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What I Know About Teaching And Learning (With Apologies To John Dewey)

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It is the beginning of the school year. Periodically I am asked, somewhat suspiciously, “What would you do if educational decisions were up to you?” I am sure they never will be, but just in case, these are my basic ideas about classroom practice. I call them “Alan’s Pedagogic Creed” or basic beliefs about teaching in the age of Common Core and high-stakes testing.

I borrow the title from educational philosopher John Dewey. Dewey, one of the most important thinkers about education in U.S. history, made a list of his basic beliefs back in the 1890s. He called it his “pedagogic creed.”



ELLIS ISLAND

An earlier wave of immigration arrives in New York.

Dewey's progressive educational philosophy was concerned with the need to educate people for life in a democratic society. He also wrote at a time when new immigrants were transforming the United States and life in the United States was transforming the new immigrants.

Key concepts for Dewey were experience, freedom, community, and "habits of mind." He believed that there was an "organic connection between education and experience," that effective teachers are able to connect the subject matter to the existing experience of students, and that they can expand and enrich students' lives with new experiences.

Most of Dewey's writing was heavily philosophical. However, in his pedagogic creed, he was much more concrete and practical. The ideas I present here are also intended to be concrete and practical, but as with Dewey, they are grounded in my broader philosophy of education and society, my experience working with students, and my goals as a teacher.

I am not calling the list a pedagogic creed because I think my ideas are on par with Dewey's. I am simply borrowing his approach and using it as a way to honor him for his seminal contributions to education.

Alan's Pedagogic Creed



WASHINGTON POST

Learning science through experimentation.

Engaged Learning: Imagine a world, or just a classroom, where people love to learn. A world where learning is exciting, where students are constantly exploring and trying to figure things out. Some of the most effective teaching is engaging students in projects where they make discoveries. Look at a baby and see how it engages its world, sorting things out, searching for patterns, seeing what goes together, and learning what to avoid. If one word could summarize the way young children learn, it would be curiosity. Instead of destroying it, teachers need to nurture curiosity and direct it so that students become engaged learners.

Education for Democracy: An important part of Dewey's approach to teaching and learning is that people learn best from experience, by actively doing, not by passively

listening. Students also learn better when they understand that what they are learning and doing have real world implications. I advocate involving students in a range of civics activities to promote active citizenship and democratic participation. I have been accused of trying to brainwash students, but the reality is I must not be very good at it, because I never “succeeded,” not that I ever wanted to. I did find a Youtube video by Teacher X that pokes fun at the idea that liberal and leftist teachers want to brainwash students. It is worth a look.

Standards as Goals: “Because I said so” or “It is on the test,” are the last phrases of desperation used by parents and teachers when all else fails and they want their directives followed— IMMEDIATELY. Why can’t standards be flexible, targets to achieve, but not at a precise time or in a specified fashion? Maybe classrooms can have enough room so that students can make choices about how they will learn something.

Constructing Metaphors: Everybody does not understand the same thing in the exact same way. One size does not fit all. Teaching means helping students discover or create their own meaning or metaphors. All human understanding is a product of making connections between old ideas and new ones—constructing personal metaphors.

Reading and Writing are Like Talking: Children learn to talk because they are surrounded by language. They discover that words have an agreed-on meaning and they can interact with others if they use the right ones. Of course we get better with practice, but we learn language by listening and talking. Children learn to read and write the same way, by being immersed in an environment where people use the written word to communicate. In learning environments where they are surrounded by printed material, where adults and older children model how to do it, and where children have a chance to practice, they learn to read and write. In fact, all meaningful learning takes place this way.

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Classroom Community: A place where everyone learns and students care about and take responsibility for each other. Rules are designed to help the community function more effectively and achieve its goals, so community members help to establish the rules and remind each other why they are important.

Caring Experienced Professional Teachers: The two most important qualities for successful teaching are relationship and organization. When students feel that their teacher cares about them as human beings, they respond more positively to school. When a classroom and instruction are well organized so that students understand expectations they learn much more effectively. In my experience it takes three to five years of hard work for a teacher to learn how to bring these qualities to their classrooms.

Last spring there was an excellent example combining engaged learning with education for democracy and classroom community at a high school in Montclair, New Jersey. Fifteen students decided to take action, even a small action, to improve the lives of people who are less fortunate than them. They formed a club, Baking for a Change. Working with the Essex County Human Needs Food Pantry, which provides food to more than 2,000 adults and 1,000 children, they bake custom-made birthday cakes for poor children in their community. A parent or a guardian can order a cake at the Human Needs Food Pantry, selecting a favorite color, interest, or hobby for decorations, and a favorite flavor for the cake filling. According to one of the club members, "We just want to make kids happy and have a really nice birthday. That's what the goal of the program is. For us, it's hard to imagine a birthday without a birthday cake."

Things that do not work:



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The classic bored classroom.

Test Fest: The United States is caught up in a wave of testing and data collection, but no one has ever demonstrated the testing regime improves instruction or student learning and better prepares them for anything other than taking tests. All students really learn is that school is torture.

Skill Spill: To avoid discussion of what is important for students to know and why, curriculum in the United States has deteriorated into a focus on discombobulated and detextualized skill acquisition, or what it is more commonly known as Common Core. But children improve their reading when they love to read and because they desperately want to know what will happen to Harry or Katnis in the next chapter, not when they are forced to dissect micro-components of text (whatever they are).

Drill Kill: This approach to teaching (drilling basic skills) is based on the assumption that students either did not understand something because they were not paying attention or because they are too stupid to think. If we make them do it over and over again, they will learn through repetition or to avoid punishment. The approach seems to work for certain physical skills (shooting baskets, marching, or hitting tennis balls) and practice does make people more proficient as musicians and artists (but probably not if they experience it as punishment), but there is no evidence that drilling helps people understand complex

ideas. On the other hand, constant drilling destroys enthusiasm and interest in learning. Drill kills.

Bore Snore: Boring teaching is a form of social control, not a necessary evil in conveying information. Its goal is to beat students into submission so they “behave.” Boring instruction is a pretense at education so schools can say, “we taught it but they didn’t learn it — therefore the problem must be them.”

Repeat Defeat: Extended school day. Summer school. Remedial classes — Drill ’em, kill ’em. Bore ’em, snore ’em. If at first it didn’t succeed, do it the same way again. Can you imagine a general or a football coach who employed this strategy? They wouldn’t last very long. This is a form of punishment, not an approach to teaching.

Fact Attack: If you say it fast — fact attack — the words almost rhyme. The myth behind “fact attack” is that somehow, if we present students with mountains of detail, cram it all in and threaten them with a test, it will all be absorbed. In chemistry, when a suspension is supersaturated, particles precipitate out at the same rate they are absorbed. The liquid just can’t hold anymore. In classrooms, most kids just give up. The others memorize data for the test and then trash it as quickly as possible.

Tech Dreck: If am right about how children learn and what does not work in classrooms, about the importance of caring teachers and classroom community, then the heavy investment in all the latest classroom technology and software is a BIG mistake. Students who are not motivated to learn are not going to be motivated by plugging them into “The Matrix.” They may be transfixed and controlled, but they are not learning to be thinking, creative, concerned, human beings.

Control Patrol: Metal detectors. Hall patrols. In-house detention. Bathroom passes. Five points off. Threatening calls home. Pile on the work. Give them another quiz. Test, test, test. Post the rules, recite, copy, and memorize them. Sign the rules. Your mother signs the rules. Rules, rules, rules, and more rules. And if you break the rules—WHAM!

Alan’s motto: You do not have to know this for the test. You need to know this for life.

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