

A Problem of Economy

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At the recent Conference in Portland a perennial problem came up in several discussions. The MEI approach to teaching is too “messy” for many people who have authority over what happens in the classroom. Teaching through song games doesn’t look like their idea of education. In some classrooms, rules of conduct and teaching methods have been imposed that keep students firmly planted in their seats. Teachers and students feel stifled and frustrated. Teachers who have used the MEI approach understand its exceeding value in the development of the whole intelligence of the student, but not everyone sees it that way.

When I took a course in economics I learned that economy is the exchange of goods or services based on perceived values that are agreed upon by the buyer and seller using an agreed upon medium of exchange, or currency. I was astonished by the concept that the value of any given currency is subjective and essentially imaginary. (That was a liberating thought that instantly freed me from much distress over my personal budget.) The buyer and seller must agree on the currency and the value of the thing in order for the transaction to be satisfactory to both. The idea of the value of currency as it relates to perceived value keeps coming back to me, applied in different contexts, one of which is the classroom.

I believe the source of the problem as related to the MEI approach to teaching is a problem of economy. The money that pays the teacher and provides materials for the classroom is considered by many to be the sole medium of exchange. Teachers and students should interact in a way that guarantees the expected outcome. When consumers observe an active class where there is a playful atmosphere, they may perceive that they are not getting what they paid for. There is disagreement not only about the value of what is taking place, but also about the medium of exchange involved.

The economy of real education is based on a non-monetary currency. The currency of the classroom is complex and intangible. It is comprised of activities and interactions that build relationships and create an atmosphere of mutual respect between teacher and learners, and the cultivation of the habits of curiosity and critical thinking. When teacher and students apply such a currency to their exchanges, there is ample opportunity for both teacher and student to predict, explore, check, confirm, reflect, and record – to grow and learn. The value is in the process. There is not always a material ‘product’ by which the value of the education can be measured. There is no easily read ‘ticker tape’ giving a constant black-and-white measure of the educational value. The real product of the classroom economy is the person who is formed by the process. The MEI approach does not seek to prepare students only to parrot information to achieve a test score. The MEI approach seeks to develop the capacity of people to think and to reason, to inquire and study a problem from many vantage points in order to take appropriate action, and to interact with others in a peaceful, productive manner, showing respect for all, and to recognize and appreciate beauty. The value of such characteristics is difficult to express in dollar value or test scores.

Our challenge then, is to know our purpose (see page 1 of this newsletter), and to make it apparent to those who question the value of teaching through song, song games and movement. We must be prepared to articulate the value of the activities, techniques and strategies we use, in language educators and administrators can understand and relate to. Our challenge is to help those we perceive as adversaries to understand the long-term value of this way of teaching. Our challenge is to so respect and educate those who oppose our approach to teaching, that we all might somehow, as our purpose states, network with and collaborate in order to blend the very necessary considerations of the monetary economy with the economy of the MEI classroom. We must find ways to work together with them in the best interest of the children.

In Oregon, there was a time when lesson plans for any activity were required to include specific references to the state Course Curriculum Goals (CCG's). Yes, it was a major pain, but it also clarified my thinking about the purpose for every activity I used. Because I had to think about my lessons in that way, I found I was always prepared to defend my activities, techniques, and strategies as "best practices" according to what was expected by the state my administrators, parents, and the school board. (It helped that I was already very familiar with the CCG's for K-8 Music because I had been hired by the state to compile and format – by hand – the first rough draft.)

As you plan your lessons, you might take the time to write down all the educational and developmental outcomes that you are working toward through a specific activity* [I know – who has time for this? But it's worth the trouble at least to practice it a few times.] Anticipate the arguments of those who might be critical, and prepare your rational explanation, using current educational vocabulary – we must always communicate in a language the hearer can understand. By preparing in this way you may help others recognize the value of the currency and the product in the economy of your classroom.

* If you have such an exposition of a lesson that you would like to share please send it and we will publish it in this newsletter.