
Preface

I was a reluctant student at best. While compliant, certainly in my younger years, my interest in schoolwork was never imbued with the passion I had for baseball. By the time I was seven, I knew each of the stadiums where the then 16 teams played. Not too much later, I knew batting averages and home run totals, birthdates, and occasional hometowns of my favorite ballplayers. I studied the back of the baseball cards bought each week at Barenberg's candy store up on the Boulevard. I read the Yankee yearbook cover to cover. I argued the merits of one player versus the other and one team against another, not with the statistical acumen of today's Bill James' obsessed scholars but good enough for a grade school kid in those statistically "primitive" days.

When I did have to work for school, I'd skid through my math problems, reading assignments, penmanship, or grammar like a fried egg on Teflon. To allow those students who were more serious than I to finish their assignments without interruption, my teachers let me indulge in my other passion (other than the lovely, Susan Silverman!), maps! I was permitted to look at, trace, and copy maps. I loved the shapes of continents and countries. I loved their irregularities; the squiggles that I now know as inlets and isthmuses. I loved the bays, the lakes, and how some states like Colorado, Kansas, and the Dakotas seemed completely geometric while others, like Michigan or Florida had funny pieces of land that seemed to "stretch out" into the territory of other states. I loved looking at how South America must have at one time nestled into the Western coast of Africa. (I figured that out myself!) And Greenland always looked *sooo* big! And why was it "green" if it was so far north? (Given the current warnings of global warming, maybe there was something prescient in its naming, come to think of it.)

When I graduated from college in 1971, I moved first to Seattle and then to San Francisco. Needing a job, I answered an ad in the paper for a nursery school teacher. Having had a couple of education classes at the urging of my father, I applied for and got the job. It was part-time. I was essentially the male role model at a single parent (mostly women), feminist, socialist cooperative nursery school in a pink building in Noe Valley,

viii Putting Everyday Life on the Page

a small neighborhood in the city. The school was on the first floor of what had been a private house. The upstairs was rented to one of the parents and her child, two wonderful people who would come sweeping (and sleepily) down from their quarters in lovely pink silk bathrobes and/or colorfully and creatively mixed and matched outfits that might include rainbow colored socks, long gowns, and blue jeans. Not knowing much about teaching, I did two things. I watched to make sure that everyone felt included, and I created as many experiences for the children as I could, both in school and out. Without much in the way of theory or experience, I instinctively felt that by taking time to observe I would get to know the children; their likes and dislikes as well as their social and intellectual needs. Additionally, I felt that our various forays into the world would stimulate their senses, curiosity, and joy for coming to and being in school.

I tell these anecdotes so that you can begin to get a sense of who you're going to be spending some time with . . . a middle-aged, married man who carries around vivid memories of what he learned, how he learned, and therefore what was and still is important to him about teaching and learning. I forgot who said this, but I like it . . . "School is a six-hour interruption from learning." While this is certainly an exaggeration, it has some truth to it or at least it did for me. My interests as a child lay outside what was being taught about in school. I was interested in sports, in social relations, and as I got older, in contemporary politics and culture. While school occasionally utilized and intersected with what I knew and what I was interested in, most of the times what I "had" to learn and what I was interested in seemed at best unrelated and at worse, at variance with what was being taught in school.

This is not to say that school wasn't valuable to me or that I didn't learn to write, read, do math, learn about isosceles triangles and parametric, as well as about Albania and Turkey, the two countries I chose to do an oral report on in fifth grade. (I still remember my mother worried about being photographed going into the then Maoist Albanian Embassy as she helped gather resources for me.) No, I learned and I am thankful for the education I had. But it could have been a lot easier, and it could have been a lot more fun if only I had been really "noticed," talked to and not at, and if I had been respected and acknowledged for the knowledge and interests I brought to school every day.

I was smart, as are most children. Author Howard Gardner's work affirmed what I already sensed from my experiences as a young person. Roy got 70s on his report card but had the funniest sense of humor with great timing. Lee couldn't sit still in class and yet was always able to organize kids for a game. Penny wouldn't do her math but could she draw . . . etc. etc. etc. We all have stories like this, don't we?

So, continuing my history, after my first teaching experience and another of shorter duration, I realized that I probably was not "hard-wired" for the teaching profession and became interested in and went on

to become a performer, writer, and an arts educator. I created and toured with an “old time” medicine show, juggling, playing music, doing magic and comedy in schools, theaters, and fairs throughout the United States. I became a storyteller, performed a number of one-person shows, and then created and directed a museum school in an inner city Providence, Rhode Island, school. Here, students and artists created museum-quality exhibits based on inquiries about their former factory building and their multicultural and multi-use neighborhood. While doing this work, I developed and refined many of my theories concerning “real-world” presentations, inquiry, and the importance of taking advantage of what’s around you. I’ve also hosted, written, and directed two long-running radio shows and have made a documentary film on the Narragansett Native American stonewall building tradition. Additionally, I’ve had the good fortune to work with great musicians on the historical narratives I’ve written about tenement houses, watersheds, rivers, and farms. Currently, I’m traveling around the world, performing and teaching workshops in, among other things, writing, diversity education, and human rights.

While my educational philosophy has evolved—and I guess both my ideas and practices have become more refined with age—the foundation for my knowledge and for the work that I do are the lessons I learned as a mostly lethargic student; ones that I used as far back as my first teaching experience: to observe, utilize, and build upon what I notice in those I’m teaching. I bring this understanding to you by way of this book with the humility of someone who knows how hard you work and how much you care.