

Principal shows education a process

March 31, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

News this week about a guitar-playing elementary school principal who moonlights as a street performer has me thinking about the meaning of education. Education is a gradual process. Education is not so much about fulfilling a specific goal or arriving at a destination. Education is a long and often unpredictable journey. This I truly believe.

Did you know that Hsinchu County rocks?

Peng Huan-chang, principal of Beiju Elementary School in Beiju Township in Hsinchu County is behind the story. In 2008, Mr. Peng and several colleagues started their own band which, by and by, developed in time. In 2010 the band was a member of the Hsinchu County Association for Music. In 2011, Sha Hen Da (the unlikely name of the group), won itself a street artist's license.

Mr. Peng's musical interests have prompted him to sponsor talent shows at his school. He sees the shows as "a platform for children to train themselves to showcase their talents and to develop their courage to be on stage" (TT 3-28-13 p. 5). Education, he says, should help students discover their potential and learn how to improve themselves.

Mr. Peng's views are spot on. The man is doing more, however, than talking about education. He is showing us what education is all about. At age 45, here is a teacher who personally exemplifies the fact that education is an on-going, time-consuming, life-giving process, not a quick fix or finished accomplishment.

Making the effort to help students gradually come to know themselves and our world, showing them how to find themselves step by step is, yes, precisely what we must do in our elementary and high schools. It is also what we should continue to do in our universities.

Several years ago, my department ran what we called at the time a "writing lab." Colleagues teaching English composition courses took turns as volunteers at a desk in a make-shift "laboratory" that functioned on different days as a venue for meetings, drama rehearsals, and student club-house. We ran the lab over lunch hours, and without equipment of any kind. We had no computers, no Power Point, no fancy bells and whistles.

Some students came to the lab on their own free will. Most came because of the gentle push or "threat" of an instructor. They showed us papers they were writing and all manner of homework, some fresh, some already corrected and graded. Perhaps the students pictured themselves as motorists pulling into a gas station. Get a fill-up, check an odd noise in the engine, and get back on the road. That may have been their view of the situation.

I never thought of the lab in those terms.

As a matter of fact, the quick fix of problems such as broken grammar, inaccurate verb tenses, and dull vocabulary probably was exactly what many of our "customers" had in mind. For me, it was all about process.

The process of analyzing and revising a piece of writing, the gradual nurturing and then sharpening of an ability to write English well: that is what we hoped to achieve in that dusty old lab.

Principal Peng urges students to be brave with their talents. "Don't let fear of failure hold you back" seems to be one of his mantras. How easy it is to let fear of failure to hold us back in mastering a new language. How easy too, to allow our fears to stifle our growth in other areas.

I resonated deeply with Principal Peng's use of his personality and life to educate his students. He is showing us by his passion what his students need most to learn. For him, the meaning of education is not to produce a final product to hold in our hands. Education, his actions demonstrate, is the story of a movement from darkness to light, and of an entry into the great sea of potential that lies within each of us as individuals. Mr. Peng's lesson is that education, like life itself, is a process.

My words perhaps sound impossibly idealistic. Many of the parents of our students, and many of our students themselves, do not want to hear about time or journeys or process. They want to hear about diplomas, jobs and salaries. They want something called "results."

Why does that word sometimes make me uneasy? (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points:

1. The elementary school principal this column focuses on is 45 years old (not sooo young) and yet has formed a band that performs regularly. The column says he is teaching his students good lessons in life. What are some of those lessons?
2. Is learning in life an on-going process, or the achievement of a goal, a final product? In other words, is a college education the search for a kind of product you can hold in your hand, called a diploma or a job? In addition to skills useful for a job, what else does a college education offer a person?
3. In some ways, the principal mentioned in this column has turned his passion for music into a tool for teaching. What role does music play in your life?

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