

Book review of "I love learning: I hate school"

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BOOK REVIEW

I LOVE LEARNING: I HATE SCHOOL

REVIEWED BY

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Blum, Susan D. (2016). *I Love Learning: I Hate School*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Pages: 345. Price: 24.95 USD (hardcover); 19.95 USD (paper).

First let me say I was attracted to the title: Shallow I know ;) but it got my attention in a world that is full of “noise.” Further exploration found this sentence on the dust cover introduction piece, “She challenges our system of education and argues for a ‘reintegration of learning with life.’”

I was hooked.

Like the author, I had liked school as much as I had liked learning. As with her, it was why I became an academic – teaching future teachers, future instructional designers and others like myself who tried to learn both inside and outside the formal classroom. Like her, I could not understand how someone would not love school the way I did (pp. 2-3). This feeling of connection to learning has never gone away and I continue to be surprised when I meet people who don’t share this love.

As author Susan Blum notes, she struggled with this dissonance from her students until she began to look at the issues through an anthropological lens. She describes the book as “...the story of how I, a professor with twenty-five years of university teaching...lost faith in school but gained faith in my fellow humans” (p. 2). The book is her answer to the question “Why don’t they care?” (p. 2).

The book is divided into 4 parts: Trouble in Paradise; Schooling and its Oddities; How and Why Humans Learn; and A Revolution in Learning. In these four sections Blum explores her journey from school acolyte to offering a revolutionary vision on how school systems

have to change and how learning is ready for a new paradigm.

Blum delves into the “nitty gritty” of learning. Grades, course evaluations, learner engagement, competition for time, not having a reading culture, and more concerns from practitioners all add to her discussion of what may be currently stopping us, as teachers and they, as learners from growing from the experience of learning in an academic environment. Her examination of the academic literature showed her a need to “...measure the present against an idealised past... [when doing this], it must fall short” (p. 29). She suggests “...success not learning, is the obvious goal in college today” (p. 33).

She argues that we are in a place where reading concentration and writing is evolving. Technology has created a space in our learning, whether good or bad, so we need to realize this is not going to result in us “...returning to a time when weighty physical objects held a monopoly on knowledge, wisdom and information” (p. 47). I understand her thinking in this. Recently I attended a two-and-a-half-day workshop on critical thinking and indigenous world view, and we were asked to turn off our electronics, put away paper and pen, and just LISTEN. At the end of the first day, my head was aching. It had been a very long time since I had focused that much on one task by using one sense, as I am usually found multitasking between all of the senses.

So did all of this research and talking to colleagues and students give Blum hope and understanding that all

was not lost in the academic arena?

Well, here's what she did. First she changed her approach – she asked students to have "voices" (p. 258). For Blum, this "voice" was asking students to be actively engaged in the topic of the day – bring to the class something that interested them that fit the discussion. She then listened (often using these student's voices, to make changes to her approaches) - she switched out quizzes and began to use exit slips (3 basic questions turned in at the end of class); she began to meet with each student in the first month of class (in a group of 4) at the bookstore café – the conversations "...reduced the physical and social space between faculty and students" (p. 260).

Over time, Blum strived to narrow the space that often divides learner and teacher. Not all of it worked, and not for every class. But she persevered and found what felt right for her and her learners - what I would call that "perfect dissonance" that allows learning to happen.

In the end, Blum discusses the models of education that got us here to where we are today and questions the usual "factory model" of learning. She offers her own thoughts on using the Permaculture Model (<http://permacultureprinciples.com>) as an opportunity to apply the underlying principles to education going forward. She describes the idea as "...[an] analogy between education and growing food...that aims to mimic natural principles to yield permanently sustainable results...incorporating the human and practical ("livelihood") as well as spiritual and communal needs" (p. 278).

As she notes "Though only a metaphor, it actually works quite well to design a humane, sustainable system – including an education system – that works *with* (human) nature rather than constantly and ineffectively battling *against* it" (p. 278). In the book she takes the 12 principles of the Permaculture Model and sets up 12 cultivation principles for application to education. Like growing in a garden, she suggests "If all education is cultivation, then it is no surprise that when we *fight* natural forces, we expend energy wastefully, [we] fail to attain our desired results...When we work *with* those forces, we produce beauty and bounty" (p. 280).

Overall, the book is full of ideas for you to reconsider your own approaches and to offer ways for you to cultivate your own classroom of learners.

Blum's book is witty, interesting and quite engaging. Her language, stories, and humour make the reading easy and yet thoughtful and grounded academically. If

you are looking for ways to counter some of the feelings you have as an educator, ways to counter the feeling that you are not connecting with your learners, this book will be a good addition to your summer reading list while you prepare for fall classes.