Declaring Civil War on Essentialist Teaching

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Abstract: How do we know when students have learned? is an important question. By way of a narrative example of a classroom lesson, the Essentialist philosophy is described. This philosophy is teacher-directed and lacks any inherent requirement for student understanding. Rather, a teacher delivers the required information, and students absorb then give back what was delivered. Five missing characteristics of learning—understanding, thinking, problems, questions, and feedback—from the narrative classroom are briefly discussed, and a student-centered philosophy is presented, which has the ability to support and sustain learning that is rich, substantial, and meaningful.

Keywords: learning environments, classroom environments, student-centered, philosophy

It seems silly to ask, but what exactly do we expect to happen when children go to school? The obvious and most reasonable response is this: We want children to learn. Certainly, the ultimate result of the efforts of teaching should be learning. But in the real world of classrooms is it a given that learning takes place or is it simply assumed that learning takes place?

Consider this question: How does one know when students have learned? This question perhaps seems at first glance as silly as the first. However, herein lies a critical issue that has a demonstrative impact on the look and feel of the teaching and learning within any given classroom, specifically, is there a philosophy of teaching and learning in place that assures that students actively learn at high levels?

To illustrate how the choice of philosophy demonstratively affects the outcome of a teacher’s classroom efforts, consider the true-to-life narrative in the following section inspired by a conversation between one of the authors and her middle school student daughter regarding a recent history lesson on the American Civil War. This narrative represents a typical classroom, most notably for secondary schools, in which (1) the teacher directs the class and (2) the learning illustrated is often at superficial levels where the students are largely passive in the learning process. This methodology is representative of a particular educational philosophy called Essentialism. This practice seems contrary to the popular perception that student-centered classrooms are now more prevalent than ever. Student-centered classrooms represent an alternative philosophy of teaching and learning in which students are more active and engaged in the learning process.

The reality of Essentialist classrooms remains present despite best intentions. For example, Texas (our home state) implemented and promoted student-centered learning in the mid-1990s. The shift from teacher-directed to student-centered classrooms was aided with the impetus of a student-centered teacher evaluation instrument. One would expect after 15 years that student-centered classrooms would be dominant. However, despite the state’s best efforts, the teacher-directed classroom remains predominant, as this narrative illustrates. One reason for this failure to shift classrooms has to do with the emphasis of preparing students for the state’s high-stakes test. The pressure to present specific material in the allotted timeline each year impels teachers to direct the learning of the classroom in ways they find familiar and comfortable rather than in ways that support the student-centered methods favored by the state and the current educational literature.

The purpose of this article is to provide an illustration demonstrating that the Essentialist philosophy in the form of teacher-directed classrooms is still alive and well and to critique and contrast this type of teaching.
and learning with five characteristics that can transform classrooms into student-centered learning environments.

(Authors’ note: the narrative is offered for illustrative purposes only and should not be construed as neither a definitive nor authoritative ethnographic observation of the classroom in question. The conversation/narrative is presented in informal language to capture the essence and flavor of the moment’s encounter. Even so, it is representative of many classrooms.)

**Learning about the Civil War: Blue Is Good, Gray Is Bad**

My 14-year-old daughter waited until bedtime to tell me she needed a blue shirt for school in the morning. Since her school colors are blue and white, I assumed she had a school spirit event of some sort. We headed to the laundry room to check the basket of clean clothes.

“Well, I could wear gray . . .,” she said hesitantly when no blue shirt readily presented itself. “We’re doing this dumb Civil War battle thing, and we have to choose sides and wear either blue or gray. I wanted to wear blue.”

“Oh, that’s a wonderful lesson!” I exclaimed, so proud of her young history teacher for encouraging the students to think deeply about the issues surrounding the Civil War and to defend their reasoning through choosing sides against their friends. “So what were your reasons for joining the North?”

As I gathered a load of dirty clothes to wash with her blue shirt, she held up a clean gray one and sighed heavily. “I don’t know if it’s the North or the South; I just know blue is good. This gray shirt is clean, but gray is bad.”

“Why is gray bad?” I asked.

In a flood of frustration, she explained that she had spent the whole week copying notes off the board in her history class. The notes said the North was good and the South was bad. She did not remember much beyond those two stark adjectives: *good* and *bad*. When her classmates complained about their cramping hands and squinting eyes, the teacher decided it would be fun to break the monotony by wearing blue or gray shirts to school on Friday and throwing paper wads at each other. The paper wad fight would make up for four days without talking or moving.

