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## What is the best teaching approach?

Garden International School in Kuala Lumpur interviewed me for a job a few years ago. The Primary Head teacher, Colter Watt, asked me this question: What does 'inquiry-based' mean to you?

My answer, I think, was not a good one; anyway, I wasn't offered the job. Were I to be asked that question again now, I would turn the question back onto the interviewer and I would ask him these two questions:

- 1) Does your school have a curriculum?
- 2) Do your students take standardised or external examinations?

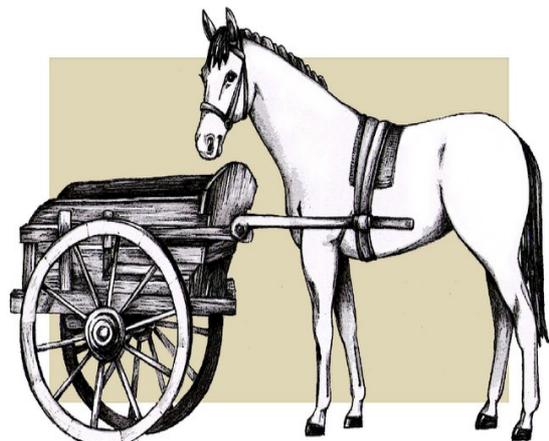
The answer to both of these questions would have to have been 'yes'. In which case, Garden International School does not offer an inquiry-based education.

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'Inquiry-based' is one of a number of different 'approaches' which one hears about from schools and educators. 'Child-centred' is another – which always makes me wonder what kind of school education isn't child-centred; adult education presumably. There is a school just outside Chiang Mai, Thailand, which advertises itself as a 'child-friendly school' – that always make me giggle as I pass by. I feel sorry for kids who go to schools which are unfriendly to children.

To be fair, I suppose 'child-centred' compares itself to the alternative, which is 'teacher-centred' – but schools which claim to be child-centred also continue to follow the model of one classroom teacher to 25 plus children. That sounds pretty teacher-centred to me. One child and twenty-five teachers sounds more child-centred.

I've heard of the 'cooperative approach' which is founded on the idea that learning is a social or community endeavour. But again, such schools claiming such an approach are taking children out of their natural social and community groups and putting them into large age-homogeneous groups in an artificial environment. (See picture to the right.)



Then you have the constructivists whose claim is that learning is about constructing meaningful associations vis-à-vis other people, – similar to the cooperative approach. This is usually juxtaposed with the Skinnerian or Pavlovian approach which is based on behaviour modification based on external stimuli such as rewards and sanctions.

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The inquiry-based approach seems attractive to me. The idea of children being naturally curious and deciding their own path through their learning and developing independent thinking skills and following their individual interests sounds most to me like the natural state of human learning and development. But as I have outlined above, this must live separately from a curriculum or standardised testing because both of those things obviously imply an imposed learning paradigm. You can't tell children to learn whatever they want for the next ten weeks and then test them on adding fractions and World War I. And you can't tell children they have to read Lord of the Flies and then expect them to read something different, whatever they're into.

Sticking with the general idea of inquiry-based learning, which I believe is widely accepted as a sound approach, I would posit the following. Whatever one's approach preference, I think that most educators would agree that an effective teacher is one



who is passionate about his or her subject. An excited teacher can more effectively create an excited learning environment – as opposed to one who, for example, is teaching the Vikings for the tenth year in a row, pulling out the same old tired worksheets and once again filling the wall with a cut-out long boat and helmets, just adding different child-Viking faces each year.

So this leads to the question – **how can teachers remain excited about what they are teaching?** I have a suggestion.

Another area of agreement amongst educators, I suggest, is that a good teacher is also a good learner. A great Literature teacher, for example, would be someone who loves to read literature; a great Modern Languages teacher someone who loves to learn languages. Each person's passion for teaching whatever subject or topic is fuelled by their latest discoveries. I am in a very fortunate situation right now as a teacher in that I have a small number of students whom I am teaching online where there is no curriculum and no exam objective. I can teach whatever I like and what happens is that I teach whatever it is that I am learning about at the given moment. It's great because the learning is fresh and exciting for me (as a learner) and this creates a fresh and exciting dynamic for the student – and it does no harm also when I start a lesson by telling the student that I have just learned something really cool.

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So what is my point? My point is that the best teaching approach is when the teacher is an inquiry-based learner himself or herself. This precludes curriculum or testing imposed from above or from outside. The teacher is on a journey of discovery which is a joy-ride for the educator. This inspires and fuels the delivery of the teaching which in turn hopefully will inspire and fuel the learner's desire to engage in his or her own inquiry-based learning adventure. We can talk about being 'child-centred' or about putting children first, but whether we like it or not, great learning begins with a great teacher, and great teachers are people who are constantly challenging their own beliefs and assumptions and are excited to do so.



The best classes begin with the teacher saying, *“You'll never guess what I just learned!”*

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