

Challenging The Unchallenged: Gifted or Not

By Larry M. Arnoldsen

A Public Junior High School

I am reporting an experiment in which I became the teacher of 36 14-year-olds in a 9th grade U.S. History class two months into the school year. At that time and since then I had been working in teacher education at BYU. A public school teacher had challenged me to demonstrate how to successfully engage in learning students of his that were refusing to learn. We had become acquainted while working jointly with student teachers.

The day I began I handed out to the students a blank 3" X 5" card on which I asked them to write their name. After their name they were to write who their hero was if they had such. We discussed this briefly. It could be a parent, sports figure, a person deceased or living, etc. Such information would help me in working with them they were told.

Next, they were to write yes or no to the question, "Do you like history?" Thirty-four of thirty-six said, "No!" Next they were to answer the question, "Would you like to like history?" Thirty-four of thirty-six said "Yes." I then said,

During the next 30 days the number one goal is to have all of you come to like history. The second goal is for each of you to receive as good a grade or better than you have been used to getting in social studies. Now, if these goals can be achieved--have you like history and have you get as good or better a grade than you've gotten in the past, what will it be worth to you? What will you be willing to give or do in exchange? Whatever it is, please turn the card over and write down what you'll give or do.

Half the kids said they'd "cooperate". Three boys said they'd clean all the windows in the classroom. Some offered various amounts of money, very small amounts. Then I said, "Do you have anything you would like to ask me?" Some immediately asked, "Yeah, how are you going to do it?"

An Individual Learning Plan

At that point a handout previously prepared was distributed. They began to look through it. I asked them to look at page one. They were to do what it told them to do. First, they were to put down their name. Second, the grade they hoped to receive. Third, what they would like to learn. At this point they were to turn to page 2 and look at the list of topics. There were 60. Fourth, they were to make a plan of how to learn what they had chosen to learn. On page 3 were sample plans. Fifth, they were to decide how the grade for their study would be decided. Page 4 had some examples: oral or written reports; reports to myself or the class as a whole. After they had filled out the first page and it had been signed by me, they were to proceed with their study. They were also to complete a duplicate of page 1 which was page 5. One copy was for me and one for them.

There now arose some questions and discussion. It was pointed out that the history class would consist of each of them doing what each had planned. I, of course, would be helping them at every step. Yes, they could work with other students on a topic. What if one of the 60 topics didn't interest them? Then let's add to the list. What would they like to add? What did they have in mind? Yes, they could go to the library. No, a topic didn't have to be a standard history topic.

A student teacher stayed in the classroom when I went to the library and vice versa, since all of the students weren't in either place at one time during some days. A few students could not decide on a topic the first day. I said to think about it that night. We could also work on it the next day.

Lunch the First Day

At the end of the first class period I had noticed two girls who seemed the least enthused about what had been outlined to the students. As the bell was about to ring the students began to line up at the door to leave. I went over to the two girls, took each by an arm and moved them out of the line. I then asked them if they were going to lunch (this was the end of fourth period). They said they were. "Are you going to the lunch room to have school lunch?" I asked. They said yes. I asked if I could go to lunch with them. They looked puzzled, but agreed. I went with them. I stood in line with them. I sat for twenty minutes with them in the lunchroom. We did not talk about the class. We talked about them and their families. "How long have you lived here?" "What does your father do? Your mother?" They asked me some personal questions. Next day in class they were my two best friends.

Film Evaluation

The next day a film had been scheduled by the regular teacher. He asked if I wanted to use it. I said, "Yes." It was about the United States Constitutional Convention. The next day as class began; I told the students I wanted to show them the first few minutes of the film. I'd then stop it and see how many would like to see the rest of the film. This was done and when I asked by a show of hands how many wanted to see the rest of the film, only one hand went up. I then pushed the projector over into a small side room, had the girl accompany me, and turned it back on with a wall serving as a screen.

The Student's Interest

The method in all of this was to have each student begin a study of history at a point of high interest and then to have enough flexibility in how they could go about it to allow for a variety of approaches. I believe almost any student could be a gifted student if the curriculum and instruction is organized in response to each student's needs and interest. Gifted students generally have a very responsive and stimulating home environment which puts them ahead of their peers academically, intellectually and socially. The "ungifted" need a similar opportunity.

An educational revolution is upon us. One of the most important events of this peaceful but profound revolution is our dawning discovery that the child is born comprehensively competent and coordinate, capable of treating with large quantities of data and families of variables right from the start.

