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Final Paper

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**The Art of Teaching**

What is the art of teaching? Does it still exist in this new world view of education that incorporates standards driven curriculum, accountability, and high stakes testing? Have, as professional educators, we lost our profession? Everyone from the federal government, to state/local governments, to the average business man on the street seem to know what is best for the education profession. Just run it like a business and we will get better results and improve test scores. What are the results that we are looking for? Are we trying to create the future thinkers of the world, or are we trying to create robots that know how to pass a standardized test. What is the future we are preparing our students for? If students could leave high school and get a job with the knowledge needed to pass the standardized test then current educational reforms would make sense. However, the last time I checked there are no jobs in the high-stakes test taking business, unless you consider the limited grader jobs. It seems, at least in my personal experience over the past ten years, that education has gone farther away from true learning with real life problem solving skills and more toward test preparation. We are judged on whether our students can pass a test and not the type of people we are sending into society to lead and mold our future. Do we as educators still have the autonomy needed to accomplish what we know we need to do as professionals?

These are some of the problems and questions that I will attempt to answer, even though there may not be an answer for some of them. First lets start with the question of “what is the art of teaching”. The dictionary gives the following definitions for art (1) "the activity of using imagination and skill to create beautiful things", (2) "a field or category of artistic activity ", (3) "a trade or craft and the methods employed in it ". We are artists who use our imagination and skill to create the future of life long learners who will go on to create beautiful things. However, in the current educational reform movements we are quickly loosing that art form. With the high-stakes testing and requirements of No Child Left Be Hind (NCLB) the teaching profession is loosing its autonomy, which is the heart and soul of our art form. In fact one of the schools that President Bush used in Houston, Texas as an example of how standardized testing works was actually lying about their graduation rates and hiding some of their drop outs (Grioux 215). It just shows that when numbers instead of learning become the main goal then the numbers will be made one way or another to avoid penalties. Teaching is about students learning not passing a pointless tests, it is about reaching the students where they are and creating a love and appreciation for learning.

To have teachers teach to the test would be like equate having all painters use a paint by number art book, and then wonder why the artists work is not up to their normal standards. The art of teaching involves not only knowing what to do and how to do it, but also knowing when to do it, and in what situations not to do it. There is a performance art aspect to teaching. Sure there are some teachers who just read off their pre-prescribed notes and give their worksheets out. However, I like to think that most of our profession is trying to create a true learning environment in which true life long learning can take place. There is also an art form to how the classroom environment is set up and the feelings of acceptance that students feel so that they can learn. The art of teaching consists of decision making in the moment, building a repertoire of techniques and skills, and knowing when to draw upon which techniques, that make up the art of teaching.

However we cannot ignore that there are some aspects of science in the educational field. The uses of researched best practices are important in teaching. Yet some on the outside and inside of education think they are the magic “cure all” pill. There is not magic pill in education or we would not have the constant bombardment of reforms that we experience on a daily/yearly basis.

As the dictionary defines science as (1) "the study and theoretical explanation of natural phenomena", (2) "a systematic activity requiring study and method", and (3) "knowledge, especially that acquired through experience". Yes there is an argument that science is part of teaching, and I would agree especially when looking at the third definition of science, as seen above. There is a knowledge that is required to teach, but the part I like the best is that it is acquired through experience. So I would argue that teaching is a combination of art and science that are not really able to be separated one form the other. Teaching is also a systematic activity requiring study and method. To be an effective teacher one does need to know their subject matter. However, where it falls short is teaching is not strictly about knowing what we are teaching.

If we strictly take teaching as a science then we get into what Taubman talked about in teaching by the numbers

“Where the teacher’s agency is remains a mystery. Within the discourse of the learning sciences, teaching is directed towards the achievement of predetermined and precisely defined learning outcomes through interventions that are targeted at students’ presupposed cognitive processes. If those outcomes are predetermined, often by someone other than the teacher, if they are assessed with instruments that are aligned with those outcomes, most frequently standardized tests, if the interventions are directed almost exclusively towards the achievement of those outcomes, then the teacher has less and less to do with the education of students, although that teacher is paradoxically positioned as the primary cause of a student’s success or failure to learn (191)

What he is talking about is that if teachers are given a scope and sequence that must be followed, and the test is the measure of this then what is the purpose of the teacher. If the teacher is not an important part of the equation and cannot be trusted with the autonomy to conduct their classroom as needed then how can we be held responsible for student learning. Part of the art of teaching as mentioned before is know when and when not to do something. If the scope and sequence tells you that you need to be moving on and you know as a teacher that your students are not ready that is a problem. As Taubman also states “Stripped of autonomy and intentionality, emptied of inner life, reduced to conglomerations of skills that are employed in environments in order to stimulate predetermined responses, teachers can easily be replaced by bureaucrats, mechanics, or machines (194).” If teaching was not an art form than this statement would be true, teachers could be replaced by a machine.

