

# **The Most Important Day in a Teacher's Life**

**Or**

**Why We Learn:**

## **Full-Circle Learning's Pedagogy of Purpose**

Do you remember the day you first thought about becoming an educator?

Did a teacher from your own childhood influence your thinking? Perhaps you have a favorite teacher who made a difference in your life.

I submit to you the idea that the most important day in a teacher's life might be the day you decide to become a teacher, because with that step, you will influence the lives of virtually all other professions and all others influenced by *those* professions.

Think of all those who have pursued a degree but have lacked positive role models. Whether unschooled academically or morally, people have either contributed to society or robbed opportunities from others, based on the level of integration of character, cognition, and a desire to serve. An effective teacher can inspire them to maximize their human potential in all areas.

Never in history has humanity faced a more rapidly accelerating set of dilemmas, with science, social science, technology, health and changing conditions calling the next generation to reimagine some of the ways we once earned a living. What jobs will they inherit? What problems will they solve? What attitudes will they bring? Whose voice will they hear encouraging them, in addition to the adults in their homes?

For all the challenges you face as an educator—and there will be challenges—you can guide students to link their creativity and cognition to their compassionate service and their collaborative pursuits, so they can honor the past and prepare to inherit whatever the future brings.

In a book called *Eleven*, Paul Hanley said the world will soon have more people than it can easily feed, but overpopulation won't be as great a dilemma if we can ensure that we have the right kind of people who make responsible choices to regenerate the earth.

The time to invest in the human development of those individuals begins in the first five years of life, when the brain grows faster than at any other time.

By age 3, the brain has reached 80% of its adult size, and 90% by age 5. By age 6, the child has a brain 95% of the size and weight of an adult brain. As a child enters primary school, then, inherent talents expand through connections

to real-world problem solving and opportunities to exercise social cohesion, resilience, and compassion for others.

You can help learners of any age see that success in life doesn't depend only on what we learn or even how we learn but on *why* we learn.

Most courses are called how-to courses. They teach the mechanics but not necessarily the philosophy of learning. Think about the importance of pedagogy in education: Why *do* we have a natural instinct to learn?

That will determine how we use our instincts. For example, when we make art, we don't hide it away but rather, we hang it in on the wall or use it as a dish on the table or apply it on fabric or in jewelry that people wear.

When we learn how to use numbers, we create everything from murals to machines, and if we add science to formulas, we formulate medicines or safer ways to feed people.

We put words together to educate or inspire. We string *notes* together to uplift people through song.

## **Peak Experiences illustrate Why We Learn**

Our human nature bids us expand our talents for a purpose and find greater joy in learning when we do.

Abraham Maslow called it the peak experience when we lose track of time in a state of euphoria as we create.

Our current research has since taught us that those peaks can be even higher when we not only love what we are doing but love those we are doing it *for*—when we know that our human family will benefit from our efforts, and that the higher the stakes, the more this is true—that sometimes we transcend the hierarchy of needs such as food and shelter in order to learn and create and to bring about a change that will help those around us. We've seen this with children who starved all weekend and could barely walk to school but came with joy on their faces on Monday morning, just to be together.

Teachers too can inspire peak experiences, even the joy of sacrifice.

### **Work: Love Made Visible**

I remember a day a few years ago when I was in the staff room at the Hangzhou Teacher's College of Zhejiang Normal University with Professor Qin and Professor Gan.

A sign on the wall said, Work is Love Made Visible.

A five year-child came in and presented a gift she had made. She had learned to practice patience by embroidering a lovely picture. Her teacher had worked

with her students to practice patience by embroidering these gifts.

The teacher's efforts themselves came as a gift of love and patience. She taught the relationship between the processes taking place in their heads, hearts and hands—their cognitive functions, their spiritual practice, and a useful interpretation of the arts that would bring joy to another. For them, all these defined the purpose of learning.

The teacher's combination of thoughtful planning, preparation, and the *example* of patience that she demonstrated to her students were her gifts of love.

