

Beware of Cats in the Doghouse

Something to Consider

Many of us started teaching in the 60s (some even in the 50s). Remember, we thought we had problems. In the 70s, court cases made attendance in school more optional in order to pass the class. Take a test and get the credit. On one hand, learning is not the same as seat time. A colleague of mine, Jamie Crannell, used to say instead of making credits time certain, why don't we make school learning certain? He was ahead of his time.

Many students used the court rulings to skip classes, ask for all the work at the end, and get the credit. Technology has made this even more possible. The problem is that not coming to school created a habit of not being connected. Yes, educators have responsibility for engaging students, making learning relevant and creating a goal of learning transferable to real work.

As the existing system of the 60s became less relevant to a changing world, more and more kids were leaving formal education. Many options were initiated, mainly in the 80s, which helped students and parents seek alternatives. Educators caught between the Carnegie unit and relevancy were slow to change. At the same time, the 1983 Nation at Risk Report in America, gave rise to the blame game and the unintended use of test scores as the rating systems for kids and schools. See *The Manufactured Crisis* by Berliner and Biddle for more information.

Enough of history. In the early 90s, I met Michael Grinder who was training in classroom management and learning styles. One of the helpful analogies he presented was the Dog and Cat model. Let me explain.

Most of us in the earlier years were taught to teach dogs. This is not to say the students are animals but some of the characteristics apply. We are using a metaphor. Besides four legs and furry, what are the characteristics of dogs?

Usual answers are obedient, glad to see you, can't get enough attention, and want to please. Dog-like students tend to want direct connections with you, see emotions they can read and want approval. They are interested in pleasing you, the teacher. They growl when they are scared or feel threatened. If they don't growl and don't feel wanted, they may just go away.



Characteristics are:

- D** Direct Relationships
- O** Overt Emotions
- G** Grrr Means Fear
- S** Service-Oriented – Want to be Liked

When I ask, "What are the attributes of cats?" the usual answers are, "Aloof, curious, self-directed and can survive alone for long periods of time on their own." (Yes, they need food, water and their box cleaned, too.)

Cat students will be the first to leave traditional education when they see no point or lack of relevance to their life. Many won't give you a lot of time. If they can't connect the meaning to the content, they find something else to occupy their time. If you can hook their curiosity, they are intrigued. They tend not to respond to orders. **Creating options is a better plan!**

- C** Creative & Curious
- A** Aloof: Are you talking to me?
- I** Tease Intellectually to Engage Them
- S** Suggest, Rather Than Direct Them. Give options.

This is not just a school issue. Parents have got their hands full as well. Keep in mind that most of our staff and parents are operating on a 10-20 year lag. What we remember as experience in school, might

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Many students today are looking for something new or different. Many are unwilling to sit there and take it. Engage them or lose them. Have a positive relationship with students or they will find a place where they feel understood and/or valued.

In the premise that Michael presented, and that I agree with, we were taught to teach dogs in college, and the cat population has been increasing at an exponential rate for a long time. Unfortunately, most schools are still trying to teach dogs. Some of this is driven by the testing culture and the limited view of management and leadership. What Ted Dintersmith, Tony Wagner and the many schools they connected with have done is to effectively teach cats (and dogs) by appealing to their strengths. As I read, 'What School Could Be,' by Dintersmith, every school had a student voice and choice and part of the attraction. Remember, if they are not connected with our school or learning site, WE HAVE WILL NOT HAVE INFLUENCE.

I want ethical educators to have an influence on our young people. As a retired senior leader, it was always difficult for parents to see a brick wall (boundaries and consequences) that wasn't working. Parents who were Jell-o (too few boundaries and no consequences) wasn't working either. Yes, I have been both as a parent, too. That is why I taught a parent class on the Goldilocks Theory of Parenting.

I am suggesting we start teaching to attract and embrace the Cats. Dogs will follow. Make learning relevant. We can do this! As I have quoted in the past, Angeles Arrien – "If your job is waking up the dead GET UP! TODAY IS A WORKDAY."

Michael Grinder shared with us years ago the following story. I must admit I do not know who Lara Adair is, but I really like the message.

When Children Turn Into Cats

Lara Adair

I just realised that while children are dogs - loyal and affectionate, teenagers are cats. It is so easy to be the owner of a dog. You feed it, train it, boss it around and it puts its head on your knee and it gazes at you as if you were a piece of art. It follows you around, chews on furniture if you stay too long at a party and jumps with enthusiasm when you call it from the yard.

Then, one day around 12-13, your little puppy turns into a big old cat. When you call it to come inside, it looks amazed, as if wondering who died and made you emperor. Instead of coming, it disappears. You don't see it again until it gets hungry. It dashes through the kitchen long enough to turn up its nose at whatever you are serving. If you reach out to touch it, it pulls away as if it has never seen you before. It may talk to you if it needs something like a ride to the mall or some new piece of clothing.

Stunned, more than a little hurt, you have two choices. First, and the one chosen by most parents, is that you continue to behave like a dog owner. After all, your heart still swells when you look at your dog, you still want its company, and you want it to obey. When you do ask for compliance, it pays no attention to you. It is now a cat. So you toss in onto the back porch saying, "Stay there and think about things, mister." It glares at you, not even replying. It wants you to recognise its independence.

You, not realising that the dog is now a cat, think there is something terribly wrong. It seems so anti-social, distant and sort of depressed. It doesn't want to go on family outings. Since you are the one who raised it, you assume that whatever is wrong is your fault. Overcome with guilt and fear, you redouble your efforts to make your pet behave.

Only now you are dealing with a cat, so everything that worked before now produces the opposite result. Call it, and it runs away. Tell it to sit, and it jumps on the countertop. The more you move toward it, the farther it moves away from you. Your second choice is to learn to behave like a cat owner. Put a food dish near the door and let it come out to get it. If you must make demands, find out what it wants and command it to do it. But remember that a cat needs affection too - and your help. Sit still and it will come seeking that warm, comforting lap it has not entirely forgotten. Be there to open the door for it.

Realise that all dog owners go through this, and few find it easy. I miss the little boy that insisted I watch sitcoms with him and who has now sealed himself into a bedroom with a TV, computer and an iPhone. I miss the little girl who wrote me love notes and is now peeling rubber in the driveway.

The only consolation is that if you do it right, let them go, be cool as a cat yourself. One day they will walk into the kitchen, give you a big hug and say, "You've been on your feet all day, let me get those dishes for you." And you will realise they are dogs again. 🐾

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