

June, *The Book of Learning and Forgetting* by Frank Smith  
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*The Book of Learning and Forgetting* is a simple book in the best way possible. A 120-page, Q&A filled, assurance that students are learning all the time. Contrary to popular belief, all the things we do in school (testing, memorization, worksheets) halt that learning. Frank Smith, who is a distinguished psycholinguist from Harvard and partial inventor of “whole language” reading instruction, gives a convincing argument.

In summary, Smith provides two theories of learning: the classic view and official theory. The official theory is one that most accept and is reflected in our schooling: intentional, hard work, individualistic, assured through testing, memorized, occasional, obvious (when it’s occurring), and based on effort. Counter is the classic view: effortless, boundless, never forgotten, inhibited by testing, unpremeditated, and social. Smith firmly believes that all learning is through the classic view. He reiterates often — “Learning is not hard work.”

A brief history is provided on how people learned prior to modern schooling. Most were immersed in their line of work such as a fishermen at the docks, or a farmer in the field. No one officially tested them on their knowledge — instead, they were immersed within their field until they achieved mastery (and then taught others.) Smith refers to these intellectual communities as clubs — places where learning happens as the result of mentors. We know, of course, that people learn this way. Smith slyly states,

“I have never heard a parent say, ‘I’m not worried about the gang my son goes with — he’s a slow learner.’ Parents know that children learn from their friends, particularly the things the parents would prefer their children not learn. And they also know that what their children learn in this way will be very difficult to erase. It is life-long learning.”

After the growth of modern schooling and the standardized practices brought with it, Smith highlights how our definition of “learning” changed. Although we all recognize the impact of immersive classical view thought, arguably most of our culture sees learning as something that happens at school. Further, we learn individual subjects in individual classes and proof of said learning is through tests. None of this makes sense as we forget most of this information in the long run. Unless there is a real world connection or a sudden spark of interest (leading to our own initiative to learn), we’ll fail to find relevance, memorize, pass, and forget.

Yet, schools continue to frame all learning as the official theory. Smith shows how behaviorism — wanting to promote positive actions of children — led to a mass market of rewards and gimmicks:

“Every activity—whether on paper or on computer screens—was sugarcoated with frenzied graphics designed to seduce learners and teachers into the belief that all the effort could be ‘fun.’ Inevitably, it was all accompanied by scores and relentless record keeping...[behaviors such as] ethics, respect, loyalty, morality, honesty, charity, collaboration, compassion or care. All of these involve values that can only be acquired from people with whom you identify, from the company you keep.”

If this is the case, then schools are not doing a great job at preparing learners for much of anything. A common argument might be: how do we spark learners to actually learn basic skills such as reading or writing, instead of us always doing it for them? As in, at what point will students take command of their learning as opposed to the instructor? Smith explains:

“Teachers needn’t worry. There’s a simple yet powerful reason why children will never become dependent upon other people to do anything they think they can do for themselves—they don’t have the patience. Someone once brushed our hair for us and tied our shoelaces, but we don’t expect anyone to do so now. Nor do children, who normally insist on attending to themselves long before we think they are ready to do so...”

Later, Smith highlights how a parent will be reading to their child and often to their dismay, their child turns the page before they’ve finished.

Much of the work is comprised of easy-to-follow questions and answers surrounding the classic view. Some stand-out points include:

I have struggled to learn math for years and I’m very motivated to do so, but I never remember anything!

“Your years of wasted effort demonstrate that hard work and motivation do not guarantee learning; rather they are a sign that learning has not taken place, only small amounts of temporary memorization.”

What takes the place of traditional school in this model?

“If pointless and time-consuming programs, drills, and others were taken away, teachers could be free to get on with the kinds of things that promote permanent and worthwhile learning...[having] constant contact with people from whom they can learn from in the classroom and outside.”

Surely a school with this model would never work in the real world?

“The essence of any liberated school is that it would be a community—not a hierarchy of principal, teachers, support staff, and students but a place where people gather to engage in interesting activities. Teachers, students, and everyone

else in the school would be partners in a collaboration of initiative and enterprise. There would probably be more teachers, too—better paid and more experienced—and more assistant and apprentice teachers as well.”

This work is fantastic for any educator who wants confirmation that progressive, experiential education is real learning—and they’re not crazy when they think testing is a waste of time. Pages of citations document research studies proving how “traditional school” does little to foster learning, and educators would do best to ask students what it is they want to learn. As previously stated, it stands out how easy-to-read this work is—making it a perfect summer read for continued support, engagement, and dissection of progressive practice.