

GROWING LEADERS:

Tools for Cultivating Balance in the Classroom

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Preface

When I started teaching 4th grade in 1968, I was given a stack of textbooks, a schoolroom that looked exactly the same as the rooms where I attended school in the 1950's, and 25 adorable little kids who looked and acted much like I did when I was their age living in the same suburban town in California. I was fresh out of college – having packed a 4-year degree into 3 1/2 years so I could start teaching in January. Life was good and I knew what I was doing.

I'll never forget the feeling of surprise and delight when my first paycheck arrived. Just over \$600 for living a dream that I had had since I was 10 years old! It all seemed so easy, so fun, and so very, very NATURAL. It was what I had always wanted to do with my life and I've never forgotten the fun of those first few years.

It's amazing to me now that almost a half century later – even after having been retired for almost 15 years – I feel comfortable writing about teaching as “easy, fun, and very, very natural.” That was not my experience during most of the 30 years I spent in the classroom. The stress of being in education built steadily during those years and at times became unbearable.

There is no point for me to try to describe what happened to education in this country during the past four decades. My generation, “The Baby Boomers,” entered the arena of education full of energy, idealism, and dreams for the future. Too much has already been written about what changed all that, and when I let myself become mired there, I feel like I lose my center - my natural optimism - and my own hope for the future.

The intent of this book is to tell a story that might help bring some balance back into classroom teaching. I believe that what's happening in education right now, while creating a great deal of stress, is not only inevitable – but is the natural unfolding of a process that will take the next generation of leaders to exactly where they need to be.

That said, this book must be a “how to” book for managing stress and for bringing joy back into teaching. Only then will the children in our classrooms be able to practice and hone the leadership skills that will be crucial in the decades to come. The way to do that, I believe, is to honor how the human brain/mind learns naturally – and to focus on that process regardless of your particular teaching situation. Your students won't all learn in the same way or on the same day, but in the long run they will probably do much better in school and in life if they learn to understand themselves as learners and develop a sense of ownership for their own education as early as possible.

Introduction

WHY? We must prepare our children for a future that we can't imagine.

Neale Donald Walshe put it this way in *Conversations with God: Book 2*: “You are preparing your children for your past, not for their future.” Our kids seem to know this – but we’re not hearing them when they try to tell us. They pull away and we tighten our grip until communication has broken down completely. The truth is, they are going to win. They are making decisions about their future on a daily basis – even if their decision is that they certainly don’t want what we have to give them. Some of them, of course, learn to play the game by our rules and we feel good about that when it reflects in their test scores. But at what price?

WHAT? Balance.

As it is now, the adults in most schools have all the power and children act out because they are not being heard. We must overcome our tendency to react out of our fear of an unknown future and realize that our children don’t need to know all the facts that we have stored in our heads. Cultural literacy is important – but more than what Alfie Kohn calls a “bunch’o facts” education¹, our children need to possess the skills that will serve them as leaders in their own families and communities: We can only help them grow into those leaders if we step back and look at the big picture. The key, I believe is in maintaining balance:

^w

- Balance of power between adults and students
- Balance between the “high tech” world of computers and mobile technology and the “high touch” world of personal interaction with other people and with the environment.
- Balanced curricula which focus on skills, concepts, and the tools they will need as life-long learners and leaders.

¹ **FIX FORMAT:** Kohn, Alfie. From Chapter 3: "Getting Teaching and Learning Wrong" in [*The Schools Our Children Deserve*](#) (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999)

HOW? Practice, Practice, Practice . . .

We would probably all agree that problem-solving and decision-making would be at the top of the list of skills that we would like our children will possess when they leave school. We would also like them to be able to express their creativity, work cooperatively and collaborative with others, and understand why things are the way they are (or at least be able to ask the right questions.) The problem is that it takes time to practice using these skills and concepts – and that’s in short supply in today’s classrooms. The old saw “Practice Makes Perfect” simply isn’t true. The truth is that practice makes permanent.

The purpose of this book is to suggest that perhaps it might not be that hard. It may not be possible for a teacher to change the whole system – but I would argue that changing the way one thinks and feels is the first step to transforming our schools – one teacher and one classroom at a time.

Some time ago I was thinking along these lines when three words came together in a simple equation:

$$PERCEPTION + ATTITUDE = EXPERIENCE$$

I had been trying for some time to put these together in a sentence, but it just wasn’t working. I knew that the experiences of life are closely related to how we look at the world and how we feel about what we’re seeing or what’s happening . . . but I was having trouble expressing that in a short sentence. When the equation showed up, it all made sense. It doesn’t matter which one comes first – it comes out the same. The premise of this book is that when we change either our perception or our attitude – our experience will also change.

That may look a lot simpler than it is. It’s not going to happen overnight – but if you choose just one of the tools in the chapters below – commit to working with it for a couple of months – you will find that one or more of the components of that formula will begin to shift. (Be careful, though, of what is called the “Implementation Dip” . . . the tendency for things to get worse before they get better. That’s where commitment comes in! So do yourself a favor and choose one that sounds easy.)

