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# The Zoo Trip:

## Objecting to Objectives

It's a beautiful day for a family trip to the zoo, and the arrival of a new baby elephant makes the prospect even more exciting. So why is Tim crying?

**BY THOMAS S. POETTER**

educational worth. Some behaviorists claim that no learning occurs if students' performance, as measured by the teacher, doesn't meet the exact specifications of the objective to be taught in the lesson.<sup>3</sup> Many present-day "reformers" say that everything in the curriculum should be tied explicitly to "standards," "objectives," or "goals."

It's just not enough for them and for those exercising surveillance over

I'VE TAUGHT many graduate- and undergraduate-level courses in education for novice and veteran teachers over the years. Curriculum understanding and development are typically central aspects of these courses.<sup>1</sup> I've often used Elliot Eisner's classic curriculum text, *The Educational Imagination*,<sup>2</sup> to frame what I regard as a problem for the field and the practice of teaching in public schools: curricularists and teachers often believe that meaningful activities in school have to be scripted, planned to the nth degree and assigned learning objectives and goals ahead of time, or they have no

teachers and our classrooms if students find an experience meaningful and valuable in myriad ways or if an activity teaches without being tied to some set of learning outcomes or objectives. It's the classic question of whether ends have to come before means, or if means can precede undetermined ends in a meaningful way. Or maybe the bigger question is whether educational means are sometimes adequate educational ends in and of themselves. Perhaps some of our most educational experiences occur when we purposefully engage in them and then figure out after the fact just what it was that we gleaned from them. The gleaning can be done implicitly or explicitly with the teacher, on the student's own, or in a group. The point is that something was learned, and the learning may have been ineffable, deep,

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or profound — as when you hear your first beautiful aria at the opera or see a majestic home run hit out of a big-league stadium.

Eisner calls these types of activities in our lives and in schools “expressive activities” or “expressive outcomes.” They are things we do on purpose because something good and educational will come of doing them. Going to the movies, riding a bike, taking a walk, or making a field trip to the zoo are things human beings do for fun, for culture, for meaning, or for learning. There is an implicit understanding that, whatever the ends of the activity, they will be worthwhile and that the means experienced will be of value, no matter what. We know something good will happen in the midst of doing the activity; we just don’t know ahead of time what it will be.

So, Eisner maintains, expressive outcomes are different from behavioral and problem-solving objectives. Behavioral objectives are time-worn educational ends that teachers typically learn how to write in preservice programs and then incorporate into their weekly planning, which they share with their principals every Monday morning. These objectives supposedly describe and predict what content and behaviors will be achieved from the interaction with certain materials, processes, and activities. Problem-solving objectives are more open than behavioral objectives and involve more student agency, but the ends are still tightly wound around particular problems and certain questions about them. The idea, in both behavioral and problem-solving circumstances, is to use the activity (means), whether teacher- or student-directed, to meet the stated, explicit goal (end).

Many times my students have been stumped during a discussion of these multiple ways to think about educational ends, especially if they’ve seen their own curriculum work as being centered on behavioral objectives for the better parts of their careers in teaching. They argue that they often set students to solving problems and allow them to discover how best to go about the work of reaching a stated end. I believe that they do this — and though it’s good, it’s certainly not nirvana. As we talk, many of my students see some value, on special occasions, in having their students engage in expressive activities. But how are they educational? What’s wrong with always scripting the ends ahead of time, creating objectives that will guide the students’ experience, helping students connect the learning they will be doing on the scene to broader and even more explicit objectives in their regular school curriculum? They ask, “Isn’t this just good planning for instruc-

tion? Can’t an expressive activity be even better if we turn it into a more tightly planned, more objective experience?”

In response, I tell the story of how my family takes its yearly zoo trip. Okay, I don’t really go to the zoo this way. The story is told tongue-in-cheek, not always the best teaching tool, but it’s effective in this case. I’m trying to show how ludicrous the students’ hard and fast position is, carried to the extreme, just as we have carried it to the extreme in our classroom and school practices to date. In fact, the story is so hard-hitting that it once made a student cry; she walked in on the middle of the story without hearing my disclaimer at the beginning. I’m not so proud of that, though my oral interpretation skills must have been in peak form that day.

What follows is a dramatization — when I perform it, I act out the part of the driver and mimic the voices of the rest of the passengers. For effect, imagine that I am in front of a room full of students of teaching, pretending that I am driving a family of four to the zoo on a crisp, beautiful, and sunny Saturday morning.

