

#16 The Whole Apple of Learning

My mother will turn 97 in a couple of weeks. Although her eyesight and hearing are failing and her hands are crippled with arthritis, the doctors tell her she is the healthiest 97 year old they have seen. Her mind is sharp. She is pretty amazing.

She regularly calls me and tells me all about some new advertisement she's gotten in the mail that announces a new miracle cure to fix what ails her. Usually this miracle cure is some vitamin or mineral that has been extracted out of a fruit or vegetable, put in a capsule and sold for a lot of money. And yet, every time I do the research, I find that the vitamin or mineral isn't nearly as effective without the rest of the apple; that for optimal usage, it needs to work in concert with the other minerals or the fiber or some other property of the apple.

I see that a lot in education today where the pieces are extracted from the whole. Examples of this are working on vocabulary and spelling lists, isolating a reading comprehension skill, doing map work as an isolated study, analyzing the parts instead of taking in the whole.

While this may be a common and familiar education method, how is it working for us? We are told we can judge something by its fruit. For all the time spent on reading comprehension skills, how many students will continue to read after they graduate? And what will they read? Will they choose to read great literature or history, for example? Studies say no.

A hundred and fifty top scholars entered a nationwide contest where they were to be awarded a cash prize. Because they all had perfect scores, the committee awarding the prize had to find some other way to differentiate. So they asked the contestants to tell of one book they had read in the past year that wasn't assigned to them. If I remember correctly, only one had done so.

It seems the more we try to isolate pieces of learning, the more we tend to get in the way. I was reading from my daughter's college children's literature textbook and it said that children who are taught to read with basal readers with controlled vocabulary learn to read much more slowly than children who are taught to read with quality literature. One study was conducted in New York's West Side. 92% of the children came from non-English speaking homes. 96% were below the poverty level and 80% spoke no English when entering school.

The study began with 225 kindergarten children who were allowed to read in an unpressured, pleasurable way—in other words, no basal readers and no workbooks. They were simply immersed in children's literature. By the end of the year, all 225 students were reading, some on a second grade level.

Another study addressed the problem of 'stalled' readers; those readers who hated reading and who for more than a year made no progress. In the study, teachers abandoned the intensive decoding programs and instead just had them listen to stories from real books. Soon, these no-progress children were off and running.

For all our focus on writing skills—the vocabulary lists and the grammar sheets and the five

paragraph essays—how many adults go on to write because it’s a pleasurable activity?

The same goes for science and math. Only a few students will have any desire to use this knowledge after graduation. And most of what was learned will slip away.

We don’t have to teach our body what to do with an apple. All we have to do is chew on its juicy sweet deliciousness and our body breaks up its parts and makes use of its nutrients. Here are a four examples of eating the whole apple of learning, taken from my daughter’s college textbook:

1. Robert Howard Allen at age 6 was left to be raised by his grandfather, three great-aunts and a great-uncle who all lived in the same house in rural Tennessee. After his grandfather taught him to read, he started reading the Bible to a blind great-aunt. “From age seven he read thousands of books—from Donald Duck comics to Homer, James Joyce and Shakespeare...He began picking up books at yard sales, and by his early 20s he had some 2000 volumes.”

He never went to school, not even for a day. At age 32 he showed up at Bethel College in Tennessee and graduated three years later, summa cum laude. He then enrolled in graduate school at Vanderbilt University, earning a PhD in English. He went on to be a visiting lecturer in a college in Kentucky.

2. Lauralee Summer and her mother were homeless and moved from one shelter to another. She recalled sitting on her mother’s lap and listening to stories when she was a little girl. When she was 20 months old, her mother started reading her the same book every night because it was the only book she owned—a well-thumbed book of nursery rhymes.

On her fourth birthday, Lauralee was given enough money to buy a See and Say book and taught herself to read. As they moved from town to town and shelter to shelter, she always visited the libraries. She tried school at age 10, but preferred to remain at the shelter and read. In her senior year, she took the SAT and scored 1460, putting her in the top 99.7th percentile of America’s high school seniors. In 1994, she was admitted to Harvard University on full scholarship.