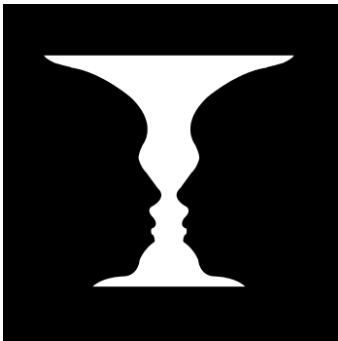
Perception

I've always been fascinated by the idea of perception. I still have trouble understanding how those "optical illusions" work – the one, for example, where one line seems so much shorter than another line – when in reality they're the same length. I've been known to worry about whether it was "best" to be able to see the "vase" or the profile of a woman when shown another example. And when other people could find something in a picture that I was still not able to see I would begin to wonder if there was something wrong with my brain!



You will probably have come across examples of pictographic ambiguity before, where a single drawing has more than one 'image' contained within it, depending on how you look at it. This picture, "My wife and my mother-in-law," is a particularly good example, and was published in 1915 by the cartoonist W.E. Hill. Even experienced psychologists can sometimes find this hard. One clue - the chin of the young woman becomes the nose of the old lady.

www.grand-illusions.com



In black you can read the word GOOD;
but the word EVIL also appears in white letters inside each black letter.

2

These examples of simple optical illusions demonstrate that while we may not see something at first – as we look harder, or someone points out something we haven't noticed before – it's hard to revert to our initial impression.

² <https://www.google.com/search?q=optical+illusions+examples>

Professor Dan Simon of the Visual Cognition Laboratory at the University of Illinois shows a video and gives his subjects something very specific to look for. (You might want to try this yourself before reading on.)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo&feature=player_embedded#at=57

When I first saw this video it was being used with a large audience at the 2006 TED Conference. The first time it was shown, very specific directions were given. The audience was told to count the number of times a basketball was passed between three players dressed in white. Three other players, wearing black, were also passing a basketball between themselves – weaving their passes through those of the white team. Most of the audience counted passes and came up with answers fairly close to the correct number of 15 passes.

Then the presenter gave the direction to just watch the video “globally.” Don’t look for anything in particular – just relax and watch. Virtually everyone in the audience expressed surprise when a person wearing a big, black gorilla suit walked to the center of the well choreographed basketball game, stopped and waved at the camera, and then walked out of camera range.

Dan Simon calls this phenomenon Perceptual or Attentional Blindness. We simply don’t see what we’re not looking for. Perception is defined in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “the way you think about or understand someone or something.” These experiments with perceptual blindness suggest that we think and understand within a given set of parameters. As teachers, our job to provide students with the tools they need to see beyond the limited perception of themselves they may have picked up along the way in order to think of themselves as capable, lovable, and powerful.³

³ These three *Perceptions* are the first of Dr. H. Steven Glenn’s *Significant Seven* (three perceptions and four skills.) Long-term research conducted over several decades shows that the seven attributes explained in Glenn’s groundbreaking book *Raising Self Reliant People in a Self Indulgent World* are the foundation a child needs to grow into a capable, responsible adult.

Attitude

As a child I remember being told over and over again to “change my attitude” . . . but I was never sure what that meant exactly or how to do it. I just knew that whatever I was feeling at the moment was not acceptable and I was supposed to do something about it.

Looking back I realize that my tendency to want to stay busy came from my early attempts to “change my attitude.” It was my way of not feeling what I was feeling – and it worked quite well for a great many years. Even after retirement I have to fight my tendency toward feeling worthless if I’m not accomplishing something. It’s taken me years to figure out how my “attitude” and my “perception” work together – and now it seems so simple that I wonder why it’s taken me so long to figure it out. Just like the gorilla walking through the basketball game!

Thinking about the “attitude” of an airplane, or perhaps the attitude of a sail, helps me understand how attitudes can change. The dictionary says that “attitude” is the “orientation of an aircraft’s axes relative to a reference line or plane, such as the horizon.” So bottom line – in order to change my attitude, I have to have a line of reference . . . a plane . . . something solid to line up with.

I would suggest that changing one’s attitude is a matter of shifting focus – finding a new line of reference or “plane.” We can’t just decide to turn discouragement into enthusiasm – but we can find a bit of relief by remembering a time when we were discouraged and in a short while things turned around and we began to feel a bit better.

Jesus said, “Turn the other cheek.” I was taught that meant to just let ’em hit me again – but now I know that’s not true. It means to shift my focus. When I “turn the other cheek,” I’m facing in a new direction. I have a new point of reference. I can take a beat and focus on something else – or a different aspect of the same thing – and, like the airplane or the sailboat, I’ve changed the direction in which I was heading and will end up somewhere else.

Experience

John Dewey once said that we don't learn from experience – we learn from reflecting on experience. I've spent the past 15 years reflecting on the experiences I have had since those first days as a classroom teacher in 1968 and I know that John Dewey was right. If I had taken more time to reflect along the way, I probably could have saved myself a lot of pain – and may have helped more kids learn some important lessons about life along the way. Again, that's why I've started writing this book – hoping that someone else might be able to avoid some needless stress and stay better focused on the fun that is inherent in learning and teaching.

