Dr. Russ Hurd asks his education majors in Inquiry into the Profession (EDPF19525) to end the semester with an essay that outlines their perception of teaching. In his essay, John Huntsman considers how proficiency testing "serves to categorize kids into two distinct groups – winners and losers – based on their grasp of 'mainstream' curricula." After demonstrating the ineffectiveness of "teaching to the test," Huntsman explains how he will teach life-applicable knowledge in his classroom so that the degenerative rote memorization teaching model will be rendered obsolete.

Remembering my youth, I know from experience that children enter elementary school with their own preconceived notions, and that the dominant notion is one of good old-fashioned healthy curiosity. Now, consider a very young child encountering a big dog for the first time; she has no reason to fear the dog. Similarly, children have no real reason to fear school, because, much like the child meeting the big dog has never been bitten, children who first enter school have not been harmed there either. Unfortunately, however, sometimes the big dog does bite the child, forever scarring not only her flesh but her psyche as well. Even more unfortunate is the fact that many children attending school will end up like the bitten child, forever afraid of the concept of school and forever scarred by the memories of their failed encounters within its walls. Now, for the sake of these "school-bitten" children, society must seek out this beast roaming the hallowed halls of the education system, for it does not bite with teeth per se, but it does tear children apart. It tears them apart from their dreams! Fascinatingly, some children do not view school as this beast, this ravager of self-esteem, but see it instead as a place of immense opportunities wherein their dreams can and do come true. As a future educator, it will be my job to try to prevent any child from being "school-bitten," and to try to bring out each child's individual talent to her fullest potential, based on my impressions of schooling, learning, and teaching.

First, schools must be a safe haven for children where they can feel good about themselves. Much of the literature we read in class focused on this concept and it seems elementary in its simplicity; so why is it so hard to facilitate? I think it is because society is impatient, not giving education reform a real chance. Society is looking for education to save our country's future, and I think this is possible, but not by the methods we are employing today. We live in a sound byte world where information is immediately accessible and people seem to believe that changes in education should be immediately apparent and appropriate. Education in this country has already undergone some pretty big changes, but the difference before was that it took some time. It did not happen overnight, and it will take some time now, too. However, by categorizing students early in their careers, we run the risk of stifling creativity forever, not to mention losing out on our most precious resources—the kids themselves. Proficiency testing serves to categorize kids into two distinct groups, winners and losers, based on their grasp of "mainstream" curricula. Unfortunately for children taking proficiency tests, we learned in a text by Cushner, McClelland, and Safford (2000) that according to Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory, human intelligences are not made up of just two types, but instead eight or more (p. 328). Cushner and his colleagues also point out that aptitude test results of college students do not necessarily predict their degrees of success later in life, and that while this information may be disturbing to some involved in education (and high-stakes testing), it is "refreshing news for those looking to bring about change to a system in need of redesign to match changing world conditions" (p. 326). But, unfortunately because of outside pressure, schools are catering to the whims of agenda-minded politicians hell-bent on what they term "minimum standards," and therefore ignoring talents not regarded as "mainstream," as though any other talent will have nothing of value to offer society. Consequently, many parents buy into the hype propagated by the media, which portrays modern-day
educators as a bunch of know-nothings with their heads in the clouds, seeking to transform their children into cloud-dwellers as well. Nothing could be further from the truth, but this contempt for real education reform is pervasive and persistent. As a person responsible for the future welfare of children, I would argue that the time to change our education system is now. We are no longer living in an agrarian or an industrial society in this country, but we are living in a world that is rapidly changing. To ignore these changes and continue schooling kids to prepare for an economy that is not only quickly disappearing, but will most likely be gone by the time they enter the workforce is not only foolish, it is downright irresponsible! So, in my classroom, the first thing I would try to do is investigate individual strengths and form work groups consisting of the best mixture of these diverse talents in hopes of breeding an environment of self-confidence, cooperation, and mutual respect. Next, I would welcome and encourage parental and community involvement whenever and wherever possible, with an open-door policy to parents at all times. I think that people who are involved in the education process feel less contemptuous of it because they are being given a voice in it, which brings me to my next topic—learning.

Learning for the sake of someone else is never an easy sale. Learning for yourself, however, because you are interested, intrigued, enthralled with the process, now that is a different matter! Therefore, learning should always be made relevant to real life, so that kids can see the importance of their curriculum in the future, in their own lives, or, for that matter, even in their present-day lives. In Inquiry class we learned about some fantastic programs that were started to help children learn relevance in education, some of which have blossomed and grown into programs that have become entities unto themselves, enriching not only the lives of students, but even benefiting members of their communities as well. One such endeavor, Foxfire (p. 57-66), praised by researcher George H. Wood (1992), began as a school newspaper, as a means to pique student interest and involvement in the learning process in hopes of circumventing the drudgery of “teaching to the test,” which otherwise seemed a necessary evil of standardized testing. After three decades, the program is still alive and well, bragging a vast following utilizing mass technology via newspapers, television, and the Internet.