When I probed more deeply about what she had learned in the four days she copied notes on the Civil War, I found she had no understanding whatsoever of the issues leading up to the war or the reasons American citizens chose to go to battle against one another. She said repeatedly that the North was good and the South was bad, but she could not explain why she thought so. I asked her which side she thought our Texas forefathers might have joined, but she had such little knowledge of the event that she could not even carry on an intelligent conversation about it.

Our family spent the next few weeks catching my daughter up on the Civil War. In the car, at the dinner table, and in the midst of chores, her teenage brothers peppered her with facts, opinions, questions, and theories about the war, and her father told her about the many books he had read on the controversial subject. One of her brothers even brought up the concept that the victors write the history of wars and their descendents modify it over time. It did not take long for her to realize that it was not as simple as declaring one side good and the other side bad. Wars are complex. Somehow she and her classmates missed that part when they spent a week taking notes and throwing paper wads.

So, where and why did the learning for my daughter break down? The middle school where my daughter attends has an approved curriculum and textbooks. The teacher is classified as highly qualified by state and federal standards. Texas has designed a rigorous, high-stakes assessment of history for eighth graders, which is aligned with a clearly identifiable set of essential knowledge and skills for American history. Every element was in place for the alignment of curriculum, assessment, and instruction. The school itself has been classified as “Recognized” by the Texas Education Agency, and the federal government declared that it made “Adequate Yearly Progress” under the No Child Left Behind Act. With the comfort of these measures of compliance in evidence, what went wrong with the educational system that produced such superficial and limited learning for my daughter and presumably the rest of the students in her class?

**How Does Good Teaching Go So Badly?**

When considering the teaching in the previous narrative, the teacher is in obvious control of what happens and when. First, there are endless notes to be taken and written down. Second, the teacher opts to do something different as a change of pace. This classroom is clearly teacher-directed. Despite the limited details of the classroom experience revealed in the narrative, these two actions tell much about the class and the philosophy that guides its operation.

Philosophy plays an important role in the classroom as it frames and informs the teaching and learning that occur therein. Curricular theorists such as Tyler (1949; Popham and Baker 1970) and Oliva (2005) understand and demonstrate the importance of selecting and identifying a particular educational philosophy prior to the identification and selection of curricular and instructional components, as can be seen in their curricular models. This idea is explained by Ornstein and Hunkins (2004) who write that the choice of philosophy “advocated or reflected by a particular school and its
officials influences the goals or aims and content, as well as the organization, of the curriculum" (30) and the instruction that flows from it. The philosophy held by a teacher (or campus) determines the "systems of perceptions, beliefs, and values—the way we perceive the world around us and how we define what is important to us" (30). Similarly, Greene (as cited in Oliva 2005) notes that educational philosophy "engages the educator… to become critically conscious of what is involved in the complex business of teaching and learning" (160). Furthermore, the philosophy held by a campus or classroom provides guidance to

answer what schools are for, what subjects are of value, how students learn, and what methods and materials to use. It provides [schools] with a framework for broad issues and tasks, such as determining the goals of education, the content and its organization, the process of teaching and learning, and in general what experiences and activities the student wishes to stress in schools and classrooms. (Ornstein and Hunkins 2004, 31)

Philosophy, then, is a necessary and foundational piece to understanding what happens in schools and classrooms. A particular philosophy focuses teaching and learning in a particular way.

The Essentialist philosophy guiding the classroom of the previous narrative, as the name implies, focuses on “the fundamentals or essentials” (Ornstein and Hunkins 2004, 40). That is, teaching those subjects and points of knowledge that are essential for students to know (Henson 2006). Consequently, this philosophy embraces an approach to education that "emphasizes the mastery of essential skills, facts, and concepts that form the basis of the subject matter" (Ornstein and Hunkins 2004, 41), and is reflected in the public demand to raise academic standards for all students. Oliva (2005) notes the emphasis is on mental discipline in which "the three R’s and the 'hard' (i.e. academic) subjects form the core of the essentialist curriculum" (164).

