

Lessons from the Sea
September, 2012

As I greeted staff members upon their return for the new school year, I found myself musing over my summer vacation. I shared with them some homespun wisdom drawn on a time-honored assignment: The one in which we ask students to share what they did or learned over the summer. My summer vacation, in unexpected ways, brought insights into the nature of teaching and learning – even though this was far from the purpose of my vacation. I signed up with a British company that takes groups out and teaches its participants to swim in the open water. Eight of us, and two coaches, went out each morning for a 1 ½ to 2 mile swim in the Mediterranean Sea off of the Spanish island of Mallorca. In the afternoons, we reconvened for a couple of hours at an Olympic size swimming pool for drills, practice, and videotaping of our swim technique. Eat. Sleep. Swim. Eat. Sleep. Swim. We did this routine for 7 days.

Here is where my thoughts led me. First, I began to think about the transition from the water of the pool to that of the sea. Pool water is chlorinated. The idea is to eliminate bacteria and algae, to make it as pure and clean as possible so that swimmers don't get sick. It is also flat, passive, waiting for us to stir it up. It is without life. Sea water, by contrast, is teeming with life – with its vegetation, fish, and all sorts of other life forms. The sea also has a life of its own – with its waves, its undercurrents, and its constant movement. Pools are still and safe. The sea is ever changing and thrilling. Ever the educator, I began to think about schools being like pools and the rest of life being ... well ... like the sea. When we build schools, we first and foremost create a safe environment in which students can take risks. We create an environment that keeps turmoil at bay so that students can focus on the basics without being overwhelmed with the complexity of what I shall call “the real world,” for lack of a better term. We do a good job at this. Students practice and develop skills so that, when they do enter the real world, they are ready for its changing landscape.

How do teachers know we adequately prepare students to swim in the open water, that is, in the real world? This is the question I explored through the lens of my trip.

Out of curiosity, I did a Google search for quotes about the sea. Many of these quotes surprised me because they spoke of the *dangers* of the sea. I was expecting more about the *beauty* of the sea. Some did speak of the sea as a place where we belong. Here's one along those lines, from John F. Kennedy, speaking in 1962 to his fellow sailors:

“I really don't know why it is that all of us are so committed to the sea, except I think it's because in addition to the fact that the sea changes, and the light changes, and ships change, it's because we all came from the sea. And it is an interesting biological fact that all of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean, and, therefore, we have salt in our blood, our sweat, and in our tears. We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea, whether it is to sail or to watch it, we are going back from whence we came.”

Now, on the darker side, here's a quote from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*:

“Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.

“Consider all this; and then turn to the green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life.”

Fortunately, there was no Moby Dick on my trip, nor were there venomous jellyfish or the sharks that appeared on our own Massachusetts coast this summer. It struck me that both quotes talk of the sea being a part of us. In Melville’s thinking, it’s as if we must grapple with the dark and foreboding sea in order to find our island of peace. And so, let’s return to my analogy and ask how we prepare students for “real life,” the unprotected life, so that each one of them can find his or her island of peace? Well, it begins with creating islands of competency in school – in the pool, as it were. Each of the following three lessons from my trip helped me think further about how to answer this question.

First, I quickly learned that there are no lane lines in the sea. Yes, I was more buoyant, but little good that did if I swam in the wrong direction (which I did), or bumped into someone swimming straight while I went off course (which I did). My lesson here is that we have to be careful not to foster dependency on those lane lines. Students must grow increasingly independent and self-confident. In literacy education, we call this a *gradual release of responsibility*. We also must teach students to be adaptive as they apply their learning to new situations. I learned that to sight in open water – so you can see where you are going – you have to lift your head straight up between breaths and take a look. Now, this may sound easy, but you also have to understand that I was always taught that you never lift your head while you swim – lest your legs will sink and you’ll increase water resistance against your body. So, in the real world, it turns out you have to let go of what was useful in one setting in order for you to be successful in another. You have to know how to apply your knowledge in new situations, how to swim in the waves when you’ve only learned to swim in a pool. This holds true for all kinds of learning. Without what we call “higher order thinking skills” (such as applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating) and without a sense of independence, students will indeed be lost at sea.

My second lesson was as follows: When the going gets rough, relax. Don’t fight the water. Our coaches constantly reminded us to relax our muscles – particularly in our neck and shoulders. When they did so, I was surprised to find out just how tight all the muscles were. It’s a natural reaction. When tired, or hit by waves, we struggle and it is this struggle that is counterproductive. For our students, when they are frustrated with the difficulty of an assignment, or they just can’t “get it,” they tense up. By high school, we call this *stress*. We need to help our students take a step back, regroup, and start again with what they know. Wellness education is not just about physical fitness, it is also about stress reduction, responsible decision-making, healthy relationships, good nutrition, and avoidance of substance abuse. When all these things are in place, they are truly fit. When the supports are in place, students can take a deep breath, relax, and only then be able to improve their academic skills. The best swimmers are the most relaxed. Just watch any Olympic swimmer coast over the water, and you’ll see relaxed, yet determined, grace. The best students are equally relaxed and determined. Not all students can do this on their own, especially those with special needs. That’s why we’re here; to provide them with the support and scaffolding they need to succeed. I wrote earlier of islands of peace and competency. Good students find these islands in themselves quite easily, often repeatedly. Students with special needs need our support to do so, and this can take years, but when they do, the feeling of peace and joy is especially precious.

Thirdly, I was reminded that the body follows the head. If, while you swim, you allow your head to move back and forth, or up and down, your body will respond by shifting direction. As a result, your swimming, which should be streamlined, can instead sway you in all directions. The head, after all, is the heaviest part of the body. Throw its weight around and it’s bound to set you off course. I wasn’t aware of how much my head moved around when I swam. Gaining awareness is an essential part of the

learning experience. Years ago, a swim coach told me that most athletes, in a four step process, move from *unconscious incompetence* to *unconscious competence*. By this he meant that we begin swimming lessons not knowing we are incompetent at some aspect of this skill. Once it is pointed out that our technique is somehow lacking, we become aware of our incompetence. Hence, we become *consciously incompetent*. With training, our technique improves and eventually we become *consciously competent*. The final stage is when we can relax when using a newly learned skill – when it becomes habit. This is *unconscious competence*. All learning is like this, and it is something that our students should keep in mind as they labor through these four steps. We must step out of our unconscious state just long enough to learn to get things right, and only then can we step back into that unconscious state. The body follows the head. The acquisition of skills follows the mind's awareness.

As students dive into the school year, into our metaphoric swimming pool, we must remember the sea. We have to teach them to think consciously about their skills, to relax when they are stressed, to adapt to new circumstances, to swim straight without those lane lines and, of course, to enjoy the swim!

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