

EDUCATION WEEK

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COMMENTARY

The Deeper Purpose of Learning: Satisfaction

By Cord Ivanyi

*"When I'm drivin' in my car
And that man comes on the radio
He's tellin' me more and more
About some useless information
Supposed to fire my imagination
I can't get no, oh no, no, no
Hey, hey, hey, that's what I say
I can't get no satisfaction."
—The Rolling Stones*

I teach for a living. I've been doing it, with only a five-year hiatus to explore law enforcement, since 1994, so you could say that it is my true vocation. I've taught all kinds of students, from undergrads when I was in graduate school to 5th graders. I've taught at universities and community colleges, at alternative schools, and at prestigious college-prep schools. I feel that I have seen a good slice of the educational pie, and over time, certain questions have bubbled to the surface, some remaining there.

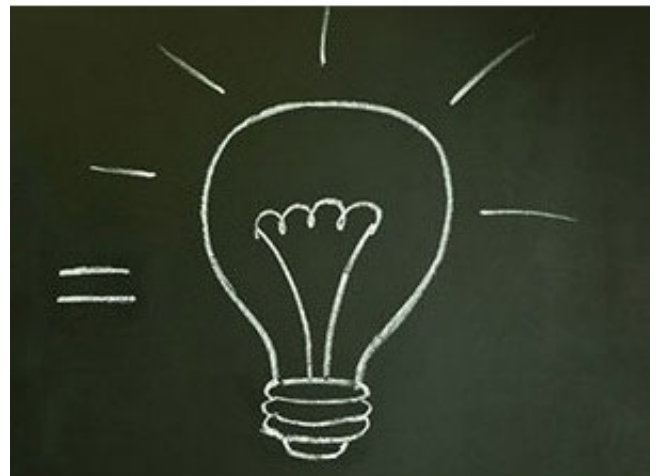
One of these is almost Platonic in its nature: What is best in education?

So many great minds have come forward with answer(s), from **E.D. Hirsch Jr.**, with his preplanned sense of cultural literacy, to **Howard Gardner**, with his theory of individual personal brilliance. I believe that these individuals, and so many others, have given the educational spectrum immense contributions; and yet, I feel we as educators spend an inordinate amount of time on the *what* of our subjects, with some of the better of us incorporating the *how*, and yet so many missing the *why*.

I know it is important for students to develop strong reading, writing, and math skills. But where during the study of individual subjects is a connective rationale? And, if there is such a thing, what is it, and how can we measure it? We live in a world obsessed with metrics. Everything fits into a grid, a spreadsheet, a chart, or a scale. Logic, something I have taught on and off for years, seems to dominate the landscape—without being acknowledged as the hobgoblin it often becomes, when we lose the sense of a greater meaning behind our endeavors.

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I teach reasonably logical subjects: Latin predominantly, with the occasional logic or rhetoric class thrown in. It is easy to take apart these subjects. A verb stem plus a tense sign plus a personal ending equals an action in time with a doer. In data analysis, an "A" proposition is defined as separate on an axis from "E," "I," or "O" propositions; using Aristotelian logic, a "material" cause can be distinguished from an "efficient" cause. I am good with these subjects, as they made sense to me when I was a student, and teaching them has driven them in some way into the marrow of my bones.

There is more to education, however, and many of us recognize it, perhaps even lose sleep over it. When we sit down to nail down a perfect lesson plan, we sense it, that twisting thing, the fabric of connections—we to our subjects, our subjects to our students, our students to us. There is much more back there. I have spent a long time thinking about that tapestry, and many times, I have felt I was just on the verge of some sort of revelation, only to lose it again in a wrinkle or a fold.

We teach because we know things, but that is only part of the reason for a good number of us. We teach because we believe in mankind, because we value connections, because we understand the dangers of ignorance. How often, though, do we derive satisfaction from what we do—not merely in a concept well taught or a lesson cleverly articulated? How often are we actually satisfied as teachers, and how often do we consider how to teach students to be satisfied?

In high-functioning schools today, there is a powerful push to rise to the top, to be "the best." The GPA is the currency, and students work furiously to get as much of it as possible. The more of the 4.0 pie you get, the better you are. We acknowledge this in so much of what we do. We love the "99ers." Do we celebrate the "76ers," though? In some measure, I believe that we try to do so, but all too often we can be seen looking at the A student as the model.

"When do we stop students and explain to them that education is a tool, not an end?"

Not long ago, I was talking with a friend of mine as we walked through Philadelphia. He is a prominent physician, who had the opportunity based on his ferocious academic capabilities to study medicine at any university he chose. As we walked through the courtyard of his alma mater, he said something that stuck with me: "If you get through med school, no one is going to look at whether you got A's or C's. If you get through, you are fit to practice medicine, and that's the bottom line."

How can we teach that students who strive and receive C's are not worse than students who don't have to try, but receive A's? Here is the crux of this ramble. How do we teach satisfaction? Is it teachable, and if so, what are we doing about teaching it?

I had a group of 7th graders accost me for giving them low 90s on a quiz, and even after I showed them where they went wrong, they continued to lament their grades. Off the cuff, I asked one of the plaintiffs whether, when she went to Dairy Queen and ordered an ice cream cone, she assigned a numeric score to the object she was purchasing. She shook her head. I asked her why not, for certainly some ice cream cones are better made than others, some have just the right curvature, just the right amount of topping. She shook her head again, and said, "It's just an ice cream cone." I continued, asking her how many things she appreciated without assigning a numeric value. She admitted that it was most things. I asked her why, then, was she losing sleep over a 95 percent score when I had clearly shown her where her errors lay. She said it was because 100 percent was better, and that was what she wanted.

Satisfaction is something I believe we need to begin considering. How well can our students use what they

learn, and do they feel satisfied when they do? How much of what we teach becomes irrelevant all too quickly, and what is the value of cramming for exams simply to regurgitate data that will soon be forgotten? What is the grand scheme of the learning process, and when do we stop students and explain to them that education is a tool, not an end, and that it is a tool by means of which they are supposed to find satisfaction? I am hopeful that some will have read my musings here and will have seen a glimmer of light between the curtains.

In a world of metrics, we must make a way for those with less to feel they can achieve satisfaction, and we must make it clear that those with the most have an obligation to share, and that therein lies satisfaction.

Cord Ivanyi is a Latin teacher at the BASIS Chandler School in Chandler, Ariz. He has taught for 15 years at various levels, from university Latin to 5th grade classics, with seven years spent teaching senior English at an alternative school.

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