

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

The laugh is on education

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

One of the best comedians of our time has an important lesson to teach us. A few years ago, in one of his comic acts, Father Guido Sarducci announced that he was opening a college which, for a few hundred dollars, would offer students a chance to get a B.A. in only one day.

As the audience laughed, Sarducci assured them that it was no hoax. In one day students could take all their required courses and exams and go through the graduation ceremony. How could all this be accomplished?

A survey was made of students who had gone to regular four year colleges and had earned their degrees two or three years before. They were asked what they still remembered from their courses. For example, students who took three years of Spanish would be asked how much of the language they still remembered. If most of the graduates said that all they could recall was *Como esta usted? Muy bien*, then these two sentences would constitute the entire foreign language curriculum at Sarducci College. And, as soon as the students could pass a test on this content, they would be awarded credit for three years of Spanish!

The same procedure would be followed for every other subject.

Why is this so funny? Mainly because it's so true!

Much of what we do in school is cram and memorize enough facts to get through the test.

Then we promptly forget what we learned - if you can really call that learning in the first place. But must it be that way?



Commentary by
Tom Hylton

Can learning be so organized that the results are permanent rather than fleeting? This is a key education question. Millions of students go through school, passing tests month by month and year by year, but when they're about to graduate from high school, they can't write a letter or essay that shows the ability to think critically or to persuade, or they can't understand a nationally syndicated columnist.

We have to challenge our traditional approaches to teaching and learning.

For example, as part of nature study or science, students are required to learn about birds. Typically, these

classrooms have pictures of birds or bird charts posted around the room. Some teachers use flash cards and expect students to memorize the names of the birds. They may also be asked to classify the birds in various ways, such as water birds, those from the plains or mountains.

After a few weeks the students take their bird test. We can reliably predict two outcomes of this procedure: First, the students will soon forget almost all they learned about the birds. Second, many will have come to hate birds.

But there are different ways to learn about this subject.

For a boy scout merit badge, I needed to personally observe and keep records of 40 different kinds of birds.

To observe that many birds, you had to be out at different times — at dawn and dusk — in different habitats.

Soon I discovered birds seen in the real world didn't look like the pictures on the classroom wall. You learned to observe carefully.

I discovered I had the power to see things which others couldn't see.

Compared to those who "cover" birds in a classroom, I engaged in real learning that changed me and became a part of me.



ALBERT SHANKER
was president of the
American Federation
of Teachers.

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