I wish I had been able to learn from Lynn Erickson’s work a long time ago.

Like many teachers, I spent a considerable classroom career trying to figure out how to make what I taught compelling for the students whom I taught. No one in a position of authority told me I needed to do that. Rather, I saw the difference in students when I was able to make curriculum “appealing.” I had no formal way of accomplishing that. Again like many teachers, I just “gutted” it out.

My approach to curriculum design went through various iterations as I developed as a teacher. In my earliest years, I suppose my plan of action was to try to learn enough at home on Monday night to have something to tell my students on Tuesday, to learn enough Tuesday night to have something to tell them on Wednesday—and so on, for what inevitably proved to be an exhausting year. I had one instinct that served me well, however. I knew I wanted to make the content interesting to the students. In my earliest days as a teacher, that meant making some connections with their lives and experiences, telling stories, and throwing in an occasional game.

Somewhat later, I worked with colleagues who agreed that we had two key imperatives in curriculum design—to make curriculum “fun,” and to be very sure we focused on “what mattered most” for students to learn. We saw evidence daily in both student motivation and achievement that we were onto something useful. Those goals, too, were sensible, it turns out.

My thinking about the goals, however, wasn’t as sharply defined as it should have been. I now think of curriculum as being “engaging” instead of “fun.” I’m not opposed to students experiencing pleasure in their work; pleasure is a kid magnet after all. It’s just that I’ve come to understand that some things that are devilishly hard and most distinctly not fun can also be very engaging and deeply satisfying when we conquer them. Similarly, I now know what it means to focus
on “what matters most.” Lynn Erickson’s work has played a formative role for me in establishing that clarity.

Still later in my teaching, I read the work of Phil Phenix, who reminds us that human beings are born asking the question, “What is life and who am I in it?” He goes on to remind us that most of us die still trying to answer that question. The disciplines, he says, are designed to help us answer the question. History answers the question, “What is life and who am I in it?”—as do science, music, literature, and so on. I can remember with disturbing clarity my realization that Phenix was right, and that my curriculum was falling well short of helping students see that power in what we explored. The way I thought about curriculum got a rapid and very extreme makeover at that point, and the results with my students were compelling. I saw them go inside their minds and experiences in a way I’d never seen before. I watched them make links between the ideas we discussed in class and what they saw in the world around them.

It was only after I left the public school classroom and encountered Lynn Erickson’s writing that I had the epiphany I’d been seeking. Lynn’s work did what all good writing does when we encounter it at teachable moments in our lives. It made me say, “She understands what I tried to do, and she validates it—but more important, she gives me a vocabulary to think more precisely and more sharply about the work of curriculum design.” All those years, I’d been hunting for the notion of concepts and principles and didn’t know those words existed in terms of curriculum design. I’d been imprecise in distinguishing key information from key insights about a subject. Lynn broke the code for me.

Once that happened, I understood many things—or at least began to understand them. The content of my curriculum was composed of concrete facts and abstract understandings, or principles and generalizations, and skills. The facts made sense in light of the principles and generalizations. Otherwise, the facts became a grand game of trivia. The skills gave us a way to act upon the important ideas. I began to see that a worthwhile activity for students would likely ask them to use a key skill and some pivotal information to understand a generalization or principle. It was as though the curriculum stars were suddenly aligned in my head and could serve as the compass for curriculum planning I’d never quite had. I saw how to cast my students as thinkers, seekers of understanding, and creators of knowledge—not merely as absorbers, pleasure seekers, or even introspectors.

FAST FORWARD TO THE PRESENT

My concern in education now is not for the teachers who seek to help students find authenticity, meaning, and utility in what they teach. My worry is for all the pressures that cause teachers to believe they can’t afford the luxury of curricula with those attributes. So many factors seem to deliver the message that curriculum must be reduced to whatever can be repeated on a machine-scoreable test. Thus curriculum becomes repetition of facts and practice of skills—too often devoid of
context and meaning—and most certainly devoid of the kind of pleasure that
begets motivation in the young. So what’s the solution?

Clearly, teachers cannot disregard mandates for student proficiency with “the
basics.” A list of standards, however, is not a curriculum, nor is a textbook or a
pacing guide. All those things provide us with guidance about what we must
teach—but they are only the beginning of our roles as teachers. Here’s an analogy
for thinking about the role of standards in curriculum.

We would not invite people we care about to have dinner with us only to guide
them into our kitchens and suggest that they make their way down the kitchen
counter, eating raw beans in an unopened can, garlic still in its husk, raw ham-
burger, a pinch of salt and pepper, and so on. Those things are not dinner. They are
ingredients for dinner. A cook or a chef takes the ingredients and blends them—
often adding additional ingredients—to make food that is healthful and inviting.

As teachers, we can’t afford to blur the lines between ingredients and dinner.
We may be provided with ingredients for curriculum—but they aren’t curriculum.
To develop defensible curriculum, we have to use the ingredients in ways that
invite students to the table of learning, in ways that contribute to strong minds, and
in ways that commend learning as deeply fulfilling.

This book is a guide for making dinner—really good dinner—from raw ingre-
dients. Lynn Erickson helps us see how facts, concepts, generalizations, and prin-
ciples interrelate to reveal the meaning inherent in a subject. She helps us see how
skills guide students in becoming actors on the stage of learning. She reminds us
that all students deserve and need to derive meaning and power from curriculum
and thus dispels the myth that only a small group of students should work with
high-level, meaning-rich curriculum. She helps us see that concepts and principles
are the basis for defensible differentiation—ensuring that all students work with the
essential framework of meaning in a subject, but with different support systems, at
different levels of sophistication, drawing on different experiences, and so on. She
illustrates how concepts are portals to relevance because of their presence in our
lives. She also correctly counsels us that when students understand what they learn,
student achievement rises, as do the students’ prospects for a productive and satis-
fying life in a world much more multidimensional than an answer sheet.

Lynn’s work, however, is not a recipe. She pays us the compliment of believ-
ing that teachers are willing learners who inspire their students about content in
proportion to their own inspiration about the content. She asks us to do hard
things—and then shows us the self-efficacy that results from the doing of those
things. She ignites our imagination and intellect and thus reminds us of the power
we once knew to be a part of teaching and learning.

We teach young people who will find satisfaction in learning—either with
what we teach or outside of it. We teach young people who hunger to discover the
power of their minds. We teach young people who will have to solve problems
their teachers cannot begin to articulate—and who will never be able to do that
with a list of largely forgotten facts. We teach young people who have a critical
need to make sense of the world around them. Simple as it seems—and hard as it
is to master—concept-based curriculum is the best educational tool we have for
addressing those needs.

I continue to learn from Lynn and to be grateful for the contribution her work
continues to make to my work. I just wish I could have learned from her a long,
long time ago.

—Carol Ann Tomlinson, EdD
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