The teacher in this philosophy is the focal point of the class in that he or she is the master of a particular subject or discipline and, therefore, controls every aspect of the classroom and directs actively the classroom curriculum and instruction with little or no student input. The emphasis of the teacher’s efforts is to impart the various points of knowledge of a subject. That is, the content of the class is focused on students acquiring bits of information and knowledge identified as important to their understanding of the discipline or subject under study (Darling-Hammond 1997; Oliva 2005). The teacher designs and delivers to the students the information and bits of knowledge—typically dispensed in simplistic form, although a latent desire for more complex learning may be present—and students are largely passive recipients expected to absorb and remember what is taught (i.e., “the whole week copying notes off the board”). The class is taught uniformly, in that the teacher delivers the material to everyone at once, and teaching is largely contained in the individual classroom. The class is organized on a schedule characterized by compartmentalization where subjects (and classes during the day) are individually focused rather than interdisciplinary. While homage is paid to high expectations, teachers focus on the middle of the road or, more accurately, middle of the class in terms of student abilities and potentialities. Students are graded on their ability to remember and replicate the teacher’s presentations as the class progresses along a predetermined schedule. Likewise, students are seen to have certain intellectual abilities that determine their overall success in the class.

As might be surmised, the concept of learning in the Essentialist classroom is narrow in scope and simplistic in nature. The students in the narrative were expected to learn about the Civil War from copying and presumably studying (i.e., memorizing) the notes on the board. Although the actual content of the notes was not revealed, it can be guessed that it had to do with bits of fact-based information, probably strung along in chronological order with several key dates thrown in for good measure. The “learning activity” thought up on the spot by the teacher lacked any emphasis on student learning other than, perhaps, the recognition that there were two sides to the conflict called the Civil War, that fighting took place, and that one side won. The learning in this classroom was left up to the individual student, who had to make sense of the lesson (i.e., “the North was good and the South was bad”).

If learning is the measurable outcome for teaching, then it should be obvious that the learning in the narrative classroom was simplistic, shallow, and limited. The reason for this outcome is that the philosophy that guided the work of this classroom expects nothing more—a teacher delivers the required information, and students absorb and then give back what was delivered. This philosophy has no requirement for understanding on the part of the student nor any inherent gauge that understanding—that is, learning—has occurred other than on a superficial level. Once teachers have delivered the material in its prescribed form and according to the predetermined schedule, his or her job is done. It is up to students then to make sense of what is delivered, which is then measured on equally simplistic paper-and-pencil assessments (often with preselected multiple choices) more dependent on memory than understanding.

Does the Essentialist classroom really represent what is wanted from teaching efforts? Should educators be satisfied with learning outcomes described in the previous narrative classroom? Surely not.

If the Essentialist, teacher-driven, low-level learning classroom presented in the narrative is deficient, then what is needed is an alternative classroom empowered
by a philosophy in which students are actively engaged in the act of learning.

**A New Philosophy for Meaningful Learning**

An alternative philosophy needed to maximize learning for students is one that is driven not by what the teacher does but by what the student does. This means “a heavy emphasis on how to think, not what to think” (Ornstein and Hunkins 2004, 44). In this philosophy, the teacher serves as a guide for students, and he or she “help[s] students locate, analyze, interpret, and evaluate data—to formulate their own conclusions” (45). In other words, students are actively engaged in doing the rich work of the classroom. In contrast to the example classroom, students are actively engaged in the generation of knowledge (as well as its use and application) in flexible frameworks of learning activities guided by a teacher ready to stimulate thinking with a question rather than to confirm simplistic correct answers. Teaching actions such as this not only prepare students for high-stakes testing but also, more importantly, empower students to gain confidence in their own learning—a far more reaching goal, which further stimulates students’ engagement in learning situations to come, both in and out of the school setting.

This means that students frequently encounter discovery and inquiry as instructional tools, where problem-solving methods, scientific inquiry, and reflective thinking are met in cooperative and individual learning situations and where there is variability in classroom experiences, instructional situations, and instructional materials, including resources outside the classroom (or school). The goal of learning is not simply the accumulation of bits of knowledge, but the understanding, use, and application of knowledge so that learning becomes connected to life, inside and outside of school, both for the present and the future. Or, as Gardner (2000) put it: “The purpose of education is not to provide ultimate answers; it is to enhance one’s sense of understanding without dashing one’s sense of mystery and wonder” (185).

Thus, to enhance the learning of her students the narrative teacher needs to broaden and refocus her instructional strategies beyond a week’s worth of note copying and/or note taking and last-minute paper-wad reenactments. To fully engage the minds and efforts of her students into the topic of the Civil War, the teacher needs to incorporate five critical characteristics of learning (and teaching) into the classroom teaching situations to ensure learning that is richer, more substantial, and more meaningful.

