

How Kids Learn...and Learn...and Learn

by Romey Pittman

Fairhaven School's two fundamental principles are, of course, freedom and democracy. But sometimes, since these two ideas are sensible and decent in their own right, we lose sight of their importance as educational cornerstones, of the fact that they set conditions in which real learning can best occur.

In the world of educational and psychological research there are two basic notions of how learning takes place. Learning is seen in traditional schools as a process of transmission -- from adult to child or perhaps from book to child. A child is essentially an empty jar into which learning must be poured (or crammed). More recently, researchers have begun to define what has always been true -- that learning is, in fact, a process of construction. Kids don't acquire knowledge, they create it. They build from the inside out their understanding of the world.

From their first year of life, kids are little mechanics, linguists, and scientists developing theories about what things mean and how they work, testing the theories out in a variety of situations, and reworking them as new experiences and knowledge conflict with them. That doesn't mean that kids learn in a vacuum, that nothing we "teach" them matters. It means that they take what we say (and especially what we do) along with other things they find out on their own, and make meaning of it for themselves. If you haven't noticed this process already, watch your kids closely for a while. You will begin to see that there is learning going on in every conversation with a friend, every imaginary war game, every walk to the store.

Schools have made half-hearted attempts to take these new (for them) research findings into account, allowing kids to "discover" what teachers have already decided they want them to learn, or using a "whole language approach" which allows kids to read and write without having their mistakes corrected (until they get to second grade). But as long as the schools break down what were once important ideas into a series of tiny (meaningless) steps, and insist that kids learn just what /how/when the teacher wants them to learn, that natural knowledge-building process cannot fully operate.

Education critic John Holt's description of how educators might teach babies to talk demonstrates wonderfully the counterproductivity of traditional teaching methods:

First, some committee of experts would analyze speech and break it down into a number of separate "speech skills." We would probably say that, since speech is made up of sounds, a child must be taught to make all the sounds of his language before he can be taught to speak the language itself. Doubtless we would list these sounds, easiest and commonest ones first, harder and rarer ones next. Then we would begin to teach infants these sounds, working our way down the list. . . Everything would be planned, with nothing left to chance; there would be plenty of drill, review and tests, to make sure that he had not forgotten anything.

Imagine how devastating this process would be for children trying to learn to talk. Most kids in school get tired of being required to regurgitate things for which they have not been allowed to make meaning. Real learning either begins to shut down or continues to operate only outside the classroom. Curiosity is deadened and school becomes a race for achievement or a meaningless exercise in frustration, not a place to learn and grow.

So how do we help kids learn without disrupting the natural knowledge-building process? John Holt says, "Real learning is a process of discovery, and if we want it to happen, we must create the kinds of conditions in which discoveries are made. . . They include time, freedom, and a lack of pressure." At Fairhaven School, where kids have those three things in abundance, as well as plenty of stimulating activity around them, they will not just learn skills and facts and ideas. Children will learn to perfect their own knowledge-constructing process, just as one learns to handle and use a tool well with practice. They will learn to apply their knowledge in "real life" situations, across and beyond academic

"subjects." They will not have every "wrong" theory corrected, even by the time they leave the school. Their range of knowledge may not match perfectly, or even remotely, that of a traditionally schooled child. But they will know how to locate information, acquire skills, and make meaning of important ideas. Their lives will continue to include a constant, internally regulated learning process which will serve them well as long as their lives and the world keep changing and demanding new things of them.

Reprinted with permission. Fairhaven School, 2000.

For more information about Fairhaven School: <http://www.fairhavenschool.com>