lacking the opportunity to have meaningful conversations with adults.

Once the teachers hear what's in their students' mind, they could even adjust the way they teach their own academic subjects. This may take time and does not have to happen at the time the teachers hear their students' stories. But the teachers can start thinking if there is any relevance between their academic subjects and their students' issues or lives. My guess is that they would realize that most of what they teach has very little to do with their students' issues or lives ... sadly. But just even thinking about such a (potential) connection can be a huge step forward. And if, just if, the teachers can make any small connection between their students' lives and their subjects, there will be a huge impact. They can revisit the students' problem and introduce the subject materials from the students' point of view. That will surely make a much better presentation of the materials. The students are guaranteed to be interested in much more. Then, the students will most likely remember the lesson long after leaving school. A corollary to this point is that if the teachers teach just based on their agenda, pretty much *nothing* will stay with their students after leaving school.

In this connection, some of the activities that are not tied to the state requirements may provide a better opportunity for students to sustain their intrinsic motivation. For example, the HMS produces a musical show every year. While it is still directed by teachers, students have to think and act on their own much more than in their classes. They are not involved in a competition or motivated by materialistic rewards. I think that they would be happier and even learn more if they do this kind of activities rather than taking the required classes. It would be super, if the students have the opportunities to create their own musical *from scratch*, including the script and the music. Some people might say that that would be exceedingly difficult. But that could be exactly the kind of "problem" some students might be willing to tackle on their own.

So, even within the current educational framework, there are things that teachers can try. Even if very little can actually be done, the new attitude of the teachers may be picked up by their students. But in reality, most teachers may not be able to make such a progress. Many teachers

may not even understand what is being discussed here. On the other hand, some courageous teachers might do something innovative, even risking their jobs. In between, some teachers might try to find a way to shift their teaching styles little by little, whenever possible. And I know some HMS teachers who do just that. Even such a small change would be a catalyst for a significant improvement in the future.

I still think that it is essential for facilitators to place students' problem up front and start from there. However, how and to what extent this can be done is entirely up to the teachers. I simply wish them the best.

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