## THE ZOO TRIP

I take my seat at the wheel of our minivan. Every spring we go to the zoo as a family. We leave early in the morning so that we can get a free place to park on the street outside the \$5 zoo lot. The car is packed with snacks and drinks for the ride and for the day on the zoo grounds; the goodies sit at the feet of my wife, Kate, on the passenger side. Our two sons, Jack, 8, and Tim, 6, sit in the back seats, all buckled in. I drive. They anticipate.

“Well, boys,” I begin, as I look at them through the rearview mirror, adjusting my seating position for the 50-minute ride, “just for review, tell me again what it is that we agreed would be the focus of our glorious trip to the zoo today?”

“Daddy?” Tim pipes up immediately. “Before we start, I want you to know that we watched this one show last night on TV about the new baby eledrant at —”

“That’s ‘elephant,’ Son. ‘Elephant,’ not ‘eledrant,’” I emphasize.

“Right, a baby eledrant was —”

“No, ‘elephant,’ not ‘eledrant.’ Now say it right, after me. El-e-phant.”

“Eledrant.”

We go on like this for a few minutes. Frustrated, I

finally say, "Just go on, Tim, forget it. You're in first grade and still messing up the pronunciation of easy words like that. Wow. Anyway, what were you saying about the baby eledrant, I mean, elephant?"

Tim takes my harsh critique in stride and continues, purposefully, "Well, we saw this part on the news, and it told about the new baby eledrant at the zoo. It was born just this past week, and they are going to have a special program today at 9:30 where they bring it out and show everyone and —"

"And?" I press.

"And I'd like to see him."

"And you'd like to see him? Well, that would be possible if today was about baby elephants, but today isn't about baby elephants." Turning my attention to Tim's older brother, I ask, "What *is* today about, Jack? Tell your little brother again."

"It's about carnivores, Dad. Carnivores!" He makes a growling, almost meat-eating-type noise, grinding the sounds in the back of his throat while answering. He'd just as soon gobble Tim up as put up with his nonsense.

That makes me beam. "Good, Son, it's the family's carnivore day at the zoo. Correct. We've been preparing for this trip for several weeks. Now, if it were about baby elephants, today we would be focusing on . . .?"

"Herbivores, of course," Jack answers with great confidence. "Everyone knows that elephants are herbivores, not carnivores. Herbivores, like elephants, eat plants and stuff, not meat." With a good bit of disdain for his younger sibling, he pounds this point home, looking directly at Tim.

"Right again!" I turn to Kate and ask, "Honey, would you please give Jack a cookie and a drink for his performance so far? Just outstanding. Good boy."

"Thanks, Dad."

"You're welcome, Son," I smile, while making eye contact with him in the rearview mirror. But I see Tim's hand in the air, patiently waiting to ask a question, knowing no cookie or punch will be forthcoming. He knows better than to ask for something like a snack at this point, considering how poorly he has done so far.

"Tim, what is it?"

"Well, Dad, I know that today is about carnivores, and that herbivores are not carnivores."

"Good, Tim, that's the smartest thing you've said so far today," I say, interrupting him.

"But I'd really like to see the baby eledrant. He's so cute, and just brand-new and everything."

Seething now, I pull the car over. "Now you listen

to me, Tim." I wheel on him, scaring even Kate a bit. "You can try to derail this discussion all you want, but this isn't about *you* and what *you* want to do or see at the zoo. That's just selfish. I won't hear any more about it, do you hear me? Now just button it, and we'll get back to business. You got me?"

With a small tear welling, Tim whispers just loud enough for us to hear, "Okay, Dad, sorry."

"Fine." I pull the car back on the road. "Now — and there's nothing to cry about, by the way, young man. After all, we are going to the zoo today. Isn't that awesome?"

Now turning back to Kate, I ask, "Honey, do you have the warm-up worksheet I brought for the trip?"

"Yes, Dear, right here."

She fiddles around on the floor for the manila folder with the worksheets titled "Carnivores at the Zoo," finds them, and hands one each back to Tim and Jack along with pencils and clipboards.

"Now, these worksheets should help you prepare even more deeply for the zoo trip and especially for the special topic of carnivores. Get to it. We'll hear your preliminary answers in, oh, five minutes."

The boys both take up the work, quietly. They can both read well enough to handle the elementary questions with their own writing in response.

"Okay, Quiz Time!" I shout, after only about three minutes, because Tim's errant comments have made us lose some time.

"Let's hear it, Tim. Come on, boy. Number 1 (I had the questions memorized). 'Name your favorite carnivore at the zoo.'"

