

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Learning not to learn

My favorite 20th century educator is Albert Shanker, a New York teacher who became president of the American Federation of Teachers from 1974 until his death in 1997.

He wrote a weekly column as an advertisement published in the Sunday *New York Times* entitled "Where We Stand."

Here is a favorite:

By Albert Shanker

What's the most important thing young children learn when they begin school?

According to educational psychologist Sylvia Farnham-Diggory, it's to forget -- forget about the personal learning programs they developed as they figured out how to walk, talk and understand their world -- and assume the role of pupil in the school bureaucracy.

Children's learning in the five years before they begin formal schooling is incredible. And much of it is stuff they work out -- or at least practice and perfect -- on their own. They learn to walk, talk, feed themselves, ride a tricycle, climb stairs. (And in urban neighborhoods, many young children learn to fend for themselves in the face of many dangers.) All of this learning takes place according to children's own schedules. Some kids learn to walk or talk or drink from a glass earlier than others, but everyone learns.

Suddenly, after all this excitement and achievement, Sylvia says, children enter school and find that school will handle the process of learning for them. From now on, their real job is to learn the role of the pupil--how to sit still, listen and answer questions when they are asked.

Under this new system, children quickly discover that their own questions are a nuisance and their learning strategies are irrelevant. Feedback about how they are doing is often too abstract and too late to be useful. Though children learned to walk and

talk in their own time, school learning has to be done according to the school's schedule and in the school's way. The school is saying: "We don't accept your techniques for learning things; do it our way or not at all."



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

One of the characteristics of this rigid school structure, is that time and work are "fractionated."

That is, days are subdivided into periods; periods into lessons; and lessons into objectives. This makes it easier for the admin-

istration to keep tabs on teachers -- but it also makes it harder for kids to learn. What is "covered" in one class period is unlikely to be related to what

was covered the last hour or will be covered the next. And students might not come back to a particular subject again for several days. As a result, Sylvia says, children who know reams of baseball statistics and tell you all kinds of details about science fiction struggle to remember the unrelated material that gets thrown at them in the course of a school week.

The way learning is conceived is another problem. In most of our schools, the only learning that counts is the kind that can be put into declarative sentences (and tested on a multiple choice test). A cat is a mammal and so is a whale. This academic learning is often not very useful because it is so abstract, so removed from children's own lives and interests.

In Sylvia's model, teachers correspond to the adult experts in a traditional apprenticeship. They are not simply the source of factual information; they are resource people and guides. The students are apprentices, working toward a goal that is important to them and that calls for all the intelligence and resourcefulness they showed when they were learning to take their first steps.



ALBERT SHANKER
was president of the
American Federation
of Teachers.

This column was abridged from the original because of space limitations.