

Why I Will Not Become a Teacher

By Melissa Wolter-Gustafson

It is in fact nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands mainly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wrack and ruin without fail.

—Albert Einstein

I have wanted to be a teacher for as long as I can remember. I saw something in my teachers that struck me as amazing, starting with my first grade teacher Ms. Kelly and continuing through my high school English teachers. Helping to guide students through the process of learning, which for me was filled with joy and excitement, seemed like the most important job in the world, and it was what I wanted to do. As I grew older I became more aware of the challenges that teachers face. I looked beyond myself and noticed that some students saw school as painful, difficult, and frustrating, while other students saw school as boring and useless. My enthusiasm for teaching wavered slightly, but I still felt confident that my own passion for learning could help students rekindle the joy and satisfaction of exploring and discovering new knowledge.

Melissa Wolter-Gustafson
is a graduate of
Northeastern University,
Boston, Massachusetts.

As I entered the Northeastern University teacher preparation program, I felt a renewed sense of commitment to teaching. However once I reached the courses that centered on methods and materials for instruction, and curriculum development, I began to

wage an internal battle with myself. All the discussions in class around creating relevant and engaging curriculum units and lesson plans seemed to clash with what we were asked to do. Our assignments called on us to create, for fictional students, arbitrary units and lessons that were so highly structured that they left no room for what I view as authentic learning, the kind of spontaneous exploration that no teacher could have anticipated. The more I was reminded that elaborate lesson plans hold a place in today's accountability-driven educational climate, the more I found myself at odds with the idea of teaching.

My philosophy of education stems greatly from the concept of a person-centered classroom, as written about by Carl Rogers and Jerome Freiberg in *Freedom to Learn*. This philosophy has been around me throughout my life, as my mother trained to be a person-centered therapist under Carl Rogers, and also worked as a teacher of graduate students pursuing their master's degrees in education. It was only in my own college education however, when there was a conspicuous lack of notice given to humanistic philosophies of education, that I realized I had internalized many aspects of the person-centered approach and had molded my own philosophy of education upon it. Increasingly I saw my philosophy of education and the concept of becoming a teacher as mutually exclusive.

A strong philosophy of education and becoming an effective teacher seem as though they should go hand and hand, and yet they have often been contradictory in my own experience. The current educational climate makes this truer than ever. It had been my experience that teachers had certain obligations to the state and the school, beyond which they choose to run their classroom in a way that suits their philosophy and personality, and the personalities and ages of their students. This is how I thought I would function within a school: creating a classroom molded on my beliefs and convictions about what a positive learning environment should be. However, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is increasingly stepping into the classroom and removing control from the teacher and students. This is in the name of standards and accountability, and carries with it the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), a series of high-stakes tests for public school students. As a teacher, I would now be obligated to interrupt the natural, student-directed flow of learning in order to cover all the material that students need to know in order to pass the MCAS and graduate from high school. As a result, my philosophy is at odds with teaching, and so is my concept of authentic learning.

A test such as MCAS assumes that learning is synonymous with being taught, an assumption that appears to be the primary in most schools in the United States today (Greenberg 6). The construction of schools today is one in which control — over the selection of material, the duration of time spent studying a subject or topic, and the rate of speed at which new information is processed, is removed from the learner. Robert Fried argues that: "if you believe that adults can 'make' children learn well — in the absence or in defiance of the child's inner sense of confident engagement with the power of discovery and of mastery — then . . . you are placing

that child at great risk of failure as a learner" (243). Yet, the focus of today's educational climate of high-stakes testing as a method of determining whether students are learning or not assumes that teachers can make students learn, and that all students can accurately demonstrate what they have learned on a single test.

My teacher preparation program culminated with ten weeks of student teaching in an urban public high school. As a student teacher, I felt I did things to contradict my philosophy of education by selecting material and dictating activities and outcomes for my students. These tasks were required of me as essential components to the successful completion of the program. Therefore I chose to create a curriculum unit and lesson plans that I felt were viable for a traditional classroom as it existed in the school in which I was teaching, but also retained some of the underlying elements of my vision of myself as a facilitator as opposed to a teacher. The idea of teacher as facilitator or "coach" stems from the book *Freedom to Learn*, in which the authors, Rogers and Freiberg, assert that "teaching is...a relatively unimportant and vastly overrated activity," and that the process of "imparting knowledge makes sense [only] in an unchanging environment" which the present United States is certainly not (151, 152). In the society in which we now live, change is continuous, and Rogers and Freiberg argue that in this environment, "the only person who is educated is the person who has learned how to learn; the person who has learned how to adapt and change; the person who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security" (152). Thus, the teacher, school, or state-mandated curriculum becomes irrelevant, in that the content of subject based classes is static and therefore not useful to the students who today live in a dynamic, global society. The role of the teacher becomes not to pass on information or knowledge, but to facilitate the students' attempts at learning how to seek knowledge independently.

This is the framework which I utilized in developing a curriculum unit for the eleventh grade students with whom I did my student teaching practicum. Though I had chosen the materials and activities, the main thrust of the curriculum unit required students to seek knowledge independently through research, interactions with peers and myself, and through the process of writing about their experiences as learners. In this way, the students who participated in this curriculum unit should have been learning about learning, with the subject matter as a changeable conduit. I was teaching concrete skills about how to access information in the world they live in, as they explored the library, internet resources, and personal interactions. These skills are more valuable to students than knowledge of any given content area, in that once students have the skills to find and access materials, the potential for learning is boundless.

