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I Learned to Teach in a Country School

Hank Benjamin

The boy I was forty years ago and the man I am today are connected by a set of fundamental beliefs of what is right and proper. These beliefs have been my anchor during the storms of life and a compass in times of uncertainty. They point me toward an emotional home base where I feel at peace with myself.

Please don't get the idea that I am married to past practices and long for the good old days. I'm computer literate and can program my VCR. The belief system I am referring to is value oriented, attitude shaping, and influences comfort zones. Because I knew only open spaces, an unhurried lifestyle, and caring neighbors as a boy, I now feel it is quite natural to spend most of my time at my country home interacting with a small circle of close friends. Likewise, my beliefs on what a classroom should "feel like" can also be traced to a time and place that exists only in my memory.

I was one of the last students in my state to graduate from a one-room country school. Shortly after I moved on to a city school junior high, some top officials decided that the poor country kids deserved all of the advantages found in the big schools. Back then bigger was better, *de facto*.

One teacher, thirty students, and seven grades in one large room hardly seems like the ingredients for educational success. It severely limited direct instruction and forced learning into different directions. The older kids helped the younger kids with their lessons. When we didn't know how to do our work, we turned to each other for help or figured things out for ourselves. Working to-

gether wasn't considered cheating back then, and we were even encouraged to get help from our parents.

Our school had a wonderful sense of community—it had to because of our small numbers. There weren't enough older kids for recess games so the younger kids were recruited and trained. If the smaller children got discouraged and quit, the games soon ended, so there was always a great deal of praise and encouragement handed out. Our informal minor league system turned out some skillful little athletes.

Sometimes the teacher played with us and sometimes she stayed in the school. Older students ran the playground and enforced the rules whether she was present or not. We had our share of disagreements and problems but regarded them as part of growing up. Playground discipline was built around common sense. When we did something wrong, we expected to pay a penalty. Our childish sense of fairness helped separate accidental incidents from deliberate meanness. It was a good system and taught us a lot about life.

I might not be able to remember what happened yesterday, but much of what occurred forty years ago is still clear. I don't think I was actually taught to read, I think I just sort of picked it up. I recall reading everything I could get my hands on. My teachers gave me book after book, each filled with exciting adventures and strange places. I'm sure I devoured a hundred or more books per year, many of them classics.

I wasn't taught a bunch of facts, but somehow I learned the foundational stuff. My knowledge of names, dates, places, and events has always been more than adequate. Maybe I picked them up during all of the reading I did, maybe I learned them on my own because of the love of learning that was part of our little school.

Back then the PTA meetings were the big events in our lives. The children provided entertainment in the form of songs, skits, and recitations. Reports and projects were shown to anyone expressing even mild interest. The meetings were a time to receive praise and to be proud. They also provided a reason for doing high quality school work. Report card grades never seemed as important as showing off our stuff. I don't know if our projects were well done and our skits well performed, but all of the adults reacted as if they were wonderful. When the children talked, the big people listened carefully and reacted appropriately.

One of our teachers taught us to square dance and got us an invitation to appear on "Uncle Howdy's Talent Show," a local television program that would show about anything. Unusual road kill collections were brought in on the slow days. Our community treated us like movie stars. We might not have been good, but at least we moved. Our self-esteem soared to new heights.

We didn't have counselors, therapists, physical education, music classes, or art instructors. There was no copy machine, AV equipment, computer lab, library, sick room, cafeteria, or office. Our teachers were marginally educated by today's standards, often held second jobs, and frequently changed schools. Supplies were limited and we were without indoor plumbing. There was no administration, Board of Education, or state bureaucracy dictating curriculum. Our teachers had to figure out things on their own, which they did. Because of this they made sure we learned to figure things out on our own, which we usually did.

We understood risk taking. We climbed trees and fell out, walked on thin ice and fell in, smoked behind the school and had the wrath of our parents fall on us. Some of our daring acts brought peer admiration while other foolish attempts brought only humiliation. Taking chances

was part of growing up, as was accepting responsibility for one's own actions. Ultimately we learned to look before we leaped and to balance possible glory against probable pain.

Attending the same little school with the same classmates and the same teacher provided a stability in our lives that is rarely seen today. We felt connected to each other and our community. It is easier to move forward when we know there is a place behind us to which we can return.

We were taught values that increased our likelihood of future success. Honesty, hard work, perseverance, respect for authority, and the sanctity of the individual were valued qualities back then. We were encouraged to be patriotic, God-fearing, self-sacrificing, and concerned for our neighbors' well-being. Morality was presented in black and white terms. Prejudice and bigotry were wrong—tolerance and understanding were right.

Not one of our parents were college graduates or even earned much money. But everyone of them expected their children to do better. Our teachers were always pushing us to do a little bit extra, just so we would be well prepared for the city school. I don't think they ever doubted that we would be able to handle junior high, they just wanted to make sure we were ready.

We came to believe that hard work plus right values plus education would guarantee us a successful future. Our formula did not include luck or friends in high places. It was just understood that good things would happen if we did our part. We were optimistic children and were never taught to fear the future.

Because of my experiences in the old country school, I associate multi-age grouping, cross-age tutoring, and community service with sound education. I have even gone so far as to use individualized and small group instruction, cooperative learning, holistic instruction, mastery learning, and portfolio assessment in my own classroom. I prefer projects to dittos, student self-control to teacher bossing, and noisy excitement to quiet boredom. My students are taught to solve their own problems, take responsibility for their own actions, and to value independent thought. I guess I'm just an old-fashioned teacher who never learned how to keep up with modern educational practices.