3. Dale Wasserman is best known as the creator of Man of La Mancha. When his parents died when he was 14, he was placed in an orphanage, ‘undisciplined, secretive, and almost entirely unschooled.’ One night, in the middle of the night, he ran away and hitched his first freight train ride. For the next five years he rode the rails, never having a home, going to school, or working a steady job. This is how he described his learning: “In the library of a small town, I would select two books, slip them under my belt, read as I rode, and slipped them back into the stack of another library in another town where I’d borrow two more.”

4. Cushla Yeoman was born with multiple handicaps, mental and physical. The doctors recommended she be institutionalized. Her parents refused and instead kept her home and read picture books aloud to her, sometimes reading up to 14 books a day, week after week and month after month. By the age of five, Cushla was pronounced by doctors to be socially well-adjusted and intellectually well above average.

You may say these four cases must be exceptional, but I can give you a lot more. In fact, as I read the lives of great men and women, I see the same pattern repeated over and over again—lots of stories in childhood and lots of uninterrupted time alone with books.

Let me throw in just one more example of someone who literally ate the whole apple. Lew Wallace was a general in the Union army, and after the war he wrote a book that was the best-selling American novel of the 19th century, even outselling Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. It has been called the most influential Christian book of the 19th century—the book is Ben-Hur. I'll let Lew describe his own educational experience:

“I had one mainstay: I loved to read. I was a most inordinate reader. In some lines of literature, especially history and some kinds of fiction, my appetite was insatiate, and many a day, while my companions were clustered together in the old red brick schoolhouse, struggling with their problems of fractions or percentages, I was carefully hidden in the woods nearby, lying upon my elbows, munching an apple, and reveling in the beauties of Plutarch, Byron or Goldsmith.”

Two more examples of eating the whole apple of learning—vocabulary words are picked up ten times faster within context than when provided as separate vocabulary lists. Also, critical thinking cannot be taught as a separate subject. As was stated in one article I read, “People who have sought to teach critical thinking have assumed that it is a skill, like riding a bicycle, and that, like other skills, once you learn it, you can apply it in any subject.” Decades of cognitive research have proven that's just not the case. You learn critical thinking by immersing yourself in rich content of thought.

The best way to learn is to make learning a part of life, not separate. A child will learn fractions much more easily by measuring out ingredients for cookies or cutting pizza into six pieces and giving 1/6 of a pizza to a little sister than by working through a pile of worksheets. See how fast a child learns counting by 5s when he's adding up the nickels he's earned doing chores so he can buy a new toy. A child will learn more about trees spending time outside in nature than reading about them in a textbook and filling out a worksheet.

Telling and listening to stories, singing, playing, sharing rhymes, looking at pictures, watching sunsets and stars and chasing butterflies—this is eating the whole apple in early childhood education.

I would say the concept applies to adulthood, too. While most organizations try to solve the problem of poverty and homelessness by focusing on the pieces --helping the homeless acquire job skills or providing housing or teaching them to fill out an application—one group thought entirely out of the box.

The Clemente Project offered free college level humanities courses to homeless people with amazing success. The difference was, these courses tended to their hearts and once their hearts could see and feel, they felt empowered and they began to lift themselves out of poverty. I would call that a whole apple approach.

We have so mechanized learning, it is shutting down the desire. A student spends the first twenty years of his life being told, every day, exactly what he will do and what he will learn. The teacher asks the questions. And we see the fruit all around us—apathy, lack of curiosity, narrow mindedness.

We as a people, as has been said, are ‘surrounded by all stirring things, unmoved.’

I’m not saying that there is not a time for detailed study. There is! Lew Wallace, once the desire was lit to start writing, took it upon himself to put himself through a rigorous course in grammar. Abraham Lincoln did the same. We’re just backwards—we work from the outside in. The rule, as was taught by all the heart educators, was: from within, out.

I can’t help but think of possibilities when I learned of the Saracen model of education. You’ll recall that when the Crusaders finally made it to the Holy Land, instead of finding a barbaric, uncivilized people, they found beautiful fountains, silks, mosaics, universities. As I read of the Saracen model of education, I found it interesting that rather than a teacher driven model, it was student led. There were no tests, no degrees, no requirements, no compulsion. Rather, a teacher would advertise a class and the students would come and sit in on the class. If the student felt like the teacher had something to offer that he was looking for, he would contract with the teacher to continue teaching him. And he stayed so long as it was of benefit to him. When he was satisfied, he left. So many of the things we enjoy had their beginnings in this air of educational freedom from the Saracen world. Freedom is a vital ingredient in a whole apple style of learning.

