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The
7 Questions
of the
Inspired Mind

How to Teach or Learn *Anything*

*From Play in Childhood
through Mastery and Innovation
in Adulthood*

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The Inspired Mind

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Introduction

The Open Mind

In 1987, educator Allan Bloom wrote about the failure of the American system of higher education in *The Closing of the American Mind*.

He lamented that the great books of Western Civilization were out of vogue, that professors neglected to discuss anything of lasting value with their students, and that they fell short as exemplars of a philosophic way of life.

In short: our college students were getting a deficient education – what Bloom likened to a “closed” mind – for lack of Classics and Mentors.

The Culturally Literate Mind

That same year, academician and literary critic E. D. Hirsch published his own commentary on modern education in response to the apparent lack of a common culture among the rising generation of "scholars"--even the highly talented and celebrated ones.

He noted that certain read-between-the-lines meaning is lost because we do not have a common frame of reference, and that the richness of our language and culture are largely lost on the youth who will be our leaders in the next few decades.

The whole library of topics "For Dummies" on almost any conceivable topic is evidence of a society which pursues education purely on a need-to-know basis, seeking narrow, digested knowledge from an "expert" who will tell them what to think, without having to judge for themselves the relevant, the useful and the meaningful.

The Well-Trained Mind

A decade later, Susan Wise Bauer took up the baton as she applied her experience as a homeschooled, classically-trained professional educator to encourage parents and teachers to own their role of re-introducing classics in the education of our young ones.

Her book *The Well-trained Mind* illustrates for a generation of parents and teachers who knew nothing of the great books how the elites were taught with original sources, critical interpretation and written response.

Her *Story of the World* resources became a guide and an inspiration to many professional and home educators, and

a model for how to draw our young ones into The Great Conversation.

Our Mission: The Inspired Mind

Building on the vision and passion of these great educators--the Open Mind; the Culturally-Literate Mind; the Well-Trained Mind--we hope to contribute to a new level of discourse on the subject of education:

The Inspired Mind.

Every person has inner genius. Great education consists of helping each student discover, develop and polish her genius.

Like Bloom, we employ Classics and Mentors; like Hirsch we promote cultural literacy and a foundation of critical shared knowledge; like Bauer we believe that our children are capable of so much more, and our teachers and parents should be tasked with bringing them face-to-face with greatness.

And yet, all of these fabulous objectives and tools can be effectively used to bore a child to tears, to overwhelm a parent or teacher, to effectively shut down the learning process and ultimately injure the relationship, the self-esteem, and the long-term learning outcomes.

And yet: How can we achieve our highest educational and life aspirations without an enduring and passionate love of learning?

We believe that of all the things our children (and we) learn, on the short list of critical lessons are:

- A deep sense of purpose
- A deep sense of ownership

No catechism of knowledge, no skill, no achievement will fully compensate if a student does not feel a deep sense of purpose for his life and the personal responsibility and empowerment to prepare for that purpose through his education.

And where both of these things are abundantly active, there is almost no skill or knowledge out of reach to the learner, no matter what it is, what setbacks or disadvantages stand in his way, or when he chooses to undertake it.

Prologue

What is Education?

3 Types of Education

There are really only three kinds of education, and they are best understood from the student's perspective. Students get a good education for one of three reasons:

- They are forced to study long, hard and effectively (the "Stick")
- They are convinced or manipulated to study long, hard and effectively (the "Carrot")
- They love to study long, hard and effectively (the "Love Affair")

If the first two can be "good," the latter is truly "great."

The Stick, the Carrot, or the Love Affair—these are the three types of education; and the love affair is by far the most effective. To the Open Mind, the Culturally Literate Mind

and the Well-trained Mind, the Inspired Mind adds an additional element to initiate and cultivate a life-long love affair with learning.

Building an Education

In any subject there are multiple fields and areas. In math you have algebra, geometry, calculus and so on. In science there is biology, chemistry, physics, etc. In music there are different kinds of instruments, periods and styles of music, and every subject has both its notable practitioners and its innovators. You can go deeper and in to more detail by studying individual fields as well as the broader area of the subject.

A great education includes jumping around between subject and field to get a broader and deeper understanding of each of them.

The following pages are not meant to be a full study plan or outline for any of these subjects. Rather, this is meant to give an example for ways to start, how to build and grow your own outline.

It started with our Mentoring in the Classics series. One month we covered a math classic, and the response to a 7-step process to effective math-love and learning that Oliver articulated was so overwhelming that we realized that

there was a great need to have this same template applied to other subjects.

