

Are We Teaching Our Kids Not To Think?

By G. M. Prince

There is no such thing as immaculate knowing

I suspect that children come to believe that adults enjoy immaculate knowing, that is, *they* do not have to go through the anxious process of trial-and-error connecting and approximate thinking to arrive at knowing. Adults just *know*. The goal-oriented teaching prevalent today gives that impression. The messy, uncertain process of getting from confusion to knowing—the learning process—is seldom, if ever explicitly honored or taught. As a consequence children may tend to avoid the very operations that are necessary to everyday good thinking.

Thinking is necessary to create meaning—to make sense

Everyone is creative in that he or she can make connections to understand. Robert Kegan, the psychologist, says, "...what an organism does...is organize; and what a human organism organizes is meaning. Thus it is not that a person makes meaning, as much as that the activity of being a person is the activity of meaning-making." (*The Evolving Self*, 1982, Pg.11) Beneath meaning-making lie perceiving and connection-making.

According to John Dewey, the great educator, all thinking is making connections to detect relationships to get an idea. "...an idea," he says, "terminates in an understanding so that an event acquires meaning(*How We Think*, 1933, Pg. 136)...a thought or idea is a mental picture of something not actually present and thinking is a succession of such pictures." (Ibid. Pg. 5).

A Break-Down of the Learning Process

Let's examine an over-simplified episode of learning. A child is writing a story and comes to a word she does not know how to spell—elephant. She sounds it out in her mind. "L-E-Fant". At each "sound" she connects with the sound of a letter stored in the warehouse of her memory. She writes it as she hears it.

This act of connecting to invent meaning is itself a natural joy. The creation of successive approximations is *the way* we all arrive at meaning. I speculate that Mother Nature gives us a small shot of endorphin when we make connections. She does this to encourage learning and development in the interest of survival. The bursting joyfulness of most young children as they learn is a testament to this.

In the elephant example, our learner is told that her spelling is wrong and is given the correct spelling. While the teacher intends her correction to apply only to the spelling itself, the child experiences it as the spelling *and* how she arrived at it. She discards not only the spelling, but also tends to lose faith in the process she used to arrive at the spelling—the creative process, the trial-and-error, trial-and-success, successive approximation process.

In this way, the fateful moment when a person is moving from confusion (“How do I turn this image of an elephant into a word?”) through approximate connecting toward a commitment to a precise meaning becomes a time of heightened anxiety because in her early years, the outcome is so often punishment. Connection-making when there is any ambiguity, confusion, or uncertainty—*whenever there is a chance to be mistaken*—signals THREAT. The child and, later, the adult becomes predisposed to avoid that feeling and may not attempt to connect.

Goal-Oriented vs. Process-Oriented Learning

My educational life is extremely goal oriented. At home and in school, most of the information I get is in the service of some desired accomplishment. I am taught civility so I can get along in my society, I am taught math to use in my life. In school I work to get to know about such things and the Civil War, and to earn good marks. Emphasis tends to be on results and little attention is paid to process. The system operates on the basis of rewards and punishments. I get rewarded for reaching the goal of *knowing*, there is no reward *or even appreciation* for the actions of learning, and as a result, I may never really become aware of my process or continue to develop my perceiving and connecting skills. Alfie Kohn, in *Punished by Rewards*, says, “In a very limited sense...rewards and punishments do work. In the short term, we can get people to do any number of things by making it worth their while.” (1993, Pg. 14)

The price I pay for this exclusively goal-oriented training is very high. In the work I do, my focus is nearly always on the end-point and how to get there with the fewest possible screw-ups and mistakes along the way; no experimenting or trial and erroring. This tends to make the process slightly unpleasant—something to be gotten through. The extrinsic reward is my driver. I do not attend to the minute particulars of how I am getting it done. I miss the perceiving and joys that accompany connecting to make a new meaning. Since my reality is mainly process—rewards are destinations—to get through the process only for the sake of the goal is to cheat myself of a great deal of being.

Further, Alfie Kohn cites scores of research studies showing that the focus on rewards and punishment nearly always results in the people losing interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward.

One of the impressive findings that has come out of my own study of the creative process is that many people do not know how they think to manufacture ideas; to explain things to themselves and to invent solutions to problems. They manage to do all these things in spite of that, but they are not as skilled as they would be if there had been more focus on the *process*. While goals and vision are important, as the Cunard Steamship Line used to advertise, “Getting there is half the fun”.

Being Solely Goal–Driven has Problems

Being goal–driven inclines me to focus on outside approval. At school and at work I am *given* goals. Whenever I encounter an anomaly or am confused or in trouble, I tend to look for help and guidance in achieving *their* goals. My first impulse is to ask questions. Because confusion makes me anxious, my foresight function and my anxiety gradient conspire to *not perceive* a troubling or confusing situation and I am less effective than I would be if I realized that *I* am *always* in charge of my own process.

Another difficulty is that I am not used to dealing with the very *concept* of process. An example of this problem is described in the literature of Marital Psychotherapy. Almost always when a couple comes to therapy they are in trouble because one is attempting to *teach* the other how to act to improve their relationship. It is the therapist’s task to help each one shift from that goal–oriented mode into a self–focused awareness of his or her own transmissions and *learn* their impact; to focus, each on his or her own *process* and self–teach how to manage that better. It is difficult for them to shift from the *goal* of getting along better, to the *process* of how to get there.

A further drawback of neglecting process–oriented learning is that I often experience goal–oriented teaching as a discount. I feel one–down in a power–over relationship. I may defend myself from being taken over and I have probably invented a number unconscious but effective reaction strategies to *resist being taught*— a built–in limiting factor in most teacher/learner relationships.

Foresight Function and Anxiety Gradient

Harry Stack Sullivan, the great psychiatrist, suggests that two of the most important learning influences from childhood on are, first, the ability to foresee trouble before it occurs, and second, the increasing anxiety that accompanies the foreseeing of trouble. This combination is my early warning system. It shapes much of my behavior and can have a drastically limiting effect on my learning and creative process.