

Are We Boring Students to Death?

I had an interesting conversation with a 12-year-old young man the other day. When I asked him about school, he explained how he never learned anything and had decided that it wasn't worth it to even try anymore. Instead, he was becoming one of the "bad kids" and making life miserable for his teachers.

But while his external attitude was flippant and callous, he kept dropping little clues which showed his words belied his true feelings. And after I left the conversation, I came to the realization that this kid was showing multiple signs of being a smart individual. Was it possible that school was simply so boring to him that he had lost his desire to learn?

But if that was so, then why was school so boring? The answer to that question may be found in a statement made by educator David Hicks in his book [*Norms and Nobility*](#). According to Hicks, today's education system has strayed from the traditional, "knowledge-centered" approach practiced by the ancients. This approach put "the most difficult studies first, with the expectation that having mastered these, their students would have no trouble with whatever followed."

Hicks continues:

"Put thus abstractly and unconditionally, the classical approach sounds harsh indeed – and I would be inclined to doubt its efficacy were it not for the piano lessons of my boyhood days. There lived in the neighborhood where I grew up two elderly ladies, piano teachers, whose divergent methods of instruction seemed inconsequential at the time. At the unripe ages of six and seven, my best friend and I were placed under their respective tutelage.

My friend began, as I recall, with a simple minuet by Mozart,

which he was expected to commit to memory – a monstrously formidable and uncongenial first assignment, we both agreed. My obliging teacher, on the other hand, assigned me a one-note ‘samba’ from an illustrated book of graded exercises. Four years later, I concluded my graded exercises with a banal rendition of something entitled ‘The Lone Ranger’ from Rossini’s overworked Overture. Along the way, I had learned to play a tune by rolling an orange over the black keys. While I was losing interest in graded exercises, however, my friend – after a month of agonizing over Mozart before breakfast and after school – went on to play with elegance and precision the Brahms, Chopin, and Liszt that my illiterate fingers will never coax out of a keyboard.”

Hicks words make me wonder: in our rush to ensure that kids are learning, have we made their studies too easy? Have we been so busy giving them worksheets to fill out and easy novels to read that they’ve lost interest, become convinced that they are dumb, and decided that it’s simply a waste of time to cooperate?

Is raising the bar instead of lowering it the key to getting more students to succeed in school?