One at a Time: What I Believe (for now) About Teaching, Learning, and Schooling
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Dr. Russ Hurd asks his education majors in Inquiry into the Profession (EDPF19525) to end the semester with an essay that details their perception of teaching. Kris Shearer uses the metaphor of a boy on a beach rescuing starfish to explain that teachers must not try to solve all the world’s problems. Instead, in their classrooms, they should work to make a difference “One at a Time.”

A young boy stands on a beach surrounded by thousands of starfish stranded in the sand. The boy picks them up one at a time and tosses them back into the water. An older gentleman walks to his side and says, “Young man, you are wasting your time. There are too many. You cannot even HOPE to make a difference.” The boy smiles at him, picks up another starfish and tosses it into the water, then says, “I made a difference to that one.”

---Anonymous

Teachers may sometimes feel like that boy on the beach, as if we are fighting a losing battle against cultural diversity in the classroom, learning difficulties, standardized testing, resistant parents, and politics in education. But, we must remember the most important component in education: the children. And, like that boy on the beach, we must strive to make a difference, one step at a time. During my field experience, I observed teachers who were striving to make a difference one student at a time; they treated their students as individuals and not as carbon copies of one another. Because of the dedication and stamina required, I believe that teaching is a calling not a profession. Profession, to me, suggests that one will do the minimum amount of work required, while calling suggests a dedication that goes beyond "job description." I believe truly effective teachers love learning and will never stop learning new things on a personal level. In addition, I believe teachers should be "guides" and not "leaders." A guide is authoritative, points a student toward a path of self-discovery, is on hand for advice, and answers questions students may have along the way. A leader, on the other hand, is authoritarian and drags students on a predestined path that leaves little room for diversion or discovery. As a teacher of literature, I hope I will not "spoon feed" interpretation to my students and, instead, give them just a little appetizer to make them hungry enough to nourish their own interpretive skills. I believe the most effective teachers adhere to the five tenets of constructivist teaching by seeking students' points of view, structuring lessons to challenge students' suppositions, recognizing that students must attach relevance to the curriculum, structuring lessons around big ideas instead of tidbits of information, and assessing student learning in the context of classroom investigations rather than as separate events (Brooks & Brooks 21). None of this will be easy, of course, and I may often feel like that boy on the beach tackling that pile of stranded starfish. However, as George Wood points out in Schools that Work, "there has [always] been a person or persons who began the process of developing a school vision" (235). If someone has to start a new trend in education, a dedicated teacher will not sit around waiting for that someone to be "someone else."

But teaching is not an independent entity; it must co-exist with the learning process. In fact, Wood solidifies the relationship between teaching and learning by pointing out that, "the most powerful relationship between a
teacher and student comes when they are both learners" (27). What Wood suggests here is that learning is a process that also involves exchange of lessons between students and teachers. I believe that learning should be both practical and applicable to everyday life, carrying relevance to the lives of both teachers and students. Both students and teachers bring prior life experiences to the classroom that affect not only how learning takes place but also what learning will be more easily accomplished and retained. Teachers need to know as much as possible about the prior experiences their students bring to the classroom, as well as engage in self-evaluation and disclosure, and this can be accomplished only through a continuous process of investigation and learning about each other. Thus, learning involves more than merely material printed in textbooks.

John Dewey defines schooling as "a process of living and not a preparation for future living" (22). In other words, schooling is not limited to 12 to 16 years of classroom experience. Instead, schooling provides (or should provide) a knowledge/skills base upon which to build a way of life, a life of continuous education. Our current system of schooling often appears to be more of an assembly line intent on cloning products, and whoever manages to stuff the most information into these products is the most valued worker. I prefer the constructivist approach to schooling. "Education," Brooks and Brooks assert, "is a holistic endeavor" (23). Constructivist education, rather than encompassing only "books learning" (Brooks & Brooks 23), assists students in understanding themselves and their total existence. Holistic health, once thought to be an "alternative" medical practice, is now recognized as legitimate as it treats the entire person rather than isolated, individual, and perhaps unrelated, symptoms. Why shouldn't education follow a similar protocol? Students will be better served if we educate them as whole beings rather than classify them according to skills or deficiencies in certain educational categories. As Wood states, "one has to wonder why we believe that just because kids pass a standardized test they know something" (192).

I have no doubt that I will often feel like that gentleman on the beach, as if the challenges I am facing are as insurmountable as quickly dispersing that pile of struggling starfish. But I also believe there will be days I, like the optimistic boy, will know that I can make a difference, even if it is only one at a time.

Works Cited

