

Left Brain Schools in a Right Brain World

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I remember an activity from my early childhood.

When we were in elementary school, my sisters and I used to play “school.” We’d get the chalkboard out, the chairs and the map—and one of us would be the teacher. Sometimes, we’d get the G.I. Joe’s or stuffed animals involved, to enlarge the class size a bit. When we didn’t know what we were doing, we never lost our passion. We just got creative and made something up. It was a blast.

I noticed over time, my whole perspective changed. School became somewhat of a drudgery. I stopped “playing” school. More than that, however, I stopped looking forward to it and began looking for ways to get out of it. Sadly, I was like most kids. School and learning were fun when we were young, but eventually they came to mean toil and boredom. For many, school is even repulsive.

I know what some of you are thinking. Education isn’t meant to be fun. That’s not its’ purpose. Education is not entertainment. Agreed. The purpose of school is not pleasure and amusement. However, based on our research, education that sticks in the minds of students is usually connected to three elements:

1. A healthy, trusting relationship with the teacher.
2. An interactive learning community.
3. Creativity and innovation that stimulate the “right-brain.”

Maya Angelou wrote, “We are all creative, but by the time we are three or four years old, someone has knocked the creativity out of us. Some people shut up the kids who start to tell stories. Kids dance in their cribs, but someone will insist they sit still. By the time the creative people are ten or twelve, they want to be like everyone else.”

Right Brains in a Left Brain World

Daniel Pink has written some helpful insights about how our brains function in his book, *A Whole New Mind*. In it, he describes the difference between left-brain thinking and right-brain thinking. He argues that the old world is a left-brain world. The new one is a right-brain world. Let me summarize part of the problem with education in one phrase: we are preparing students in “Left-Brain” schools to enter a “Right-Brain” world. The school does not resemble the world they will enter after graduation. If they graduate at all.

The left-brain is about KNOWLEDGE. The right-brain is about CREATIVITY. The left-brain is calculated and definitive. The right-brain is innovative and dynamic. Certainly both are necessary. But more and more, our world is driven by right-brain thought. Sadly, consider what’s happening today in schools. With a poor economy, budget cuts are being made all over the country. The first courses dropped by public schools are right brain courses: art, music, and drama.

Albert Einstein once said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” What he meant was knowledge is finite. Imagination can take a person into the infinite. Knowledge includes only what’s already developed. Imagination is about our dreams, which have no limits. Unfortunately, our educational institutions revolve around self-contained silos of existing information. They’re about lecture, drill and test. Testing involves students regurgitating facts they have heard from instructors that semester. Nothing more. Nothing less.

I had the privilege of meeting with the Georgia Teachers of the Year this year. After our training time, I realized one of the chief reasons these faculty members were chosen as “the best” was that they included a balance of right-brain and left-brain methods. Several of them confirmed my suspicions:

- Schools often teach and test for questions that aren’t relevant.
- Schools only drill for memory rather than critical thinking.
- School departments function independently and don’t provide the big picture.
- Schools prepare kids in a 20th century style for a 21st century world.

Our dilemma: Right-brained students Must Attend Left-brained schools

Let’s discuss how education primarily takes place and why it fails to be effective.

| STUDENTS TODAY | SCHOOLS TODAY |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. Right brained thinkers | 1. Left brained delivery |
| 2. Learn by uploading; expressing themselves | 2. Teach by downloading lectures |
| 3. Experiential in nature | 3. Passive in nature |
| 4. Music and art enables them to retain information | 4. Music and art classes cut |
| 5. Desire to learn what is relevant to life | 5. Teach for the next test |
| 6. Creativity drives them | 6. Curriculum drives them |

Perhaps this is why George Santayana said, “A child educated only in school is an uneducated child.” Those of us who teach and train students must turn a corner—and transform the way we deliver our content. Lesson plans cannot be taught the way we did in 1989. Or even 1999. The culture has changed. Obviously, the left-brain is important, especially in certain professions. But the best leaders—regardless of their industry—learn to combine the strength of both the left and right brain. Consider Albert Einstein again. His expertise was math and science. We’d all agree those are left brain industries. However, no one had a greater appreciation for imagination and creativity than Albert Einstein. These are right brain activities. Let me suggest the following...

- Teaching must not merely supply information for students, but inspiration for students.
- Teaching must do more than measure a kid's memory; it must motivate a kid's imagination.
- Teachers must include not just the facts of history but the feelings that history produced.
- Teachers should not be reduced to increasing intelligence, but increasing innovation.
- Teaching cannot be only about what to think, but how to think.

Are You Relevant?

Pause and evaluate your teaching methods. Are you primarily a left-brain or a right-brain teacher? Are you balanced in your approach? Are you preparing students in a relevant way for the real world they will enter soon? Do you look for creative ways to deliver content?

I've been working to incorporate the "left brain" in my teaching for several years now. When I began creating the Habitudes™ curriculum in 2004, my goal was to communicate timeless principles in a relevant, right brain fashion. Habitudes™ are images that form leadership habits and attitudes. They teach life and leadership principles with images, questions, stories and exercises. The books are short. They do not feel like textbooks. Soon, they'll be available electronically via podcasts, video streams and PDF downloads. They allow teachers, coaches, parents, employers and youth workers to put their training on ICE:

- I – Images, which lead to...
- C – Conversations, which lead to...
- E – Experiences.

This is how students learn. A picture is worth a thousand words. When they talk about the images, they get to "upload" their own thoughts instead of the enduring the usual "download" teaching style they often experience in school or church. Finally, the conversation leads to an experience they share together. And experience changes us. To see an example of this right brain set of books and DVDs—just go to: www.Habitudes.org. May your right brain find expression.

REFLECT AND RESPOND...

1. Are you a more left brain person or a right brain person?
2. Do you ever observe a difference between the way you teach and the way students learn?
3. What can you do to engage the student with an upload, right-brain style?

Classroom Assessment

Due to budget cuts and state and Federal standards, most teachers feel they have no room to be

creative. They must simply get through the curriculum (or lesson plan) and hope the students can regurgitate it at the end of the semester. Sadly, our world—and certainly the world of today’s students—is moving more and more toward a right-brain world of creatively, big picture understanding and imagination. Take a moment and evaluate your own classroom or school.

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Discussion...

Question: Which column do you resemble more? Are you teaching the way students learn?

Question: What could you do to offer a more creative, holistic learning environment?