"Eledrant," Tim answers, now defiant. He stares straight through me.

Trying not to draw too much attention to his defiant play, I respond, "No. Elephants are not carnivores. Jack?"

"Tigers!" Jack exclaims with an air of superiority. He senses that he has the upper hand for good now, as if he didn't have it already, and he circles for the kill. "And a whole bunch more, Dad, like lions and such, live at the zoo. I just love carnivores."

"Me, too, Son. Boy, have you come a long way in your work. Momma, give that boy another cookie!"

Kate playfully throws back another cookie for Jack, which he snares in the air and pops into his mouth, lording it over Tim. I kind of like the challenge Jack lays down for Tim; competition is good for kids.

"Number 2. Timmy, I know you can do it. Okay, 'What do carnivores eat?'"

Tim pauses for a moment, weighing his options, while feeling hungry and embarrassed and completely under the thumb of his big brother, a place he hates to be. “Dad, I’m going to say . . . eledrants.”

“Hmm, interesting answer. But, no. *Meat* (or animal flesh) is the correct answer. In general, yes, I suppose elephants could be meat to some carnivores, but there are only a very limited number of carnivores that could actually eat an elephant. That’s another treat, by default, to Jack. Good work, my boy.”

Now Tim begins to cry onto his worksheet page, smudging up his answers. It’s time to turn the worksheets in.

“Okay, that’s enough. Let’s have your completed worksheets so your mom can grade them and reward you, *if applicable*. Pass them up.”

Kate takes them over the seat, marks the papers, comments briefly on the strengths and weaknesses of their answers, then announces the totals: “Jack got 5 out of 5 correct. Great job. Tim got 0 right out of 5. Not so good. Smudgy, too.”

She passes back another treat for Jack but then looks at Tim. With a motherly touch on his knee, she says, “Now, if you are going to pull this together, you are going to have to get with the program, Tim. This is for your own good — just put the elephants aside for now. Maybe we can come back some other time and see them.”

He’s not buying it one bit. “But the eledrant’s a baby *now*, Mommy. He won’t be a baby next time we come. I want to see him now. Why can’t we go?” To his credit, the boy manages to speak while simultaneously bawling his eyes out; he does it without all the hiccupping and slobbering some kids can’t control when they are upset. A tough customer, this one, and stubborn, too. Just the way I like them. They break harder, but boy, do they become good citizens: compliant, passive, upright.

I break in at this point, now approaching the final turn to the zoo. This is my territory, anyway. Sternly now, I drive home the main point of it all: “Why can’t we go, Tim? Because when we come to the zoo, we come on purpose to see something *in particular*. We’ve seen the elephants before; remember last year we did the herbivore trip? Once an elephant, always an elephant — albeit a little smaller this time, and tugging at your heartstrings, though it’s not like the elephant is named ‘Tim’ or something, right? But that’s not the point, anyway. The point is that this trip is about something else, something worth learning. Something we planned.

We aren’t just wandering around the zoo at a leisurely pace, admiring the vegetation and the animals, playing and walking and laughing and looking. Maybe some other families like to do those things at the zoo. That’s not what we do. We come here to learn stuff, important stuff you need to know. You need to know about carnivores, and we’re here to teach you what you need to know. If you don’t focus on it, you won’t learn it. Got it?”

I look back to see and hear the obligatory “Yes, Sir.” Tim stares out the window, the tears drying on his face; he quickly whisks each one away with his shirt sleeve as they come.

“Good boy. Now, there’s no treat for you until we’re inside. You can catch up if you do a good job on your worksheet assignment inside the zoo. But there won’t be any playing around and sneaking over to the elephant house. Got it?”

Jack perks up now, seeing the street signs for the zoo, “This is going to be great, Dad.”

“Yes, Son.” I smile at Kate, then back at Jack. “It’s going to be great.” It is great already. All *three* of us smile.

Tim just stares out the window. On a big billboard outside the zoo, the local news channel advertises its five o’clock series on the new baby elephant, with a big picture and a call to passersby, “Come see our new baby, Tim the Elephant. Fresh into the world and ready to go! Fresh, New Elephants — Fresh, New News. Channel 16.”

Tim reads the words to himself and wonders — just like his friend on the other side of the zoo, the new one who carries the same name as he — if he might ever be released from his cage. Then in a last, fleeting attempt at some sense of connection, Tim shouts, “Hey, did you see that billboard? It had the baby eledrant on it! Right there!” He yells out, pointing to it, “And its name is Tim, too! Just like I saw it on TV!”