It is always difficult to find words to describe something you see in your heart and I hope I’m conveying what I am seeing. But let me try one more way to describe this whole apple of learning:

My all time favorite movie is *The Sound of Music*. I’m sure I’ve seen it dozens of times. In fact, our local theater ran a special screening on the big screen at the beginning of summer and I went and watched it. Twice. And then a couple of weeks later, my family took me to see a live production at the Kennedy Center in DC for my birthday. I loved every second of it because everytime I notice something new.

Remember that little thing that went around awhile ago—Everything I needed to know I learned in kindergarten? I think everything you need to know about educating hearts can be learned in the musical number, do-re-mi.

Let me show you what I mean.

The first thing Maria did was tap into a desire of the children—Shall we learn a song to sing for your father? And that’s when they said they didn’t know how to sing, but they wanted to learn because they did want to sing a song for their father because they loved him. And Maria is going to teach them to sing because it’s something that has brought so much joy into her life. She wants to share the joy!

So step one in the pattern for learning: Awaken desire.

I remember being taught about alliteration in school and then working through worksheet after worksheet, identifying alliteration. Although identifying it was easy enough, I thought, who cares? And I hated it.

It was decades later, while I was reading a passage aloud and stopped to re-read it because it sounded so beautiful. Ah! That's why writers use alliteration! How different would it have been if a teacher I loved read beautiful literature first, and maybe paused and said, "Isn't that beautiful? Do you want to know what the writer did to make us feel that way? And then taught the concept. As an isolated subject, it was dead and unappealing.

Then, let's start at the very beginning. A very good place to start.

Whenever I want to learn anything, do you know where I go first? To a children's book. Because I know it will clearly lay out the basics of what I need to know. It will likely illustrate them so I can see. There's a good chance it will include a story. Pictures and story feed the heart and continue to feed that desire to want to know more. And then I can layer deep from there. If you have older kids, even high schoolers, encourage them to not be too quick to pass up or too proud to read the children's books. I remember hearing a very wise and well learned man— a scholar-- who said this was his method of learning. And in fact, when he needed to nourish his soul and relax, he would turn to a children's book. The beginning is a very good place to start.

Next: When you read, you begin with ABC. When you sing, you begin with do-re-mi.

Here she's tying into the familiar. Learning to read by learning their abc's was an activity they had all experienced, so now they could understand that do-re-mi was simply an alphabet for singing. Providing many experiences to connect to, and then finding ways to connect to that which has been experienced, is a key component of learning success. Always be on the lookout for those familiar connections.

The first three notes just happen to be do-re-mi.

Sometimes facts are just facts and you just need to accept them for the time being. The first 3 numbers just happen to be 1 2 3. The capital of our nation just happens to be Washington DC. Later, they may learn how Washington DC came to be our capital and how the first three notes came to be do-re-mi, but for now, we can move forward by just accepting the fact. Let's not get bogged down.

Then Maria models all the notes in the scale: do re mi fa so la ti — and notices they're not getting it, so says, Hmm. Let's see if I can make this easier. She thinks for a second, looking for an illustration, and then begins to connect each of the notes to something that is familiar to them.

Do, a deer a female deer.

Re, a drop of golden sun

And so forth.

Notice the joy on their faces as she connects to things that are familiar to them. First they listen—and then she repeats. Repetition is also a vital part of the learning process. None of us pick up the whole of anything on the very first try. I can read the same book over and over again, and each time pick up something new. Or watch a movie, for instance, over and over again. Even dozens of times. Who would do that, right? That’s why I encourage you to consider using the rotation schedule. It allows you to pass by the same subjects many times, each time gathering something new.

So, next time through, Marie let’s them take turns saying just the notes, and she sings the part that’s connected to that note. As they become more confident, they join in more until she sits back and watches them sing the whole thing on their own.