Buckminster Fuller said,

"Every well-born child is originally geniused, but is swiftly degeniused by unwitting humans and/or physically unfavorable environmental factors. 'Bright' children are those less traumatized." ¹

After there has been some successful individual study, there can be some reporting of the study back to other students, thus increasing the learning of all. The teacher would, of course, be aware of each student's work because of individual involvement with each student.

Fashions

After the girl finished watching the film, I met with her briefly and asked her what she liked about the film. She said, "The clothes they were wearing!" I found out that her dream was to one day be a fashion designer. Her favorite class was home economics. She was always trying to get out of her other classes to go back to home economics. I asked her about studying the history of American fashions. How did

¹ Fuller On Education, Buckminster Fuller, 1969, p. 86.

that sound to her? Also, what about dress styles and dress codes? Should there be such, and in the school she was attending? What about the individual? Should an individual have the right to wear what they want or don't want? What about nudists? Should people be able to go about nude if they wished? She agreed to take up the topic of clothing in history, U.S. History, and to consider some of the questions posed.

The Old West

One student had a funny old hat with him all the time. He seemed to have no friends. I learned that his dream was to have been an early day frontiersman or mountainman. He had purchased a muzzle loading rifle reproduction in a kit form. He had then assembled the rifle. It was easy to come up with a topic for him and, strangely enough, it wasn't one of the list of 60 topics.

Airplanes

A group of eight boys who had been most unwilling to learn history and were constant discipline problems turned out to all be friends and were all, together, into the making of model airplanes. It mostly amounted to putting together kits that they purchased. They had not liked any of the 60 topics, but became very excited when it was suggested that they take up the topic of the history of aircraft. They could also bring their models and work on them at school. In fact, a small 10' X 12' room would be set aside for their work room. There were two such rooms with glass walls between them and the classroom. They had been designed for small group work, but had long ceased to be used for such. They were mostly used for storage. We began to use the rooms for classwork. The eight boys were soon coming to class as early as possible and leaving as late as possible.

Sailors

There were three boys who were friends and who had a dream of being submariners when they were old enough. They wanted to be in the U.S. Navy and be on an atomic submarine. They wanted to go under the north pole as they had heard some subs had done. Submarines were not on the list of 60 history topics. It was added to it, however. I suggested to them that they study the history of submarines. Did they know much about that? No, they didn't. Did it sound like something they'd like to learn? Yes, it did. When was the first submarine invented? Who invented it? Why? These and other similar questions were posed to them on the topic.

Cowboy Music

Three other students, a girl and two boys, wanted to know if they could study about the Sundance Kid. Could they listen to the movie sound track in the library? They'd seen the movie. "Yes," I said. We'll add that to our list.

John F. Kennedy

One boy wanted to study the assassination of John F. Kennedy. We added that to our list.

Poetry

Three girls wanted to put together a "report" of poems from various periods of American history. Were they acquainted with Carl Sandburg's poetry? They were not. They were shown his books on Lincoln and the U.S. Civil War.

Developing Scholarly Skills

The idea was to begin with anything a student would find intrinsically motivating, make it as close as possible to the intended curriculum, and help the student develop "scholarly" skills with those skills becoming more sophisticated as time went on. Then, from time to time, have more and more of the students report and share with the other students what they were learning.

Sharing Learning

For example, a few days after the model airplane boys had set to work I asked them if they'd be willing to take some time in the future and tell why they were interested in airplanes and what was so interesting about them. They said "Sure," if I wanted to know. I said, "How, about next week, on Friday?" That would be about 10 days from then. They said sure. I asked them if I could invite the regular teacher to listen also. They said, "Sure, if he wants to." I asked if I could tell the other students about it and if any were interested, could they listen also. "Sure, if they want," the boys said. I checked with the other students. About half said they would like to be present. When the day came the eight students had got to class early and had hung planes all over the classroom from the ceiling. At the front of the room they had placed additional planes completely covering a long table. Half the class, the other teacher, the student teacher and myself gathered in front of the table. The boys were seated in a row behind the table.