Unfortunately, that is already beginning to happen. Each school year as it gets closer to the time for the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) we are strongly encouraged to drill and kill in the hope of good test scores. In fact this year in my building there was mandatory study island sessions. Study Island is a computer program that we used as a drill and kill method to pass the OGT. My department chair set up a schedule for the department on times to go to the computer rooms for this tutorial program. As I observed my students working I had a few who would ask a question, but most would just guess till they figured out the correct answer. Very few would take the time to read the material available in the tutorial probably because it was more of a learning experience than a review. I found that it was for the most part a huge waste of time. Primarily because it is designed to be a review not to teach the information, if the students did not know the information what is the point of reviewing it. This process took away from instructional time, and doing meaningful activities that could have had more impact on the results of the test. If the drill and kill method of test preparation worked than Cleveland schools would have high marks on the OGT and not be in academic warning or probation year after year, at least the schools I have worked at.

Thinking of this waist of instructions brought to mind the great work that Schultz did and how he used real life problems to teach his students to become life long learners and problem solvers, and how he did not teach to the test. He used his autonomy to invert his curriculum which produced “…a classroom where the students, along with their teacher, developed the curriculum together.(11)” He went on to talk about that

In schools today, it seems that everything revolves around standards, accountability, and measurement. Rather than focusing on students’ abilities to learn through problem solving, student achievement is often assessed by performance on high-stakes tests supposedly aligned with state standards. These standards, developed by state boards of education, create an awkwardness students and teachers struggle with daily. The awkwardness stems from the fact that school districts, school principals, and teachers use these objectives as front-loaded points for lesson plans or checklists. Whereas planning curriculum in schools should have clear-cut goals, outlining specific expectations, including standards, absent form the interactions of particular classrooms is artificial. Standards do not take particular schools into account and, this, are often misinterpreted and misused in curriculum development. This incorrect use of standards makes attaining them unrealistic for classrooms with varying abilities and also forces learning into an impractical act. While standards prescribed by governing bodies may serve as guides and represent expectation, they do not reflect a comprehensive understanding of individualized needs and certainly do not account for what happens in classrooms as children problem-solve and interact with their learning(11)”

In his view having standards is not a bad idea just that they are there as guidelines not the curriculum. What he went on to do with his students and how they came up with the curriculum by figuring what they wanted to change about the problems that affect the community and them, of which the class came up with eighty nine of them, was inspiring. Once they determined what they were going to, which was get a new school, and the students started to ask how Shultz stated “..I often felt like the ultimate authority in the eyes of the students. I often felt that if my authority was compromised, I was not doing my job…..Wasn’t it my role to solve everything form a disagreement to a math equation?....For the first time as a teacher, I was on a more equal level to my students: Neither of us knew the potential outcome of out foray into politics. Just like the students, I did not know how to make this goal a reality (40)”. Shultz clearly demonstrated the art of teaching in what he did and accomplished with his students. The fact that he admitted that he did not have all the answers and demonstrated the ability to lean and work through the problem. Demonstrated to his students how to problem solve and not let not knowing stand in your way.

Which ties in with what Fouse was talking about in her research

“From the teacher’s perspective, students must be valued as individuals and taught to see themselves as individuals, constantly questioning their place and perspective, as well as their role within the networks of power that encapsulate them (167)”.

and,

“The purpose of critical pedagogy within schools is to help students define their

individual goodness and reality, not to make them carbon copies of the predominant

contemporary belief system of the dominant majority. The role of a critical educator is to

challenge the student’s presumed role in society. Thus, it is imperative that a critical

educator guide a student toward the analysis of his or her freedom, being, and

responsibility to others(145).”

Teaching to the standards does not allow for either of these to happen. If all we do as educators is teach to the test we are doing a disservice to our students. Which brings us to the true art of teaching- autonomy- without it teachers are not able to be the professionals that we/I am capable of being.

Schultz had that autonomy with his class and they produced great results. Not only did the he and his students learn valuable problem solving skills they accomplished more than he ever imagined. Sure, in the end their school was closed down, but working through all the road blocks and set back created a true learning experience. This experience would never have happened if the class simply followed the scope and sequence prescribed for their eighth grade curriculum.

Porter talks about this very topic when he states “The first problem is the lack of clear agreement among students, parents, teachers, school administrators, school boards, and the public about what constitutes most worthwhile content for students to learn (343).” If Shultz would have followed the curriculum than he would have left his students out of the equation, and they would have lost their opportunity for the amazing accomplishments they made. Porter made the comment that “Telling teachers what to do through state and district policies is seen as antithetical to empowering teachers and strengthening the teaching profession (345)”. Telling teachers what to do takes away our ability to do the things in our classrooms that we see needs to be done. All students do not come to us on the same page of the book or at times not even in the same book. So when we are told what must be covered the result is that it takes our ability to truly effect or students out of our hands. Which creates the problem that Porter speaks on “The effect is that more and more topics are taught for shorter periods of time, with little hope of student mastery(345)”. We are left to deal with the dilemma of a mile long and an inch thick or an inch long and mile thick. There needs to be a better balance of the two and the autonomy to choose the best way to get there.