Pay attention to the fact that they are learning to sing by singing. We learn to do by doing. We learn to cook by cooking. We learn to write by writing. We learn to read by reading. My son-in-law loves to play board games and he’s always finding new ones. If he sits down and tries to explain the whole objective of the game and all the rules upfront, I’m totally lost. The way I learn to play new games is that we start playing, and along the way, in the time I need to know, I pick up all the rules and strategies. At first, we take it slow and then after a couple of times of playing, I’m ready. That’s a whole apple way of learning.

How much of teaching are you trying to do by explaining rather than doing?

And, again, notice the joy and variety of the learning process as they march around the hillside and dance around the city as they practice their new skill?

Now they are ready for the next layer, that of tools and rules.

“Now, children do-re-mi-fa-so and so on are only the tools we use to build a song.” Once you have the notes in your head, you can sing a million different tunes by mixing them up! Here is fruit to the learning. They didn’t learn the notes just for the sake of learning the notes, they learned them because now they are going to be able to sing a million different songs!

You didn’t learn how to read words just so you can read words, you’re now going to be able to mix those words up and read a million different stories; you’re going to be able to write a million different things!

And she begins to model what she’s talking about and has them repeat what they hear her sing. And I can’t help but see the looks of love and adoration the children have for Maria. They willingly follow her because she loves them and they love her. Her love for singing is contagious. I see two principles from Dr. Neufeld’s talk: You cannot parent a child whose heart you do not have and the young seek for something to attach to, and once it attaches, it grows to be like that to which it is attached.

Look at all the smiles!

Then, more practice, more repetition in a lot of different settings. Look at the creative process unfold—they've been given raw materials and are now organizing it all in new and endless ways. And the learning continues to layer until by the end of the number, they're singing in harmony and confidence.

What is the fruit of all that learning? Music changes the atmosphere of their home. It touches their father's heart and heals their relationship and heals his heart. They now have a skill that brings opportunity and meaning to their lives with all its variety. Their learning has born good fruit.

Now let's learn Do-Re-Mi curriculum style.

Children, today we are going to start learning the 8 notes of the scale. Notice, they're not given a reason or a desire. What I see too often are kids showing up and being handed the day's learning assignment. The first note of the scale is do. I will write do on the board for you to see. And now, please copy it in your notebooks. Your homework tonight is to copy do ten times in your best handwriting.

Day 2. The second note of the scale is Re. Will you say that with me? This is how you write Re. I need you to copy it 5 times. Now, tonight, your assignment is to write a story, using Re as your protagonist. You will be marked down for misspelled words.

Day 6. The 6th note of the scale is La. This is how you write La. Please copy it in your notebook. Your assignment is to write a five sentence paragraph on how you feel about La. Now, I don't know about you, but other than the fact that La is the note to follow So, I don't know much else about it. Certainly not 5 sentences worth. And I actually have no feelings about it. I couldn't care less. I'm afraid some of the writing assignments we give to kids feels just like that to them. And then we say they don't like to write! Or they can't write.

I was talking to my daughter who had a conversation with another mom who was tearing her hair out over her little boy. He had one simple little assignment he had to do. All he had to do was write a five sentence paragraph and he balked and pouted and cried all day long and she was so frustrated. It was so simple! Why was he being so stubborn? Well, I suspect it was the La thing.

Now children. Study these 8 notes you have learned because you will be tested on Friday and you'll be expected to put them in order.

Monday rolls around. Today, children, we are going to begin to learn time signatures.

Be still my little heart! It's this mechanization of learning that is getting in the way of developing imagination—that thinking of the heart.

I know I'm exaggerating, but this is how learning felt to me in my school years. I wish I could

find the exact quote, but I read someone say recently that we have built the biggest system of schooling wherein our children spend all their days reading the menu without ever actually getting to taste the food. I think that's a good description.

Learning by heart is a joyful experience. Eat the whole apple of learning.

Let me close with the words of an old 1805 hymn with some good reminders for well-educated hearts: .

Know this, that every soul is free to choose his life and what he'll be.
For this eternal truth is giv'n: That God will force no man to heav'n.

He'll call, persuade, direct aright, and bless with wisdom, love and light,
In nameless ways be good and kind, But never force the human mind.