

The Most Important Subject

Editor's Note: O.K., so we went off on a tangent with this article. This is a "think" piece, one that you may have to read more than once to appreciate. It is an essay of sorts written by a very bright fellow. David Boulton is president of DiaCom Technologies in California, a cutting-edge developer of a learning interface he calls part computer software, part video game, and part exercise bike. A learning interface drives how information is presented for learning on a computer. And believe me, most learning in the future will happen with computers. Here's what David Boulton has learned about learning:

BY DAVID BOULTON

In the early 60's, long before the hippies had the idea, my father customized a Volkswagen mini-bus. I remember him spending months working every night in the garage building its interior. He built a seating and table system that converted into a bed for him and mom. He rebuilt the front seat so the top part flipped up and made bunk beds for my brother and me. Over the engine compartment, he made a crib for my littlest sister and, to either side of it, small bunks for my other two sisters.

Being an aerospace engineer, he wired the whole thing up for sound and built a converter that transformed the car's battery power into household AC. He did

the mini-bus, it wasn't even the summer vacation we spent in it that I remember most. What I remember most was the word he wrote in thick, bright red, reflector tape on the back of the bus: THINK.

My father was good with snappy little statements, some painfully so. He always advocated thoughtfulness, and he always pushed me to try and understand the world around me. When it came to talking about the practical world of jobs and earning money, he always reminded me of this little slogan:

The people who know HOW will always have jobs.

The people who know WHY will always be their bosses.

A BIRD IN HAND...

There used to be a television game show called "Let's Make a Deal." It was a typically moronic game show, most notably so because people from the audience would wear outlandish costumes to try and lure the host into choosing them as contestants. If selected, the host would give them some kind of gift or money which they could then trade for an unknown prize.

The dilemma for contestants was that they knew what was in their hand, but couldn't be sure of

this twenty years before the RV craze, and he did it all himself. But when I think back on those times, it wasn't how he built up

what was behind the door (even though it was teasingly described for them). On the one hand, they knew that much bigger prizes lay in store for them if they decided to trade. On the other hand, "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." Many times, someone lost out on a brand new car because they elected to hang on to two or three hundred dollars.

I have been telling you all this because I want to use this game as a way to explore something with you. I want you to imagine that you are a Let's Make a Deal contestant and I will give you some choices to trade between. The left-hand column will be what you start out with, the right-hand column, what you can trade for. Each deal is separate. Circle your choices.

If you circled choices in the left-hand column - thank you for playing the game. You kept "the bird in the hand" and you're out of here. If you circled only right-hand choices then stay with me. Each right-hand choice included, but was not limited to its left hand counterpart. Read your last choice over again. Are you sure of it? Because, if you are, then...

JUMP...

Remember the title of this article? The Most Important Subject? What do you think it is? Take a minute - THINK - I'll wait.

OK, what's your answer? If it's more than 3 letters long, think some more. Time's up. From my perspective, "the most important subject" is... **YOU!** From your perspective the three letters I-A-M work even better. Try saying it to yourself:

"I am the most important subject."

WHY

Remember your last choice? You chose **your ability to learn** over all that you know. Somehow, it was obvious to you that "all that you know" is limited, and that "your ability to learn" is, comparatively, *unlimited*.

SMALL JUMP...

If you think back over your experience in school, would you say your teachers were more concerned with helping you understand and improve your ability to learn or more concerned with "the subject" you were learning about? Wonder why? Our educational system, with the exception of exceptional teachers, hasn't caught up yet.

For generations, it's purpose was to produce "knowers" -- people who knew things and knew how to do things. But, the world has changed and is continuing to change so fast that the only sustainable advantage any individual can have is his or her on-going ability to learn. Education will catch up with this but probably not until after you graduate. It's up to **you!**

Frankly, in my opinion, really understanding the implications of this choice to your education, your career and your life -- and beginning to live and learn as if you mean it -- is the most empowering thing you can ever do for yourself. If you do choose it, then learning to continually improve your ability to learn is something you must do.