Sheldon and Biddle do a good job of describing the perils of this type of instruction in their work when they listed implications of testing

1. Too much focus on tests can lean teachers to adopt a narrowed curriculum, dampening student interests and inhibiting critical thinking

2. Teachers incentive systems tied to student test scores often cause teachers to become more controlling, thus undermining students’ conceptual learning, intrinsic interest in the subject matter, and desire to pursue future education

3. Student incentive systems tied to test scores ruin students intrinsic interest in subject matter and reduce their willingness to challenge themselves

4. To the extent that accountability systems are seen as a panacea, they can distract us from dealing with the real problems of education (174-175)

Their assessment of the problems with the current reform measures hit the nail on the head. As educators it seems that we are not trusted with what we feel as professionals to be the best course of action for our students. As a good teacher knows one cannot just simply pull out the same lesson plans year after year, there is always adjustments that need to be made for the students that are in front of you.

Sheldon and Biddle even went further in giving better strategies for reform. They go on to say that “ This can be done, of course, through encouragement, challenge, and appropriate autonomy-support; that is, through minimizing the salience of external controls and potential sanctions and emphasizing students’ and teachers’ rights to be taken seriously, to participate in activities they consider interesting, and to understand the educational importance of other activities in which they have little intrinsic interest (176)”. Students grow if they can connect what they are learning with their lives. Standards prescribed by others do not meet those needs. They cannot because each school and child is different, and if there is not the autonomy to teach them than we are creating a larger problem than the one we are supposed to be fixing.

I like the analogy used by Sheldon and Biddle when comparing education to business, “… schools are not businesses run for profit, teachers are not assembly-line workers, and students are not commodities to be turned out with specific skills installed and ready to take their place on the assembly lines of America (165)”. We are dealing with the human element in our classrooms and must be given the autonomy to do so. They go on to say “we argue that a key goal of modern education must be to create a population of lifelong, self-directed learners: adults who posses sophisticated interests, and enduring receptivity to new challenges and growth, and a willingness to adapt to the changing needs of the workplace and society at-large (165-166)”. If we continue with the educational reform as it stands now we are creating a “disaster waiting to happen”.

Yes there is research that suggests that bribing and punishing students and teachers will increase scores, but it alienates teachers and students form learning (Sheldon 166). The research that they conducted went on to prove that when students are given rewards that they do the simplest task to gain that reward and then when there is no longer a reward to be earned they lose all interest in the learning process (Sheldon 172). It is our goal as educators to create life long learners who want to learn because they want to better themselves not for some extrinsic reward. The global economy that we are trying to prepare our students for will require them to have and use critical thinking skills and a willingness to learn something new to them. If we do not prepare them for this we are doing a great disservice to our students and our profession.

To be successful educators we need to have the autonomy to as Porter discusses when and who get the direct instruction versus the active student participation (344). There is not one right way to instruct your students and a mix is the best way to reach the students. The key is to keep them intrinsically motivated and have them understand identified motivation- when a person willingly chooses to perform a behavior despite the fact that it is not intrinsically interesting (Sheldon 167). At times intrinsic motivation is enough and the activities and lessons the students are learning make them want to keep learning. However, there is always times and subject matter where the students need to understand that they need to use identified motivation. For example when I have my students go over measurement activities at the beginning of each school year. Most of them are not intrinsically motivated to learn how to use the metric system to measure. However, I explain that we will be using all the skills learned later in the class during laboratory activities and experiments they understand the need. There is always a constant battle with getting the mix just right as an educator, too much direct instruction students lose interest. However, if the students do not have some of the basic skills needed then critical thinking activities at times do not work. Students get frustrated and no learning takes place. Our goal as educators should be to get all students to learn.

There seems to be a general theme in the literature that teachers can do the best job when given the autonomy to do so. There is nothing wrong with standards but as mentioned before they should be merely a guide line not the bottom line. It is difficult as a professional educator to not be treated as one. There is a saying among my colleagues in the halls of the school building that states “why ask the teachers we don’t know anything”. We feel that for any major decision that is being made we are the last ones to be asked, especially when the decisions being made will directly affect us the most. Teacher autonomy is not the cure all that some in the field claim to have, but it is part of the remedy to help our students excel in life. If we do not have the power to reach and educate our students the best way that we know how, then just replace us with computers and the results will be the same. A professional educator is just not a person who disseminates knowledge. We inspire, challenge, teach, coach, and expect the most out of our students. It is time that the profession was treated as such and allow us to do our jobs. The true professionals in the field hold our selves to higher standards than could ever be prescribed by standards or accountability form somewhere other than inside us. That is the art of teaching.

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