However, in my student teaching experience I did not find I could integrate my philosophical stance effectively into the already established classroom culture. When I attempted to teach in a traditional way, such as lecturing, I felt the students learned some, though more frequently I felt the concept of investment in the

Why I Will Not Become a Teacher

outcome of a piece of work was choked by a lack of choice for the learner, and the work was consequently mechanical, forced, and minimal. Yet when I attempted to let students learn independently or from working with their peers, I was met with apathy, resistance, and was accused by my students of putting the work on them so that I had to do less work myself.

As dictated by the Northeastern School of Education, in compliance with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, I was required to write detailed lesson plans for each day that I taught my curriculum unit. I was assessed on my progress as a teacher based not on my effectiveness in the running of a classroom according to my own philosophy of education, which requires a good teacher to be flexible, responsive to student interest (or lack thereof), and reflective in their own practice, but rather on how closely I adhered to my written plan. Therefore in order to be successful by the standards of the program and the state in which I was teaching, I had to contradict my own beliefs and act not as a facilitator of student learning, but instead as a purveyor of academic content.

There seems to be little room in today's educational climate for the students (rather than a test, a teacher, or a school administration) to guide what is important to learn. Perhaps this is why educational alternatives that are more student-directed seemed to be under-emphasized in my teacher training. They are not viable if one wants to teach in public schools today. Yet my own experience has shown me that alternatives exist to traditional classrooms, in which teachers "teach" and students "learn" and a test determines how well each participant has played their role. These alternatives produce bright and capable members of society.

I attended Boston Latin School, as traditional a high school as you can find today (in fact it is the oldest public school in the United States), at a time when five years of Latin was still mandatory for all students. However, my sister was deemed a failure at this same school, and transferred to an alternative school. She completed high school there and graduated from the Sudbury Valley School (SVS) in Framingham Massachusetts, where "self-motivation is never a question; that's all there is" (www.sudval.org). The school accepts students between the ages of four and nineteen and there are no grades, report cards, required courses, or curriculum. Despite these policies students have graduated from SVS to attend colleges and universities both in the United States and abroad. Most of them are accepted to their first choice schools. Other graduates have gone directly to work in a variety of occupations. These paths have led SVS students to become artists, lawyers, dancers, doctors, architects, mechanics, and musicians.

While at the school all members of the SVS community have an equal vote in the School Meeting to decide such important elements as rules of behavior, spending of the school budget and the hiring of staff. Students at SVS are therefore:

Acutely aware that they, and only they, are responsible for their education. They have been given the gift of tremendous trust, and they understand that this gift is

as big a responsibility as it is a delight. They are acutely aware that it is very unusual for young people to be given this much freedom or this much responsibility. Growing up shouldering this responsibility gives them confidence in their own abilities. (www.sudval.org)

Another aspect of this approach is that when a student fails to make good choices, they are purposefully held responsible for their actions, as in the larger society. In many traditional schools, students are repeatedly denied the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, and from the bad choices that they have made, by a system that wants to move everyone along. At SVS students are allowed to experience the consequences of their actions, a situation which more adequately prepares them for the conditions they will face once they are out of school. For example, if a student comes to the defense of her senior thesis (the sole requirement for graduation from SVS), and is incapable of adequately answering the questions put by staff, parents, and other students adequately, she will be denied a diploma. She will have the opportunity to return and try again next year or simply leave without a diploma. Though this may seem harsh, it is the way in which the world works, and SVS helps prepare students not only academically but to be members of society.

My sister, who was labeled as a failure by the public school system, went on to thrive at SVS. She danced in the ballet studio, learned to develop her own photographs in the darkroom, and read voraciously. She never took another math class after leaving Latin School in the eighth grade, or an English, or Science class for that matter. These are considered the fundamentals of education and yet without them my sister has not only performed sufficiently, she has excelled. Ironically, our divergent paths brought both my sister and me to Northeastern University. Despite my abundance of traditional academic training and her lack thereof, we both managed to make the Dean's List and graduate. Her experiences stand up strongly against the argument that there are basic academic standards that all students need in order to succeed. In fact her experiences support those assertions of Carl Rogers and Jerome Freiberg that the most vital skills a student needs are internal motivation, and the ability to investigate the questions that arise in the world around them, think critically, and learn independently.

Although my sister's story and perhaps even her school may seem like oddities, an isolated place or instance of extreme practice that happened to work for one student, it is not. The Sudbury Valley School, which was founded in 1964, has served as a model, and there is now a very small but steadily growing web of schools across the United States that practice this approach. Some have copied the Sudbury model exactly while others have formed variations, taking what seemed viable for the time and place in which the school was founded. Such schools include the Alpine Valley School in Colorado, the Booroobin Sudbury School in Australia, and the Evergreen Sudbury School in Maine.

Massachusetts seems intent on continuing on its current path towards an

Why I Will Not Become a Teacher

educational system in which accountability and standards through high-stakes testing are the goals instead of student learning. Accountability and standards are certainly worth striving for, but not when the methods of achieving them, namely the MCAS, serves to punish students by denying them diplomas rather than serving to reform schools and teachers that are failing students. If this system remains intact, Sudbury Valley, a place which practices self-directed learning, democratic administration, and freedom to make any choice and handle the consequences that follow, is the only kind of place of education in which I can see myself, not as a teacher but as a member of a community of learning. At this point, all other options seem to put my philosophy in direct conflict with the goals and mandates of the school system, and therefore excludes teaching in a public school as an option for me.

References

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