

Hard Fun

By Seymour Papert

I have had a lot of flack from people who read this column (and other things I have written) as advocating taking the hard work and discipline out of learning. I don't blame them. I *am* a critic of the ways in which traditional school forces kids to learn and most attempts to introduce a more engaging, less coercive curriculum *do indeed* end up taking the guts out of the learning. But it is not fair to hold me guilty by association. My whole career in education has been devoted to finding kinds of work that will harness the passion of the learner to the hard work needed to master difficult material and acquire habits of self-discipline. But it is not easy to find the right language to explain how I think I am different from the "touchy feely ... make it fun make it easy" approaches to education.

Way back in the mid-eighties a first grader gave me a nugget of language that helps. The Gardner Academy (an elementary school in an under-privileged neighborhood of San Jose, California) was one of the first schools to own enough computers for students to spend significant time with them every day. Their introduction, for all grades, was learning to program, in the computer language Logo, at an appropriate level. A teacher heard one child using these words to describe the computer work: "It's fun. It's hard. It's Logo." I have no doubt that this kid called the work fun *because* it was hard rather than *in spite* of being hard.

Once I was alerted to the concept of "hard fun" I began listening for it and heard it over and over. It is expressed in many different ways, all of which all boil down to the conclusion that everyone likes hard challenging things to do. But they have to be the right things matched to the individual and to the culture of the times. These rapidly changing times challenge educators to find areas of work that are hard in the right way: they must connect with the kids and also with the areas of knowledge, skills and (don't let us forget) ethic adults will need for the future world.

I have written here about adolescents in Maine's juvenile correctional facility overcoming their long standing aversion to any sort of school learning by being given the opportunity to invent and construct sophisticated mechanical/robotic devices. Doing this requires concentration and discipline. It requires learning to deal with things going wrong by finding out how to fix the problem rather than by giving up in frustration. And for some of those kids it has meant experiencing for the first time the pleasure of writing because they were encouraged to write about something they were doing themselves and doing with

passion.

The phrase "pleasure of writing" makes me pause. At this very moment writing is not altogether pleasurable. The ticking of the clock telling me that the deadline is coming close frustrates me. I am stinging from the pain of having to throw out a whole paragraph because "it wasn't going to work" even though it had a phrase with which I had fallen in love. So maybe "pleasure" isn't quite the right word. Nor is "fun." We need a better word for it and maybe that first grader in San Jose provided the best one. We are talking here about a special kind of fun ... "hard fun."

How do we make writing become hard fun? One way is to develop for kids "writable" activities that they love to do. The building of robotic devices acquires "writability" because it lends itself to stage-by-stage description. Its writability is further enhanced by the use of word processors and digital cameras. But beyond technology there is the attitude in the learning culture. An example of what I mean was brought up by a teacher who objected to the idea that children should be allowed to write about what they liked. "When they go to work they'll have to do what they are told." Therein lies a source of many kids' failure in reading. Of course we should teach children the skill of self-control needed to carry out orders. But mixing up learning that skill with learning to write defeats both purposes.

Source: <http://www.papert.org/articles/HardFun.html>