

The Magic Lamp

Within the past year we bought a flexible table lamp which can be altered to shine in different directions. A more significant aspect is that it can be turned on and off, not only by a person, but also by an animal as small as a mouse. I'm not inviting our neighborhood's friendly mice to verify our assumption. All that the lamp's "switch" needs is a light touch on its metal base—the mere flick of a finger. The lamp provides adequate light for my deteriorating eyes. I use it while reading and writing essays. It has achieved the status of a fascinating toy. My family, especially Carl, and Lisa's son, have been intrigued by it.

We are feeding our curiosity through a variety of experiments. Besides using any part of our body as a switch, we found that metals such as iron, steel, copper and aluminum effectively function as switches when touching the base of the lamp. We tried a variety of foods—vegetables, fruit, and meat, and all tested positive. Dry paper, plastic, sticks and plants tested negative. Adding moisture to them transformed each into a switch. Suspending metal, vegetables, and meat on a thin string then touching the base will not turn the lamp on.

We finally agreed on the hypothesis that a living body's energy in some form, possibly magnetic or electrical, acts as the switch's generator. Our wildest theory states that animals employ unknown ethereal waves which can affect inanimate objects. We resisted using Google or books which would provide an accurate scientific explanation for the lamp's lighting system. One could assume that knowledge readily acquired acts as a deterrent to curiosity and the discovery approach to learning.

After our series of experiments and conclusions, we were satisfied, but a degree of uncertainty remains. Yet we weren't inclined to know the whole truth. This leaves us open to further investigations. Similar searches for knowledge could become a basic element during child rearing and within the educational system. Children, generally, do actively acquire knowledge at home and in the community, but learning at school becomes more passive and dull. While thinking about our discovery approach to learning, it unconsciously drove me on the road to reverie about my teaching career.

The greatest impact person on my teaching philosophy was Signora Maltoni, a nun teacher in a wine growing region of Italy. Her class spent a half day in the community, learning about the work and attitudes of the adults, plus helping them whenever needed. For the other half of the school day Signora Maltoni supervised classroom writing of journals, creating art, plus reading and discussing topics about communities and nations beyond their own. Throughout my career I tried to emulate her community-oriented curriculum.

The only place where I successfully carried out my philosophy was at Sellwood School, from 1956 to 1966. That was a period of social ferment in major institutions of the nation. I was enthusiastically involved in the educational revolution. One provocative activity was led by Don Stotler, Director of the Portland Science Department. We worked on developing a radical science test. Unlike all other tests, then and now, it was designed to act as a teaching tool, plus being an

evaluation indicator. Using one version of the multiple series of tests, students learned to work as scientists do. Conclusions and answers could be varied, but still evaluated. Unfortunately, the vast majority of administrators and teachers were too conservative and tied to rote learning. Those attitudes are still prevalent and even reinforced by the nationally imposed disaster—the No Child Left Behind tests.

During the ten years at Sellwood School I had complete freedom to develop my own curriculum for 4th-6th grade students. An essential part of that curriculum entailed activity and service to our local community. We initiated and completed three major programs—the Sellwood Garden, the Sellwood Library, and Junior SMILE (Sellwood Moreland Improvement League).

The daily classroom routine was oriented toward individualized learning programs for each student. They kept journals of school and out-of-school impressions. They had the right to privacy regarding their journal writings. I had a specific daily journal writing time and walked around helping students, plus reading part of a student's journal, if invited to do so.

One of the highlights of the week was the Inventor's Workshop on Friday afternoons. I supplied boxes of junk, plus art media for developing models or creating designs for inventions. Each week I suggested topics like: (1) land or water or space travel, (2) kitchen or household utensils, (3) an improvement for the school, (4) an idea by the student. They could work alone or in pairs. At the end they shared their inventions with the class.

Playhouse 222, the weekly improv drama event, drew the most enthusiasm of any activity. It also served as a reward for outstanding class progress. I would then have an extra drama session.

Each morning we had Insight Time. Students could share thoughts, questions, or observations, or relate an interesting experience. We also used that period to share ideas and health problems.

By Christmas vacation, the class was so well organized that they could conduct their learning program for hours. I often allowed them to do so while I held individual conferences or discussed something with the principal. One day I attended a conference. The principal agreed to accept responsibility for the class while they were on their own. She came in three or four times to observe (her office was next door). The next day she came in to compliment the class. She said, "If I didn't see it, I would never believe it!"

I tried to stimulate students' curiosity in all subjects. The most difficult one was social studies. Math Theory was always exciting, but book stuff, less so. Creative writing and journals were the best parts of the language program. Science had high ratings, where they worked with hands-on materials. They also learned about scientists and their learning habits, plus their successes and failures.

My attitude then, and now, is that homework is an imposition on family life. For those few students and parents who demanded homework, I provided written instructions for home science projects and a few surveys for social studies.

The Magic Lamp rekindled my former childlike excitement and revived the discovery approach to learning. It directed my memory into pleasant times from the past and moved me temporarily out of acting like a 90 year old. If it can do all that, what will happen next when my Aladdin's treasure inspires me?

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