Likewise, learning should be the starting point of democratic ideals as well. Giving kids and parents education choices, themes, and projects can only help create an awareness of these concepts of relevance and democracy. Wood explicates, “Openness, self-governance, memory, and hope...are not the buzzwords of the legislated-excellence school reform movement. But they are crucial if we are to take seriously the charge that schools become places where informed, involved, compassionate, and democratic citizens are nurtured” (p. 119-120). In order to learn relevance, engender democratic ideals, and encourage parental involvement in my classroom, I would invite and encourage parents to create their own short presentations, detailing the relevance and impact of education in their own jobs, and the significance of the different intelligences they must utilize in order to perform their duties effectively on a daily basis. What better way to emphasize the importance of multiple intelligences to kids, and, at the same time, give their parents pause to consider why these concepts are not being emphasized more often and in more classrooms?

Now, teaching is probably going to be the most difficult of these three parts of education to bring into the twenty-first century, but it can and really must be done. It will no longer be enough for a teacher to open up a kid's head and dump in facts and figures, which is what is happening a lot nowadays. Researcher Peter Cookson (2001) writes that “Education is not a product to swallow without reflection and struggle, nor is it information to pour into an awaiting, but empty, brain,” and that “Sanitized knowledge is the polar opposite of the wildness of heart that fires all genuine learning...the opposite of training, regimentation, and standardization” (p.42). Simply teaching for a kid to take a test is a bad way to try to make critical thinkers out of children. They will memorize facts and figures in order to score well, but will quickly forget them, and may never be able to assign any significance to what they have learned (or should I say “not learned?”). Unfortunately, prospective teachers coming out of college, including myself, were taught in school settings and with curricula that support rote memorization and test-taking; for that matter, it is still alive and well at the college level. Some colleges' and universities' courses still gauge students' learning by how much they can recall from memory rather than how much they can apply of what they have learned about unfamiliar new circumstances—a viable, innovative alternative which would help bolster the crusade for abstract thought. Fortunately for its students,
Kent State University stresses the value of relevant, thoughtful extrapolation from the bulk of its curricula, with many courses mandating reflective writing assignments in order to achieve passing grades. For schools where this is not the case, perhaps this is where we need to start, right here at the heart of higher education, the proving grounds of future educators. If we, as a society, stress the importance of a challenging, relevant, thought-provoking curriculum to college students who are already going about the business of enriching their lives and initiating positive social change, then maybe we have taken the first step toward a possible reality called education reform.

However, one more point needs addressed. As discussed earlier, this type of testing often just serves to divide the room along competitive lines, with children being labeled winners or losers based on their test scores, which also helps to breed intolerance, another beast in need of vanquishing from education. In the Cookson (2001) article, he points out that tolerance does not come naturally to anyone and that it must be taught to everyone. He writes that “the American Dream was not forged at academic seminars,” but instead “by those who dared to dream of an egalitarian society and were willing to take great risks to make that dream come true” (p. 45). As future educators, it will be our job to teach tolerance, and teach it well. No matter what we believe personally, we must not fail our students’ interests in this important matter. Only through tolerance toward, and in fact, celebration of, diversity can we hope to survive as a nation, and indeed, as a world.

Therefore, in conclusion, in order to evaluate students in my classroom, I would do everything in my power to avoid tests, if possible, and would instead try to utilize a format much like a few classes I have enjoyed this year, including this Inquiry class. The inquiry format cannot help but lead to independent, critical thinking. And if topics are not stimulating enough one day to induce complete participation, they can be changed repeated until every student’s “hot button” has been pushed by a particular subject, drawing forth from each a passionate, well-thought-out argument or opinion. I would also try to implement a democratic system of curriculum choice wherein each student’s input would be considered and valued. And lastly, I would strive to coordinate the chosen curriculum with activities that would deliver tangible relevance, thereby engendering peak interest and a lifelong love of learning. This predilection toward abstract thought, relevance of learning, democratic ideals, and all of their accompanying benefits are what provoked our founding fathers to risk life and limb to ensure liberty for themselves, their families, and us, their heirs. Now, truly, the time has come for us, as educators, to stake our futures and reputations in our endeavor to rekindle in our society a love for learning, democratic idealism, and critical thinking, and for this purpose we will soon have the ultimate tool—our classrooms. In the hope of rescuing or preventing even just one “school-bitten” child, I believe it is a risk well worth taking.

References