A few years later, one of the curriculum developers at that university told me that she had decided to send her own three-year-old to a school using the same educational approach. She came home one night and, as she made dinner, wondered why the house had become so quiet. She could not find her child. Finally, she went to the bedroom, where her three-year old daughter sat on the spot where she normally slept.

"What are you doing?" she asked the child.

"I'm sitting here to warm up the bed for you, so you will be comfortable when you sleep tonight," said the child.

The child's teacher had taught the three-year-olds that love is the purpose of learning, but the child had nothing to give but herself, to show her love. We both had tears in our eyes as the mother told me this story.

## **Early Peer Identity Influences Learning**

How wide is a learner's circle of "family" when entering your classroom? Does your pedagogy and practice play a role as the child expands the circle? How do her growing skills enhance life for others? Does this increase her motivation?

In some cultures, a child is taught to "own" objects before giving them away or to esteem the self before recognizing others.

In other well-functioning societies, the child learns about the universe first, the community second, and personal needs third. The child may even play a role in the community's survival from an early age.

Research shows that sometimes the natural rites of passage experienced by these children help them avoid emotional pitfalls of children in the developed world.

Is it a worthy goal to provide students with the means to apply their skills rather than wait for true hardship to help them feel needed?

## **Early Altruism Studies Show Long-term Results**

Infants studied in 2007 in Germany had an instinct for helping the researcher retrieve dropped objects.

In Full-Circle Learning programs, even two years-olds experience high motivation when they use character and service as the bookends of their learning units

Longitudinal surveys and anecdotes show consistent examples of emerging leaders when the child's education prioritizes altruistic norms equally with its intellectual outcomes.

An even more significant study resulted from looking at adults who had initiated humanitarian projects and organizations, as altruistic leaders from all walks of life. They did not all live in wealth nor poverty. They did not seek self-interest nor even limit their concerns to justice for their own people.

When interviewed individually, they were most likely to share three common childhood experiences as precursors to altruism: The opportunity to:

- 1) empathize with those who were different;
- 2) bond with a caring adult role model; and
- 3) turn hardship into problem-solving opportunities.

Teachers become role models and, within the classroom, can create the other two elements that foster altruism. That is exactly what has occurred in Full-Circle Learning schools, for example, as a result of this research.

## **Identity Matters**

Research has also shown the effectiveness of two practices initiated 30 years ago that meld the identity of learner and contributor:

Students show greater social cohesion and motivation when:

1. They identify with others as common members of the human family; and when
2. The school identifies each grade level not by number but according to the generalized theme of the habit-of-heart units they will pursue (e.g. the Helpers, the Humanitarians, the Peacemakers, the Change Agents, the Society Builders, etc.)

(During a school year, each learning unit will link academics with community challenges based on a habit-of-heart such as kindness, patience, advocacy, appreciation of diversity, etc., reinforcing the class identity)



## **Projects Present Teaching as Community Participation**

I have witnessed hundreds of examples, from China to Chad, from Liberia to Nigeria, from the Gambia to Zambia, as teachers working in many countries help each generation find purpose in learning as they act on an innate desire to improve the wellbeing of their human family.

By example and through their teaching strategies, the teachers have taught not only motor skills, social concepts, ratios, vocabulary, colors, histories, numeracy, science concepts, an appreciation of the arts, and much more. The teachers have taught love.

Humans learn 70% more effectively by teaching a skill than by simply hearing or seeing information. (W. Hewitt)  
Across the nations, students have learned to practice empathy for living things through science, art, music and collaborative service.

Projects, classroom management and instructional strategies reinforce this identity. Relationships over time grow to include classmates, community members, and others around the world.

## **What can a good teacher help a class do?**

The students face dilemmas that call for collaboration, out-of-the box thinking, and problem-solving skills. They have used their integrated skills to teach people in multiple regions about drought-resistant farming, how to help flood victims and to use solar power to prevent deforestation. They have applied their learning and habits-of-heart to reduce health disparities, food insecurity, gender inequities, climate change impacts, civil conflicts, and to improve tribal unification.