After we were assembled, the students looked at me for direction. I told them to just proceed in any way and in any order they wished. After a little hesitation, one of them picked up a box that a model had come in and read what was written on the side of the box. The plane was a German Messerschmitt. After a moment of silence the boy picked up another box and read what was on its side. It was a British Spitfire. What the boys read had pointed out that the planes were W.W.II fighter planes, and that the German plane was better than the British plane. At this point I raised my hand and said, "Is that really true? The Messerschmitt was a better plane than the Spitfire? If that was so, then why did Germany lose the war?" These boys looked at each other, smiled and then one of them began to tell us why Germany lost the war. I was startled with what I was hearing. What I was hearing I had not learned until I was an upper division student at the university. I turned and looked at the regular teacher. His face had a look of disbelief on it. It was hard for him to reconcile what he was hearing with these boys' earlier disinterest in history. I said to the boys, "Where did you learn this?" One boy reached behind him, picked up a book, held it up for us to see and said, "From this." The book was, *Airbattles of World War II*. I said, "Where did you get that book?" He said, "From the university." The junior high library had little information on aircraft. A friend who was a university student had gotten the book for them plus two others which the boy reached back, picked up, and showed to us. These boys it turned out would get together at one another's homes after school and work on the models. Since they had been told they could do this as their history study topic they had also gotten books to learn more about the history of aircraft. At the various homes one would read from a book out loud while the others worked on the models.

What is History?

After I had been "teaching" this class for about a week, the regular teacher said, "I'll say one thing, you've sure got every student involved in study. But do you call this history, U.S. History?" Many educators would say the same thing, "You call this history?"

What is Education?

What education is and how it takes place must be reconsidered. That amazing "Americas foremost social psychologist" who never went to school of any kind, Eric Hoffer, has said: "It is evident, therefore, that if we are to awaken and cultivate the talents dormant in a whole population we must change our conception of what is efficient, useful, practical, wasteful, and warned not to waste our time, but we are brought up to waste our lives."²

We must change our conception of what history is and of what a history class should be. We must change our understanding of what learning is of the nature of knowledge. We must change our ideas of

² "Reflections", Salt Lake Tribune, 1968

what school should be. Consider what some very distinguished thinkers have said on these matters. The great American historian Frederick Jackson Turner said, "In this happy way I got a new idea of history. It was no convention agreed upon to be learned by rote, but just the infinitely varied action and thought of men who in past times had lived and struggled and died for means or great objects. It was in short, an aspect of life itself, and as such something to be probed into, thought about, written about." (This was in the 1890s by the way.)³

The Nobel Prize winning Bertrand Russell has said, "Freedom to learn ought to exist for more than at present (1920s). . . I should allow every boy and girl who so desired to specialize from the age of fourteen."⁴

The great mathematician Alfred North Whitehead said, (also in the 1920s) "The habit of active thought, with freshness, can only be generated by adequate freedom. Undiscriminating discipline defeats its own object by dulling the mind. If you have much to do with the young as they emerge from school and from the university, you soon note the dulled minds of those whose education has consisted in the acquirement of inert knowledge. Furthermore, this overhaste to impart mere knowledge defeats itself. The human mind rejects knowledge imparted in this way. The craving for expansion, for activity, inherent in youth is disgusted by a dry imposition of disciplined knowledge. The discipline, when it comes, should satisfy a natural craving for the wisdom which adds value to bare experience."⁵

Another Nobel winner, the one and only Albert Einstein said regarding the "traditional educational program," (1890s) "One had to cram all this stuff into one's mind for the examinations, whether one liked it or not. This coercion had such a deterring effect on me that, after I passed the final examination, I found the consideration of any scientific problems distasteful to me for an entire year."⁶

The great William James explaining how human expertise is developed said, (1892) "If we could recall for a moment our whole individual history, we should see that our professional ideals and the zeal they inspire are due to nothing but the slow accretion of one mental object to another, traceable backward from point to point till we reach the moment when, in the nursery or in the schoolroom, some little story told, some little object shown, some little operation witnessed, brought the first new object and new interest within our ken by associating it with some one of those primitively there. The interest now suffusing the whole system took its rise in that little event, so insignificant to us now as to be entirely forgotten. As the bees in swarming cling to one another in layers till the few are reached whose feet grapple the bough from which the swarm depends; so with the objects of our thinking,--they hang to each other by associated links, but the original source of interest in all of them is the native interest which the earliest one once possessed."⁷

America's "greatest creative genius," Buckminster Fuller, has said, "What I describe as positive design-science reformations of the environment must now be undertaken with the intent of permitting our innate faculties and facilities to be realized with subconscious coordinations of our organic process. Reform of the environment undertaken to frustrate our innate capabilities, whether the frustration be caused by the inadequacies of the physical environment or by the debilitating reflexes of other humans, will permit humanity's original, innate capabilities to become successful. Politics and

³ "Wisconsin Historian: Carl Lotus Becker", Great Teachers, Houston Peterson, 1946, p. 238.