LET'S MAKE A DEAL	
WHAT YOU HAVE	WHAT YOU CAN TRADE FOR
\$1,000	\$5,000
Your legs	Your ability to walk
\$5,000	The skills to earn \$5,000 a day
All that you have read	Your ability to read
Your past	Your future
Every breath you've taken	Your ability to breathe
A golden egg	A goose that lays golden eggs
All that you know	Your ability to learn

But, you can't do it by learning about someone else's ability to learn or about some model about how the "average person" learns. You have to learn about your ability to learn and you have to do it for yourself (**from the inside out**). When you become your most important subject -- when improving your ability to learn becomes the most important subject within you, then everything else you learn will be enhanced.

You probably don't remember learning to walk, but, maybe you do recall learning to swim or ride a bike. When you learned these things, you didn't learn them by reading, nor did thinking about them make you able to do them. You learned in a deeper way. When you learned to walk, you really learned to "sense yourself" falling. Once you could sense when you were going to fall, learning to walk got easier and you walked. The first thing you learned about swimming was to "sense yourself" starting to sink. Once you could sense when you were about to sink, learning to swim got easier and you swam. Riding a bike was virtually the same thing as walking, except you had to also keep up forward speed to keep yourself from falling. Learning to improve your ability to learn is much more like these experiences than it is like learning about math or science or literature. Though learning about math or science or literature or anything else, for that matter, can become the "swimming pool" or *semnasium*TM (I will tell you about that word later) in which you can learn to improve your ability to learn.

The world is now changing so fast that the only advantage any individual can have is his or her on-going ability to learn.

You have to learn to "sense yourself" learning. You have to learn to "sense yourself" when you begin to "sink" or "fall" out of learning. So, how do you learn to do this? I call the process SEMNASTICSTM. If you're like most people, when you read the word "semnasticsTM" your flow stuttered. It probably just happened again. What I am getting at is this: Every time you are in the flow of learning and encounter something -- a word, a term, a phrase, a picture, a video clip, someone's body language or tone of voice -- that you really don't understand, your flow is interrupted. I call these interrupts or stutters *meaning needs*.

What I am proposing to you is that nothing you can learn about can be as helpful to your ability to learn as learning to sense your own meaning needs. Your meaning needs govern your learning. While the essence of science is a good question, the essence of a good question is authentic uncertainty. Uncertainty is one kind of many kinds of meaning needs. Once you can tell which of your meaning needs are important, and which ones are less so, you will learn which ones to follow through on and which ones to let go. When you begin to learn this YOU start PARTICIPATING in *your own learning process* in a new way. When you begin to do this, you develop a kind of inner COMPASS that will help you learn better no matter what you are learning about.

SMALL JUMP..."SEM" is the root of the word *semantics* which means the study of MEANING. "NASIUM" is something I borrowed from GYMNASIUM which means an environment you exercise in. So, I am saying, SEMNASIUMTM is an environment for sensing and exercising *in* meaning and, SEMNASTICSTM, like gymnastics, is the inner discipline of the exercise.

I hope I have given you something to think about - maybe even helped you learn a little. As for me, I have enjoyed the opportunity to share with you some aspects of my life's work. I am the president of a company in California called DiaCom that is developing a new kind of technology (part computer software, part video game, part Nautilus machine) for helping people to learn. We think of it as an electronic *semnasium*TM. It is our intention to help build a different education system, one which behaves as if the ability to learn is indeed more important than knowledge. One in which all the subjects are learned *semnastically*.

My work keeps me pretty busy, very energized and hopefully will for quite some time. I do have a vision, however, for my someday semi-retirement. I want to travel around the country enjoying its beauty and everywhere I can I want to stop and visit with students and teachers. When I think of myself doing this I think about a high-tech RV with one word written in thick, bright red, reflector tape on the back of it:

LEARN

From the August 1994 Young Scholar Magazine,
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