

Rocket Science or Teaching: Which is More Difficult?

Nicholas Torres 01 December 2009

Recently, I was editing the written work of a high school graduate now enrolled in college for his associate's degree. In the first sentence of the student's essay he mentioned how proud he was to have graduated from his high school. As I read the essay I was struck by how most of his sentences were incomplete and that the essay structure did not seem to follow any standard rules. Later in the week, I listened to Arlene Ackerman, CEO of Philadelphia's School District. She made the comment that we've created a great system for adults, but a system that doesn't seem to work for our students as she cited the fact that 47% of our students were dropping out, but most teachers received satisfactory reviews.

I remember my first day as a Teach for America teacher walking into the 4th grade classroom in the South Bronx, NY. By 4th grade I expected that I would need to do some remedial work with some of my students. What I didn't expect was that many of my students could not read the most basic words. Instead of teaching children how to think and analyze the information they read, I found myself asking how to teach a child to read? My formal education training in education gave me the tools to debate educational pedagogy and theories, but did not

provide me with the ABCs on how to teach a student to read. When I think of the current educational system that trains our teachers I can't help but wonder about the competency tests teachers must pass before they are put into the classroom. I, myself, received high grades in all my educational courses and easily passed the New York State competency test that gave me my teaching credentials, but I still didn't know where to start in teaching students how to read. The fact that too many of my students could get to the 4th grade without knowing how to read or that a high school graduate cannot write complete sentences indicates that many of our teachers are in the same situation. Luckily, I had a resource that most didn't. I had my mother who has been teaching both regular and special education children how to read for over thirty years. Her training and resources gave me the tools to teach my students how to read and write.

Susan Colby and Tia Martinez state that "to save the nation, the United States needs alternative teacher training."¹ Just recently, listening to WHYY I heard a Chinese citizen state that one of the advantages that the United States has over China toward economic growth is that the United States has the best universities in the world which attracts talent maintaining us as the world's leader in innovation. However, we have to face the facts, as stated in the article, that "since 1970 the United States has put fewer and fewer teenagers through secondary school. As a result the country is quickly losing its

competitive edge" as documented in the research linking economic growth to people's educational attainment.

Susan Colby and Tia Martinez challenge the assumption that traditionally certified teachers are the most effective educators. They even go on to cite the research of Thomas Kane, Jonah Rockoff, and Douglas Staiger which detailed a longitudinal study that students taught by traditionally certified teachers fared no better in math than did students taught by alternatively certified teachers or even uncertified teachers. In reading, traditionally certified teachers' students performed only slightly better.

What I offer for consideration is training that includes pedagogy and theory but which is highly focused on specific training within a specific approach. What I've learned in my 20+ years working as an educator, therapist, and administrator of programs is that I was most effective in achieving results when I was able to operate within a specific service model or approach. To be effective, training needs to focus on the practical skills within a specific model or approach and incorporate ongoing feedback and coaching. By creating sufficient time for peer to peer feedback and master teacher coaching the principles of the model can be reinforced, challenges can be discussed and resolved, and solutions can be created for unanticipated barriers. Effective training happens through the provision of a constant feedback and improvement loop by peers and experts. My simple test, to be applied to any field, to determine if a

person will be effective is:

1. Can he/she clearly articulate the theory or approach?
2. Is there a clear training curriculum that compliments the service model and does it include practical tools?
3. Is there a performance feedback loop to analyze data toward increasing performance?

In conclusion, traditional certified teachers are currently not the most effective educators. However, if we change the certification process than we can save the nation by ensuring our students have the skills necessary to compete in a world economy.

1. ^ Colby, Susan & Martinez, Tia. Great Teachers on the Fast Track. To save the nation, the United States needs alternative teacher training. Stanford Social Innovation Review Fall 2009 Volume 7 Number 4.