This book is about the sort of change that takes place slowly and comes from the inside out. It's about the kind of change that begins when a seed is planted in an environment conducive to growth, and then nurtured over time. It isn't easy at first – but somewhere in this book I hope you'll find some seeds – and perhaps some tools that you can use.

THE TOOLS

Several years ago the facilitator of a week-long teacher training workshop told a story and I think it's worth repeating here:

It starts with a traveler – a traveler who takes a journey that starts with a clearly marked path. Trees begin to appear and eventually the path leads into a jungle. The traveler isn't sure he is on the right path and begins to question, "Am I on the right path?" Asking himself that several times he loses confidence and continues to think to himself. Am I on the right path? If only there were someone about and I could ask."

Eventually he comes to a clearing and he sees an old man with a white beard in a trance-like state. After trying to ask the question, "Am I on the right path?" several times, the traveler feels dejected and starts to walk away. Then he hears the old man say, "Gather what you can before you cross the river!" "Just keep going and gather what you can before you cross the river."

The traveler feels renewed energy, thanks the old man, and decides to go ahead. Traveling down the path he finally hears a river. Approaching it, he starts to slosh across when he remembers the old man's statement, "Gather what you can before you cross the river" The traveler goes back and can't find anything to gather except a few pebbles on the shore. He picks up just a few and sets off to cross the river. After his clothes start to dry out he becomes very tired of walking and finds a small patch of grass to lie down on. After falling fast asleep, he suddenly awakes to a pain at his hip as he rolls over. Upon rising he reaches in his pocket to pull out the pebbles and finds that the pebbles were gemstones – rubies, diamonds, and emeralds – that he had just not recognized before.⁴

In the story, the traveler is upset because he did not gather more when he had a chance. As a parable for attending training workshops, or reading books about teaching, I hope you will consider the ideas you run across to be those pebbles that the traveler picked up and put in his pocket. Many of them will look useless – too hard – too heavy – far too much trouble to bother with. Now and then you might see something “pretty” . . . something that looks easy to pick up and you might like to save. That’s the one you might want to try first – but don’t forget about the others. Success with one might make you want to try another. Please read with an open mind and a soft heart. Unlike the traveler in the story, you can always go back and pick up another one to try.

The matrix on page 14 might be considered a “toolbox” – somewhere to keep potential “gems” that you pick up along the way. It’s only partially filled in so that as you find or create tools of your own, you can add to your own toolbox – and perhaps share with others. The tools are divided into five categories: Structures, Strategies, Templates, Processes, and Procedures.

⁴ My thanks to my dear friend Raleigh Philp for this story. It was a “gem” that I took home from Eric Jensen’s 6-Day Learning Brain Workshop – but I couldn’t remember the details. Raleigh used it in his many workshops about the adolescent brain and wrote it by heart for me in an email in November 1999. Raleigh died in 2007, just after publishing his wonderful book: *Engaging Tweens and Teens: a Brain-Compatible Approach to Reaching Middle and High School Students*.

DEFINITIONS:

- Structure: the arrangement of and relations between the parts or elements of something complex.
- Strategy: a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim.
- Process: a series of actions or steps taken in order to achieve a particular end.
- A Procedure: an established or official way of doing something.
- Template: a generic tool used as a pattern

You may find that as you begin to implement these tools that the distinctions are arbitrary and they seem to overlap. Feel free to play with them, move them around, and come up with new categories that may work better for you.

THE TOOLS:

	Structures	Strategies	Processes	Procedures	Templates
Large Group	• • •	• •	• • •	• • •	• • • •
Small Group	•	• •	• •	• •	• • •
Individual	• • •	• •	• • •	• • •	• • •
Family	• • •	• • • •	• • •	• • •	• • •
Yourself	• • •	• • •	• • •	• • •	• • •

This book is organized into three sections:

- Section 1 describes some tools that you can give to your students to empower them and help them create paths for their own learning.
- Section 2 describes some of the tools that may help parents and/or caregivers as they work in partnership with you as their child's teacher. There are no secrets here, however, so you will find that your students will also be able to use the tools for adults as they figure out their roles as "Adults-in-Training."
- Section 3, "Tools for Yourself," is probably the most important part of the book. It's possible that if you were to start there – you'd figure out all the other tools all by yourself. Just like the flight attendant who tells us to make sure we have our own oxygen in place before trying to help our children, we must first understand ourselves as learners if we hope to be able to help others – particularly those who do not share our own particular learning style.

I believe that if these tools are properly understood and used, a teacher will experience that same feeling of joy that I remember in the late 1960's. He or she might even perhaps feel the delicious surprise I felt when that paycheck shows up at the end of the month. Call me Pollyanna if you want - point out the low pay and stressful working conditions – but at least read with an open mind. George W. Bush called the 1990's the "Decade of the Brain" and it is my hope that these tools reflect some of what we have learned about the science of learning and teaching. None of these ideas are particularly new. I love the term "*Natural Learning*" because, for me, it sums up what should be happening every day in every classroom.