We all miss the sign, because those of us focused on the project at hand are busy looking for a free parking place on the street. Jack sees an open spot on the corner just ahead, brings it to our attention, and we race into it just ahead of another minivan. What a great kid, huh?

“Naw, Tim, we didn’t see it. Who would name an elephant Tim, anyway? That’s a little strange, isn’t it? I mean, that’s a bit diminutive even for a baby elephant. At any rate, out we go!” We have arrived.

I turn the wheel to hug the curb on the steep incline of the street. Then I step out of the car and smell

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the clean zoo air. What a glorious day, indeed.

## LEARNING TO LET IT BE

It's absolutely true that a young woman in my class cried during our discussion after I told the zoo trip story. At first, her reaction flabbergasted me. I was deeply concerned that I had upset her to this extent. Yes, I wanted to invoke certain feelings in the class, to make a point, but I didn't think things would get so charged. She had come in just after I started telling the story, sat down, and immediately looked appalled. She made it to the end, but apparently she was in distress the entire time. I didn't see it building to this degree and kept right on with the story, piling the details on. She was the first one to speak. "How could you do that to your son? What are you, some sort of monster? And how could all you guys laugh about it?" She said this to everyone in the room, her classmates. "That's horrible!"

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry myself. I tried to explain to her that I was telling a fictional story, trying to make the point that curriculum and teaching sometimes serve to kill student interest, debase the child, stymie natural curiosity. I don't take trips to the zoo like this, but many of us, especially in schools, objectify things that are as pure, as natural, and as expressive as we would expect a zoo trip to be. We needlessly turn such wonderful experiences — not meant as structured, organized learning activities — into labor. I was trying to show the impact that this tendency has on children like Tim — and also on those like Jack. The hyperbole in the story made people laugh; taking a zoo trip like this is absurd, and at the same time we nervously know that we are complicit. It has happened to us, and we could very easily make it happen to others; maybe we have already.

She never got over it, though; I still don't know that she even believed her classmates or me and our legitimate explanations. All tried to console her, assuring her that I was no monster, that it was just a story. None succeeded.

The fact of the matter is that this story traumatized her because she had played the part of Tim so often in school and perhaps in her own family — and needlessly so. Why does nearly everything we do in school have to be endlessly scripted, objectified, and stilted? And why do we have to put certain students, those who see a better, different way, through such misery? Some things that we plan for students to engage in require that we simply let the students experience them. There's noth-

ing wrong with debriefing afterward, during a discussion about the merits of the experience and about what students learned. But to script every move in advance and to specify every bit of knowledge that can and should be gleaned from expressive circumstances is to commit educational overkill.

Of course, students learn no matter what we do as teachers. The question is, how will we find the right balance in this current climate and in the public school curriculum, in general, which don't support and often discourage anything that looks to be progressive, student-centered, and experience-oriented for experience's own sake?

I am constantly reminding teachers I know, and teach, and care for not to spoil the wonderful opportunities that emerge during the school year for inquiry and independent exploration. Don't take a completely scripted field trip to the zoo, for instance, I warn. Instead, take a more open, expressive approach to this and other activities, and let students have time and space to wonder and wander. There's just nothing wrong with it, and it will yield so much. In fact, if we're at all serious about cultivating true knowledge and intellect in school, we'll try harder to provide more such opportunities for our students even while the screws of the standardization and testing movements tighten the lid down on us and everything curricular. We'll try to make sure that we're not left, like Tim, looking out the window at billboards advertising our dashed hopes while we strike out into a stark, disadvantaged future filled with little more than requirements and nothing close to dreams.

School principals, curriculum specialists, and others can provide leadership in this regard. When the spring rolls around in states where the hazing of testing has ended, when teachers truly begin to teach and plan field trips, principals can tell the zoo trip story at a faculty meeting and then demand that no one in that room submit behavioral objectives for a month. At the very least, they shouldn't ruin the field trip by planning for the students to complete a worksheet at the zoo.

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1. Two valuable resources in these areas are William F. Pinar et al., *Understanding Curriculum: An Introduction to the Study of Historical and Contemporary Curriculum Discourses* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002); and Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, *Best Practice: New Standards for Teaching and Learning in America's Schools*, 2nd ed. (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1998).

2. Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 3rd ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002). Previous editions have also been useful.

3. Robert F. Mager, *Preparing Instructional Objectives* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Fearon, 1962). **K**

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