⁴ From Skeptical Essays, Bertrand Russell, pp. 333-334.

⁵ The Aims of Education, Alfred North Whitehead, 1957, pp 2, 31.

⁶ Creator and Rebel: Albert Einstein, Banish Hoffman, 1972, pp. 2, p. 31

⁷ Talks To Teachers and Students, William James, p.77.

conventionalized education have sought erroneously to mold or reform humanity, i.e., the collective individual." ⁸

One of the foremost researchers into human learning, Jean Piaget, said, "The goal of intellectual education is not to know how to repeat or retain ready-made truths (a truth that is parroted is only a half-truth). It is in learning to master the truth by oneself at the risk of losing a lot of time and of going through all the roundabout ways that are inherent in real activity.

"If this must be brought out regarding the methodology of mathematics, how much more reason there is to appeal to activity in teaching languages, geography, history, natural sciences, etc. That is, every field where knowledge of facts has no value except in relation to the processes of discovery that enable it to be absorbed.

"No real intellectual activity could be carried on in the form of experimental actions and spontaneous investigations without free collaboration among individuals--that is to say, among the students themselves, and not only between the teacher and the student. Using the intelligence assumes not only continual mutual stimulation, but also and more importantly mutual control and exercise of the critical spirit, which alone can lead the individual to objectivity and to a need for conclusive evidence." ⁹

In Conclusion

I said, to this public school teacher, "Yes, I sure do call this history! And give me time and it will become more like the history you know." He did come to see and to feel that what I was doing was a good way to engage students in the study of history, but it was all very new to him even foreign. It is not foreign to how people truly learn though. The gifted and the talented are different in that they have generally had home environments which encouraged and supported their interests. Schools have not done this for them. Traditional schooling "degenius" students. If schools, whether public, private or in the home, will create appropriate environments supportive of childrens interests, it will be possible for all children to be gifted and talented, and to realize more fully their potential.

David Henery Feldman, a psychologist who has specialized in the study of child prodigies, has said, "The Power of their (the prodigies) talent is awesome; yet it should be a reminder that proclivities are realized as talent only through the arrangement of conditions that identify, engage, sustain, and fuel its development." ¹⁰

Hoffer said that, "Where the development of talent is concerned, we are still at the food gathering stage." ¹¹

We may be, but we do know better how to raise a superior "crop of minds." We know that learning must be based upon what is important and interesting to the learner and proceed therefrom; because, learning is built upon previous learning that has been truly internalized and assimilated; and, learning differs in scope and sequence from individual to individual; and, what a given learner will learn or can learn is impossible for anyone aside from the learner to predict or to successfully control or direct! ¹²

⁸ Op Cite. Fuller, p. 105.

⁹ To Understand is to Invent, Jean Piaget, 1973, pp. 106-8.

¹⁰ Nature's Gambit, David Henery Feldman, 1986, p. xi. This book reports a longitudinal study of ten prodigies.

¹¹ Op. Cit. Hoffer.

¹² See "What Do We Know About Learning?", Revolution in Teaching, Goodwin Watson, 1964, and Hugh Nibley's "Educating The Saints: A Brigham Young Mosaic", Brigham Young University Studies, Autumn 1970, pp. 61-87.

Why? Because many factors are involved and are beyond the scope of anyone but the learner to have any chance of managing them. For teaching to be effective, it must respond to the reality of how and why humans learn. Therefore, "traditional" approaches to schooling, to teaching and learning must be discontinued and "correct principles" of education put in their place. Thought must be given to what genuine individualized education consists of. Learners must have overt control over what and how they learn. They have always had covert control! That's why so many have learned so little in traditional schools through out the ages.

William George Jordan said in 1923, "Sometime in the years of the future we will look back on the educational system of the twentieth century with the same feeling of revulsion as we now regard the superstitions of the Middle Ages. These are hard words but they are calmly and deliberately chosen. . . . There is a better way, there is a new model."¹³

¹³ "What's the Matter With Education?" The Forum, March, 1923, p. 1287.