The first characteristic of learning is **understanding**. Students have to understand not only content but also how content is applicable in a variety of situations, particularly problematic or ill-defined situations. Gardner (2000) challenges the work of teachers arguing, “[the following] formulation entails an acid test for understanding: posing to students a topic or theme or demonstration that they never before encountered, and determining what sense they can make of those phenomena” (119). Understanding requires thinking and reasoning—the mental activity of making sense. The only understanding our middle school student appears to have at the end of the week’s work was that “the North was good and the South was bad.” This level of understanding is simplistic and lacks substance. Rather, the teacher should strive to help students understand the complexity of issues that led up to and fueled the Civil War and help them display that complex understanding in activities or assignments.

A second characteristic of learning is **thinking**. Perkins (1992), a colleague of Gardner, puts the matter bluntly: “Learning is a consequence of thinking” (8). The conclusion to be drawn from Perkins’s pronouncement is clear—students must think in order to learn: “Understanding is a matter of being able to think and act flexibly with what you know” (42). In other words, “to understand a topic means no more or less than to be able to perform flexibly with the topic—to explain, justify, extrapolate, relate, and apply in ways that go beyond knowledge and routine skill” (42). It is in performance (the interaction of thinking and acting based on that thought) that understanding becomes manifest. Throwing paper wads is hardly the demonstration of understanding Perkins had in mind, one could presume. Nor does it illustrate much meaningful thinking about the causes, consequences, or casualties of war. Instead, students need to engage in thinking deeply about the war to help them understand that the war was not a simple event that just happened. The issues ran deep and had a long history, and students need to be brought to an understanding of this through the engagement of their thinking. Students need to spend time thinking not only about why a particular issue arose but also about why an issue was an issue in the first place.

A third learning characteristic is **problems**. In an equally blunt manner, Dewey (1938) asserted that “problems are the stimulus to thinking” (79). Dewey believed that “growth depends upon the presence of difficulty to be overcome by the exercise of intelligence” (79). Dewey, like Perkins, believed that learning becomes manifest for students when they are challenged to apply the content of the lesson, particularly when framed in a problematic situation to which students could relate through their own personal experiences (outside school) and previous learning experiences (inside school). Experience for Dewey is an encounter of active engagement between the student, including the thinking and reasoning exercised by the student, and that which is to be learned.

The only problem the narrative students seem to have faced is what side of the conflict to join based on their
choice of shirt color. Instead of providing the answers for the Civil War (note taking), the teacher has an opportunity to capture students’ thinking by providing a framework for understanding. Operating within a framework, students engage in activities to provide substance and meaning to the framework while the teacher guides and assists students in filling in the framework, making sure they have explored every possibility or perspective and as a result are discovering their own answers.

A fourth learning characteristic is questions. Questions are essential to learning (and teaching) because “if you examine the act of thinking, you are naturally led to the act of questioning” (Leeds 2000, 41). Elder and Paul (2002) hold a similar view, asserting that “questions are the engine, the driving force behind thinking” (1). Questions, according to Elder and Paul, “define tasks, express problems, and delineate issues. They drive thinking forward. Answers on the other hand, often signal a full stop in thought” (3). The teacher’s job is to ask questions that stimulate student’s thinking, which in turn is kept alive by additional questions encountered in the learning situation—questions originating from the student’s own inquiry and from the teacher as he or she strives to keep the learning momentum going. The implication of this realization is that “only students who have questions are really thinking and learning” (Elder and Paul 2010). Therefore, “no questions (asked) equals no understanding (achieved)” (Elder and Paul 2002, 3). Questions provide the fuel for thinking and are necessary for even the most basic learning. It is not known if the teacher of the narrative asked any questions during her week-long unit, but the limited understanding demonstrated by the student indicates the lack of any questions of intellectual quality. Conversely, the teacher has the opportunity to ask significant questions. By asking large sweeping questions, students’ thinking is engaged because questions of a sufficient scope demand an answer. These questions stimulate students to find their own answers as well as to ask their own questions as they seek those answers.