The teachers have shown learners they how to work with one another, with community leaders and with global partners to foster peace and reduce prejudice. Wisdom exchange partners have shared the relevancy of ways to help earthquake victims in California, Haiti, and China. An Ebola nation has reached out in empathy to the first corona-virus nation. Those with similar sustainable development challenges have shared ideas regarding food insecurity, agronomy, malaria, pest control, and many other specific challenges as they reach beyond national borders to learn from one another.

Children from preschool through high school have expanded their perspectives. The miles have dissolved as they asked, Why do we learn? Who do we love, even beyond our own mother? Is every mother our mother? Is every brother and sister our own?

## **Love: The “Why” in Why We Learn**

A study in the UK showed that children left in foster care for even six months as babies had challenges that lasted throughout their school careers. A teacher who understands the why in why we learn” can turn this around.

One student in an African school had a stroke and lost the use of one hand. Her speech became difficult to understand. Her classmates ridiculed her. Her teacher expected her to do things she could not do. She felt so defeated, she wanted to quit school and kill herself.

Then her teacher received training in new strategies that helped her realize she could help the whole class become a part of the solution. She could help this girl see the classroom as a place to discover the purpose for her potential instead of comparing her weaknesses. The class pursued project that transformed their community and in so doing, transformed the life of the girl. The learning strategies also introduced a level of social cohesion that made this student feel loved. Soon she began to enjoy school so much, she set a goal of becoming a Special Needs teacher herself. She not only achieved her goal but took in 25 disabled adults to live in her own home.

This is a teacher’s work. It is love made visible.

## **Who will Your Students Become?**

You may have had a teacher like this in your life. More important, you may *become* that teacher in someone else's life.

You may not know which day you will influence the future of a child, a family, a community, or a nation. More than likely, you will do so in unseen ways every day.

The theories you study, the pedagogy you adopt, and the strategies you apply can make every day matter as you nurture the altruistic identity of every learner in your classroom.

You may wonder, what evidence do we have that learners crave this human connection?

## **Anticipating the Human Connection Before Birth**

Infant altruism studies conducted at many of the top universities have now agreed on the capacity of early learners to cultivate and show empathy for others. This, in turn, affects not only their motivation in school but their lifelong endeavors.

Studies of fetuses in the womb matched rapid heartbeats with those who saw laser dot patterns in the shape of a human face as opposed to random dot patterns in the

womb. Even before birth, we are programmed to connect with one another—to bond with our human family.

How much more so as we grow and develop, learning the relationship between our cognitive reactions, our cultural patterns and the feelings and actions that we begin to match with words such as love, kindness, compassion and sacrifice.

You may recall those early studies at the Max Planque Institute before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when children picked up a dropped toy and return it to an adult rather than keeping it for themselves, replicated by other studies at leading universities now. The children were tracked over the years. Those who showed altruistic tendencies and then to received training from teachers and parents were most likely to stay in school and end up with jobs that serve society. Their role models nurtured their best natural instincts, creating light upon light.

In upcoming programs, we will talk more about the what and the how. What strategies have teachers used to influence their students? Right now, in keeping with our focus on the *why* question, I'll leave you with just one story.

### **Create Your Own Butterfly Effect**

The flapping of a butterfly wing has an impact many miles away, and indeed, the way in which you help your

students envision struggle as an opportunity for growth may be significant not only to them but perhaps to the progress of the world community.

Long after you teach your them early in life, you may learn that they have struggled to break through their chrysalis and have become beautiful butterflies, just as many children whose parents had never attended college have studied as architects, engineers, dentists, agriculturalists, teachers and doctors, now contributing to healthier communities.

One boy in an immigrant farming community created a graph, on which his teacher challenged students to imagine the number of people they could exponentially influence by adding their habit-of-heart to a career that would create a “butterfly effect” across the region. That experience inspired him to commit to a goal as a future engineer. He earned a scholarship and became the first in the community to pursue an education. As an adult, he was asked to design a satellite to assess drought conditions not just in the fields near his home but on the fruit baskets of all humankind.

So you see, the most important day in your life as a teacher may be the day you actually become a teacher—and that, in turn, will become engraved in the paths of the students you influence over a lifetime, in ways seen and unseen.

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