

The Differences Between Traditional And Progressive Education

By: Dr. Thomas Doyal

To fully understand “Traditional Education”, we need to look at its content, teaching styles, philosophy and indeed its purpose. Education has a history, indeed a story that accompanies its evolution.

Education is at the core of our civilization. It is a binding force for improving and even civilizing us as people. As civilization evolves, so too must our systems of education. Traditional education has its roots in classic philosophy that is described by Plato when he said subjects such as geometry “improved intelligence” Eventually the value of teaching geometry and even the theory that intelligence could be improved would come into question.

Traditional education was built on the model that the teacher was the epicenter of the learning process. Knowledge, content and even the purpose of learning flowed from the teacher and would be received by the student. The student was responsible for maintaining his or her attentiveness in a well-structured environment that was modeled after the attributes of adults. Teachers were endeavoring to mould students into smaller versions of adults.

Traditional education featured subjects such as classic literature, mathematics, language (English, Latin and Greek), physical fitness, geography and history. The purpose was to build the mind and body. It was also to prepare students to be productive citizens. The concept of what it meant to be a productive citizen would evolve, as have all other aspects of education. The early American version of traditional educators would come to be known as “Mental Disciplinarians.” There would be shifts in many aspects of traditional education, including its purpose. There was a push to prepare students for a career as college students. This was a change that didn’t represent a significant change in philosophy, only a shift of purpose.

Progressive Education represented a complete shift in purpose, philosophy, structure and content. The shift was from “teacher-centric” to “student-centric.” The focus of the system would be on understanding the child through studying their developmental stages, interests and abilities and designing the curriculum and learning environment to reflect that philosophy.

The purpose of education evolved into a more socially conscious theme. The schools were seen as agents of social change. In addition, preparing students for the work place became a trend rather than preparing them for college. As in any movement, there are shifting models. A shift from traditional subject matter to project oriented, real-world application was seen as more beneficial. There was also a push for vocational education.

A blending of subjects such as history and geography mixed with a social change and citizenship component came to be known as the modern day Social Studies.

As we have seen, there are radical differences in Traditional and Progressive education. There are those on either extreme of the spectrum but moderate voices influential in educational philosophy such as John Dewey have helped moderate our policies. This moderation has helped bring education to a middle ground that finds the worthy aspects of each model and incorporates them into our complex education system.

Both forms of education currently exist in our schools.

There exist examples from each form of education in today's schools. The subjects associated with traditional education such as math, language, physical education, etc. are still the main subjects in today's schools. Traditional grading based on assessment of mastery of the content is still a big part of education. Much of the instruction is very teacher-centric. Large lecture halls, teacher-led front-of-the-room-all eyes forward, in your seats instruction is still in practice today. Even the grouping of students into grade-levels is part of the traditional form.

There also are traces of progressive education in our schools today. As mentioned earlier, the entire Social Studies component is a direct result of the progressive movement. Our schools have become much more involved in social change. The mandating of Character Education, the push for "self-esteem" training, sex education, situational ethics, political

science, and vocational education are all directly or indirectly byproducts of the progressive movement.

There are two terms that have entered the education lexicon. They are “educative” and “miseducative.” They represent circumstances created by educators that have the effect either enhance or hinder learning respectively. Here are two scenarios I remember some 40 years later from my school days. Se if you can relate to why each had its effect on me.

Educative/mis-educative

Educative

Wow!! 7th grade is different. I am different. My body is doing inexplicable things.

Unfortunately, my mind is following right behind like a tail-gaiter on I-95. My voice, my weight, my confidence are all teetering precariously on an unstable swivel chair.

Today, I parade this mess called me in front of my chorus class of 100. That’s a friendly bunch. They will be understanding and kind if my class assignment is a train wreck. No one will laugh **AT** me if I make a fool of myself. Jr. high students are known for their understanding and compassion.....RIGHT?

I was brave/stupid, bold/thoughtless, adventurous/clueless...some of each. I created a tape using a borrowed reel-to-reel recorder. I produced and recorded a slew of sound effects. They ranged from sounds that we hear in our environment to sounds I manufactured for the purpose of demonstrating Doppler effects and other phenomenon. How interested would my engaged fellow Jr. High Schoolers be???? I was about to find out.

Here we go. There were mixed emotions ranging from sleep to interest to....well you get the picture. What happened next was so unexpected, so shocking that I picture it to this day as if I were right now in the moment.

Dennis Hage, my chorus/music teacher did the unexpected that would change my life. As I finished, there was no audible or visible reaction from the class. Someone knew they were next and was probably dreading their turn that was about to come. I suddenly felt an arm on my shoulder. "Class, this was one of the finest presentations I have ever seen. This was creative, informative and I loved it!! Thomas, you have a gift and I expect to see more of this from you this year!"

I don't know if he was telling the truth. It really doesn't matter. I was encouraged and his kind words would have a profound effect on me.

I have vowed to create those moments for my students. It is what I live for.

Mis-educative

Jr. Varsity baseball. 9th grade at Nova High School. I have already pitched one no-hitter and a one-hitter. Pretty sweet. My coach is named M. He tells the varsity coach, Coach P. that he ought to start me in the next varsity game against St Thomas. No way said P! A 9th grader would get shelled. Besides, I know that kid. He's a wimp. He refused to even try out for my football team.

After a great deal of convincing, I was penciled in to start my first varsity game as a 9th grader. Granted, St. Thomas was not a great team. We were expected to beat them. I knew several of their players from playing them in our city league. They were pumped at the thought of crushing this "punk"

News flash.....Nova wins, freshman pitches a no-hit shutout. We are filing out of the field to the locker room. Coach P. at the gate saying to each of us, "good game, nice game, way to go." As I reach the gate to receive my "way to go", Coach P. turns away and lets me pass. Why would a grown man with that kind of power over a young teen do that?

Do you want to know what I learned from that? I learned that a teacher, a coach, an authority figure can give lasting memories. What kind of memories are we instilling in those we are responsible for?