A fifth and final learning characteristic is feedback. Black and Wiliam (1998) believe that teaching and learning are interactive, and that formative assessment is an integral part of the interactive process because the feedback students receive is vital to improve learning. This means that “opportunities for pupils to express their understanding should be designed into any piece of teaching, for this will initiate the interaction through which formative assessment aids learning” (143). The teacher should begin the dialogue through feedback, which “should be thoughtful, reflective, focused to evoke and explore understanding, and conducted so that all pupils have an opportunity to think and to express their ideas” (144). As students begin to make sense of the teacher’s feedback, the next step is to build within the student the ability to self-assess “so that they can understand the main purposes of their learning and thereby grasp what they need to achieve” (143). The interactive dialogue necessary for learning is based on meaningful feedback, which has three elements: recognition of the desired goal, evidence about present position, and some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two; “all three must be understood to some degree by anyone before he or she can take action to improve learning” (143). It is not known if the students of the narrative received any feedback, but it is likely that they did not, except perhaps on the quality or quantity of their note taking. In the context of simplistic lessons and assignments, feedback seems hardly necessary. However, within the context of the learning characteristics suggested here, feedback is necessary for both students and teachers. Without feedback it is difficult for students to mark their progress as they learn, or because feedback is a two-way street, for the teacher to mark her progress toward the learning goals she has established for students.

An Alternative Teaching Opportunity

Given these five characteristics of meaningful learning, what might the narrative teacher do to restructure her Civil War lesson to more actively engage students and increase their participation and learning?

Questions are a good place to start. After asking students to dress in blue or gray shirts to enhance their sense of separateness or difference (us versus them), the teacher could ask students to explore their realization of differences with questions like: “What does it mean to be ‘blue’ or ‘gray’?” or, “What are the issues that identify each side as ‘blue’ or ‘gray’?” This would help students realize that the Civil War was framed with complex issues, in particular Americans’ interpretations of states rights and federal government rights. Then, incorporating a problem situation could push student thinking even further. The teacher could ask students to debate the merits of each side in a legislative-like forum or on a mock televised debate. In preparing for the forum or debate, students would have to identify, organize, and articulate the issues of each side. This would help students understand the thoughts and logic present on each side and give voice to the “blue” or “gray” cause. It would also reinforce their understanding of the complexity of issues discovered in the earlier questions. Later, the teacher could pose a question/problem, such as “What would need to happen for the Civil War not to happen?” or “How would the United States be different if the Civil War had not taken place?” This would push students to think even more deeply and to accept the notion that a challenging situation can have different outcomes. It would also help students see the long-term effects of a divisive civil war on society at large and on each side in particular.
The point illustrated here is that questions stimulate the thinking of students, and the teacher, rather than providing clear-cut answers in the form of note taking, provides instead a fertile environment for exploring the issues and characteristics of the Civil War in which students discover for themselves the answers to these (and hopefully many other) thoughtful, well-designed questions. Large questions capture many of the small details that the teacher no doubt covered in the note-taking exercise. But when students seek to answer those questions for themselves, they begin to see the relevance and connections of those small details and therein find meaning in the assignment as a whole. By asking students to think rather than to simply absorb, students have the opportunity to connect to the topic, and, more importantly, they learn to explore for themselves complex topics, to ask self-generated questions of their particular interest, and to hear and see the thinking of others that is hidden in a classroom silent with note taking.

Rather than being a dispenser of knowledge to be absorbed, the teacher in this enhanced learning environment takes on a different role. The teacher becomes a facilitator of knowledge and understanding as well as a guide who provides meaningful feedback along the journey of discovery and understanding. This type of teaching requires, as Brooks (2002) puts it, “an intellectually curious, collaborative teacher who can lead the learners’ intellectual discourse and activities to maximize the likelihood that meaningful learning will occur” (96).

Final Thoughts

Two points come to mind. First, in this era of persistent Essentialist philosophy supported by high-stakes testing, it must be pointed out that the learning in classrooms such as the illustrative narrative is simplistic and shallow. What is missing is the deep, vibrant learning supported and nurtured by the characteristics of learning presented here. The Essentialist-dominated, teacher-directed classroom ever present today cannot deliver the thoughtful learning Perkins (1992) believes should be the natural product of schools. He says,

We need schools that are full of thought, schools that focus not just on schooling memories, but on schooling minds. We want what policy analyst Rexford Brown in a recent study of schools called “a literacy of thoughtfulness.” We need educational settings with thinking-centered learning, where students learn by thinking through what they are learning about. (7)

Second, it is fair to ask, “Is acquiring such a student-centered philosophy possible in today’s predominantly Essentialist, teacher-centered classrooms?” It is, but a re-orientation is needed. All the participants of the school and classroom must make the shift, leaving the Essentialist philosophy behind and adopting a student-centered philosophy wholeheartedly because there is no halfway point, no best of both worlds happy medium, no option to pick-and-choose the parts that are agreeable. Success will only come from a new way of seeing, believing, and acting.

REFERENCES