The keys to success in these steps are:

- Starting at the beginning
- Acquiring skills and knowledge in the context of natural development
- Working with an inquiring mind

Quality education is marked by myriad questions, and the pursuit of their answers. Indeed, it might well be argued that no knowledge can be meaningfully acquired or applied if there is no curiosity, no wonder, no void to fill.

All great learning starts with a question. The 7 Questions for the Inspired Mind are a progression of interrogatives that mark a path of inquiry from early learning through world-class mastery.

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7 Questions for the Inspired Mind

The seven questions work best sequentially as listed below, and are expanded by key words that follow:

1. **Why:** Parables and Environment
2. **How:** Elements and Basics
3. **Who:** Subject-loving Mentors/Heroes
4. **What:** Put it to work
5. **Where:** Subject Classics
6. **When:** Research and Skills
7. **Which:** Classics in Depth

These seven steps will be explored in more detail under the specific subject heads later in this book. For now, let us explore the general meaning and purpose of each question.

Question 1

Why?

Parables and Environment

(This step is especially effective for earliest childhood through Core Phase. And of course: Core Phase never ends.)

The first level interrogative is the irrepressible, sometimes-nearly-constant question of childhood: **Why?**

In the context of mentoring, knowing why we do what we do sets us on a path of clarity that squelches the voices of doubt, criticism, perfectionism, and even the siren songs of distraction from our ideal and competing “goods”.

From the learner’s perspective, the **Why?** opens the heart and mind. There is a natural series of critical lessons that attach themselves to the skills, ideas and concepts we teach from Why:

1. As we teach and inspire the new learner from the context of Why, Core principles and qualities are justified and reinforced via the exposure to the new subject area.
2. When introduced in a level-appropriate form and methodology, from the context of Why, the body of

knowledge and skills in a given area of learning are relevant, accessible and inviting.

3. The intrinsic, subliminal and modeled lessons are that the subject area is both *valued* by the mentor, and *valuable* to the student.
4. The learner makes the instinctive assumption that a certain level of mastery, through exposure, play, effort and rigor (during the due course of education over a lifetime), will be natural, desirable, and worth the effort.

We cannot overstate the significance of these Why lessons. When a child 1) understands the relevance of a subject, 2) enjoys the subject, 3) values the subject, and 4) anticipates and envisions himself employing and excelling at the subject in a life-long pursuit of learning and application, *no obstacle or deficit will stand in her way as she pursues her education in that subject.*

Using fables, rhymes, ditties, tales and parables shows the learner how the subject is connected in the realm of “truth”.

Keeping the environment simple and the routine in harmony with the individual’s phase-needs, with other family members actively engaged in the more advanced steps in the learning continuum (according to the phase they are in), help to teach *environmentally* how learning works, and what the child can expect to see in his own progression as the time is right.

Question 2

How?

Elements and Basics

(Core, Love of Learning)

In the mind of child, as in the development of an effective learning curve, the next natural question is **How?**

- How does this work?
- How is it put together?
- How is this used?
- How does it affect me?
- How does it affect others?

For teaching and learning, this amounts to exploring the **Elements** and **Basics** of the subject area, with the curiosity, playfulness, experimental-ness and non-judgmental-ness of a child. In concrete terms: the child is playing in the sandbox, exploring what sand can do, and what he can do with sand. He is most likely *not* memorizing its mineral constituents, or the relevant broad academic particulars of geology, chemistry, history, etc.

When the learning is over-supervised, over-structured, over-scrutinized, over-corrected, or otherwise “managed” to an extreme, what we teach the child is that they are not to step out of line, not to challenge assumptions, not to innovate, not to follow the path just to see where it leads.

This is tragic, as these things (challenging assumptions, innovation, etc.) are *precisely* what it means to be an independent, effective and productive learner. The usual outcome of this kind of regimentation is that the child either surrenders his will and curiosity to the so-called “learning process,” or he loses trust in the authority figure as an educational mentor, and tries to go it alone.

On the other hand, by focusing on discovery and open-ended learning at this age, we facilitate an independent, curious, innovative approach to learning in the child that serve her well for the rest of her life.

To do this, our best efforts are focused in Step 2 on enjoying the journey, feeling comfortable and joyful in the process, developing a relationship and a certain level of familiarity with the tools/elements/basics of the subject matter (and we will go into detail later to explain what is meant by this in various core subjects).

In Step 2, learning through the following ways is wonderful: