



Can Public Schools Join in Wesch's Search for Significance?

A large question leaps out of Michael Wesch's lead article in your Spring 2008 issue, "Anti-teaching: Confronting the Crisis of Significance". Here it is: Can public school teachers K-12 adapt and adopt the principles and practices of a professor of cultural anthropology at Kansas State University? He faces classes of 300 to 500 students in a cavernous lecture hall replete with electronic gadgetry, most of that horde merely seeking an easy credit in the race for a degree, job and success in technical America. Professor Wesch has been searching for 'significance' in his teaching, thus to enable his students to become true learners instead of bean counters.

My answer to the question above is yes. I believe Wesch has defined a central problem in education at any level, more obvious after Grade 6, and regardless of class size; the problem is how to provide something transcendent in the school experience, something to unleash the creative energy of kids in their natural quest for meaning and inspiration, to ignite a spark of excitement every day, to thwart passivity and engender creativity. Wesch calls it a crisis of significance.

The seriousness of the author's concern can hardly be exaggerated. Public education throughout the industrialized world has fallen victim to the ever-expanding demands and pressures of the knowledge economy. As a result, the mandated, centralized curriculum has become bloated to a point where kids in Grades 7 and 8 are now being 'taught' material that a generation or two ago might not be introduced until Grades 11 or 12. Standardized tests devised by education bureaucrats are imposed upon schools as the only way to find out what students are ingesting (not learning). The physical arrangement of schooling, as Wesch put it,

"... teaches students to sit in neat rows and to respect, believe and defer to authority (the teacher). Tests often measure little more than how well they can recite what they have been told."

To the extent that Michael Wesch is accurately describing public education, there is reason for some fundamental re-thinking of the process. Wesch observes that teaching can actually be a hindrance to learning... that the best learning almost always occurs in the absence of a teacher, for it is then that learners are free to pursue with great passion the questions that are meaningful and relevant to their own lives."

At stake here are the underpinnings of the free society. Citizenship in a democracy demands the exact opposite of the all-too-common effect of schooling, kindergarten to college, i.e., dependency, passivity and ritualistic deference to authority. Michael Wesch's message is that educators worth their salt will enable students to become intellectually independent, inclined to personal action, and skeptical of con-stituted authority. Therein lies 'significance' in education, the key to learning for democratic citizenship.

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