

## What's Missing in Schools? Desire!

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If you are reading this, it is likely that you have spent 10-20 years in school learning stuff. So let me ask you a question: As you look back over all the years of your life, what have been your biggest and most important learning experiences?

When I posed this question recently to a group of Penn State students I was surprised to learn that in virtually all cases their most significant learning had occurred outside of school. The same is true for me and perhaps for you as well?

I think I know why. The critical ingredient for genuine learning is DESIRE and sadly our young people, by and large, have little genuine desire to learn what is being dished up in our schools. So it is that we have to bribe, cajole and even shame them into “learning” things that have little apparent relevance to their lives. Given these conditions, it is hardly a surprise that students soon forget what they are “taught.”

Think of the years we have spent in schools being coerced to learn things that we have forgotten. How can we not feel sad about this? Sad, too, because we are often left feeling inadequate and dumb, forgetting each of us was born with amazing capacities for learning. As babies we looked around and saw adults walking and quite naturally we wanted—we desired—to have that same freedom and power of locomotion for ourselves. This motivated us to learn to walk. Likewise, we observed how making sounds seemed to cause things to happen among the adults in our world and this created within us a desire that propelled us to master language. The same is true for reading. Children learn to read on their own once they have the desire to do so. All they require is a friendly adult available, from time to time, to answer their questions. Sadly, when reading is taught prematurely, as is generally the case these days, it often becomes a troublesome task freighted with frustration and anxiety, leading to diminished self esteem. So timing is everything and it is the child's desire that determines the teaching moment.

What would a school look like where teaching was organized around the child's desire to learn, not the teacher's agenda? Let's take Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, Massachusetts as an example. Daniel Greenberg a teacher at Sudbury relates that one day 12 boys and girls between 9 and 12 years old approached him and asked him to teach them arithmetic. Up to that point these students saw no need for arithmetic but now they wanted to learn it. Upon hearing their request, Greenberg discouraged them saying, “You really don't want to do this..... Your neighborhood friends, your parents, your relatives probably want you to, but you, yourselves, would much rather be playing or doing something else.” But the students insisted and promised to do work hard and do all the homework. Greenberg consented making it clear that he would meet with them for ½ hour (between 11:00 and 11:30 am) on Tuesdays and Thursday. If they were as much as five minutes late, class would be cancelled; if they missed two classes, no more teaching. “It's a deal,” they said. For the text Greenberg chose a math primer written in 1898 that was chock full of exercise designed to teach basic math skills.

What happened? Here is Greenberg: *“Basic addition took two classes. They learned to add everything—long thin columns, short fat columns, long fat columns. They did dozens of exercises. Subtraction took another two classes.... On to multiplication, and the tables... Everyone had to memorize the tables. Each person was quizzed again and again in class. . . They were high, all of them. . . They could feel the material entering their bones. . . Then division—long division. Fractions. Decimals. Percentages. Square roots. They came at 11:00 sharp, stayed half an hour, and left with homework. They came back next time with all the homework done. All*

*of them. In twenty weeks, after twenty contact hours they had covered it all. Six years' worth. Every one of them knew the material cold."*

Notice that Greenberg didn't employ sophisticated technologies or the most up-to-date teaching materials. His methods were tried and true: practice and drill. And these were not exceptional students, just regular kids. Yet, they accomplished in 20 weeks what normally takes six years and they learned it "cold." Why? Desire!