

Teaching Children to Learn Without Plastic Clackers

Teaching Children to Learn:

Robert Fisher

1995, Stanley Thornes Ltd.

Wellington St., Cheltenham, Glos., England

159 pages, 12.99 (pounds)

reviewed by Mack Hall

When a practicing teacher (maybe one day I will have practiced enough to get it right) opens a book at random and sees that Chapter 5 is called “Cognitive Mapping,” and then skims the book and sees lots of little diagrams and flow charts, he (indulge me in my archaic use of ‘he’ as gender-neutral) often suffers a post-traumatic stress syndrome flashback to his most recent in-service session: returns to green painted cinder block walls, flickering fluorescent lights, acrid coffee served in cups made of solidified chemical foam, sugar-coated doughnuts, brightly colored, but ergonomically incorrect plastic chairs, and a tedious presentation complete with plastic toy clackers to reign-in the wandering attention of teachers-by chirping twits with brand-new master’s degrees (from Lath-and-Plaster University, with a Tradition of Academic Excellence since 1965) and a photocopied, copyrighted, foot-noted, homogenized, multi-culturally endorsed, spiral-bound program to peddle that will solve all the educational problems in Christendom, Deweydom, and, depending on the school’s orientation, perhaps St. John Chrysostom as well.

Happily, this is the end of my negative response to Robert Fisher’s very useful book. In the immortal words of sixth-graders everywhere dragooned into writing book reports: this is a good book; I liked it very much.

When one reflects on all the dreary in-services one has endured ... uh, learned from ... one recalls that each presentation contained at least one really good idea. The problem is usually that the presenters expand a half-hour’s worth of a stimulating thought or a novel idea of a useful concept into three or four days by having people (who have worked together for years) stand up to introduce themselves to one another, break into small groups to color posters, form other small groups to construct things with colored string and wire, select one unhappy member to present the group’s conclusions, line up by size - or by birthday or astrological sign - view ineptly-made music videos with scratchy audio tapes and amateurish slides of the presenters’ singularly cute and precious children, and leap (metaphorically) through hoops while practicing whatever other time-wasting and often humiliating activities the consultants retained by the regional authority can cobble together. At about three o’clock on the final day, the presenters, who have assumed throughout the status of Moses or Solomon that their scheme or program (invariably based on “the latest research,” and almost never sourced) is the alpha and omega of teaching, then give the bynow intimidated faculty insincere back-pats by suggesting they, the teachers, really know best, and invoke anonymous, touchy-feely quotations from children which contain such highly elevated concepts couched in such sophisticated language as to be very suspect in their authenticity. In a rural Southern area like mine, they may even presume to offer the entire sharing and learning experience of the in-service session to a fundamentalist God, who is not asked whether He wants it.

What Mr. Fisher has done in his excellent little book is to synthesize lots of good ideas from a diversity of sources while dispensing with the Kronos-consuming excrementum tauri. He has condensed many a long day into a convenient book that is, in effect, all the really useful notes we wish we had taken during all those agonizing in-service sessions, and prefaced the very practical suggestions with solid theoretical bases.

Of the ten chapters in Mr. Fisher’s slim, accessible volume, at least eight deal with subjects all practicing

teachers have endured ... hmmm ... profited from ... as the entire topics, more-or-less identically titled, of multi-day in-service sessions. These chapters are:

- 1) "Thinking to learn;"
- 2) "Questioning;"
- 3) "Planning;"
- 5) "Cognitive mapping;"
- 6) "Divergent thinking;"
- 7) "Cooperative learning;" and
- 10) "Creating a learning environment."

The content of these chapters is indicated by their names. They are very well documented, with a happy blend of old and new research, and include useful examples. Unfortunately, some of those confusing schemata mentioned earlier do show up every now and then, little boxes and circles and lines and squiggles with labels and arrows pointing here and there.

The topic of Chapter 4, "Discussing," often appears within other in-service sessions, but would do nicely on its own, as it is here. This chapter links talk with thought, and again provides both theory and practical suggestions for the effective use of student dialogue in learning. Chapter 8, "Coaching," (another topic that needs more consideration by teachers) deftly handles the delicate matter of that mythical point at which the teacher's teaching and the learners' learning meet. To what degree does the teacher manipulate the physical or metaphysical models for the child, and at what point does he withdraw his hand from the (metaphorical, if we're in the classroom) bicycle and urge the student to wobble off on his own? Since this point shifts with every student, in every subject, coaching is a topic worth investigation. Chapter 9, "Reviewing," actually deals with self-esteem, an idea so fashionable and so abused that Mr. Fisher has wisely chosen to rename it to avoid guilt by association.

Where teachers/administrators/peddlers often go wrong in implementing ideas from in-service sessions is demanding a rigid adherence to some well-thought-out theoretical construct which is quite good as a description based on observation, but almost invariably is misused when made into a prescription for all teachers to follow in all learning situations. If, for instance, this summer's inservice week is all about cognitive mapping, then the teachers are mandated to reduce all the anticipated experiences of all children attending school in the next term to charts and graphs and hierarchies and sequences: "You're pregnant? Lets's see ... is that a hierarchical concept or a graphic organizer ...?"

Mr. Fisher most effectively, but perhaps too gently, addresses this common error by stating up front: "This book does not set out to be a comprehensive review of all the research into teaching children to learn. Rather it is intended to serve as a practical guide to ways of teaching that have been shown to develop effective learning." Teachers, bless them and their often drab, sale-table clothing, understand this: it is the principal or headmaster who, well into the next February, is likely to demand comprehensive written evidence, flow charts, or other time-draining documentation that demonstrates that the teacher is implementing, has been implementing, and will forever after be implementing Mr. This and Ms. That's Psycho-cognitive Role Model Mapping of the Semi-Hemispheric Evaluative Dynamic Construct of the Adolescent Problem-Solving Indicator.

Authorities, in public and private schools, require their teachers to attend in-service instruction by hour, not by quality. While rendering dutiful obeisance to the quantitative demands of officialdom (in Texas, face Austin and genuflect) headmasters and principals would do well also to stuff Mr. Fisher's little volume into their teachers' boxes in the faculty commons, so that, long after the silly and sometimes offensive exercises and bogus constructions of glue and cardboard have been relegated to the dustbin of history (as well as to the dustbins out back) real teachers will have Mr. Fisher's real-world ideas at hand for review and refreshment for the benefit of real-world children.