

Let's Have a Famine!

Connecting Means and Ends in Teaching to Big Ideas

The teachers at a high school in Canada had the right idea when they tried to create a learning experience for their students that would affect them more than reading a textbook. Where they got off track, Ms. Wassermann finds, was in not thinking through precisely what they wanted the experience to teach.

BY SELMA WASSERMANN

IT WAS the day before the "famine" when I visited North Fork Senior Secondary School (a pseudonym). Signs were posted on the walls of the main corridors exhorting students to participate in the event that was intended to give them a taste (bad metaphor?) of what it is like to experience a famine. The social studies teachers had organized the activity to raise students' levels of awareness of the tragic events taking place in Darfur.

The North Fork "famine" would last from Friday afternoon at 3:00 until Saturday at noon. Students would be allowed to have water, but no food. At the end of the session, the participating students would be honored at an assembly. It was a voluntary activity, but clearly many students thought of it as an adventure and were preparing to bring their sleeping bags, toothbrushes, cell phones, iPods, and CD players to entertain them through the long, hungry night.

The students were abuzz with anticipation, and the teachers who had organized the event flew from office



to gymnasium, in a flurry of last-minute preparations. A visit from the Queen of England would hardly have generated more excitement. Although my own visit was about other business, I couldn't refrain from poking my nose into what the kids thought about all of this.

"What is this all about?" I asked a group of 11th-graders who had volunteered for the famine. They were, as one teacher remarked, "chuffed."

"It's about learning how it feels when your country has a famine," one lad eagerly volunteered.

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"So we can know how the people in Darfur feel," another added.

"It teaches us how poor people feel when they have no food."

"It helps us to appreciate what we have in Canada."

I bit my cynical tongue. Yeah, I thought. Having my cell phone, my iPod, my CD player, my affluent friends around me, and the assurance that I could look forward to a huge buffet breakfast at noon on Saturday would certainly help me to appreciate what we have in Canada. But what would the experience teach me about tragedy on a cosmic scale? To equate the "famine" at North Fork with what was happening in Darfur seemed to me to reduce human suffering on an unimaginable scale to the level of a sleepover at school, with the promise of a party as a reward for having endured the "suffering." What's wrong with this picture?

I should have known better than to ask the teachers. Although my questions about the purpose of the exercise were nonconfrontational, the few teachers I asked quickly became defensive, and the answers they gave did not stray far from what the students told me: to help our students to appreciate deprivation and understand the plight of people in Darfur. Darfur was much in the news, and the social studies teachers, with the best of intentions, were looking for ways to bring the scope and depth of what was happening in that forsaken country "home" to their students.

To raise levels of awareness through experience is surely a good thing in teaching, but not every contrived experience teaches what we intend. How would teachers in post-famine classes be able to link the students' 21-hour fast with the famine in the Sudan? What would these students have learned about genocide? What would they have learned about how warring factions have murdered thousands and brought the country to economic ruin? To trivialize famine in such a way seemed to me a disconnect between means and ends. Surely there were better ways to create teaching/learning experiences that would deepen students' understanding about events that were too large in scope to comprehend through reading textbook chapters.

THE NATURE OF EXPERIENCE

The old saw "we learn through experience" has been worn out through overuse, but that doesn't make it less valid. Teachers know that real experience teaches more than textbook exercises, that experience has the power to deepen learning on both emotional and intellectual planes.

But what do we mean by an "experience"? And how

are experiences different from, say, activities? Are all experiences of equal value? And how do teachers ensure that meaningful learning is extracted from a "learning experience"?

In the history of educational writing, many have attempted to describe the nature and importance of experience in the educational process. John Dewey wrote about building the school curriculum around the real-life experiences of students.¹ At the time of his writing, this represented a significant departure from the standard approach of learning from texts and lectures. Dewey's idea was that the students' experiences would form the basis for in-school inquiries, so that active inquiry would begin to shape students' understandings of their experiences, thereby stretching their minds and encouraging habits of thinking. He wrote, "It thus becomes the office of the educator to select those things within the range of existing experience that have the promise and potentiality of presenting new problems which by stimulating new ways of observation and judgment will expand the area of further experience."²

Lawrence Cremin described Dewey's goal as the constant expansion of "the range of social situations in which individuals perceived issues and made and acted upon choices."³ Dewey wanted each generation to go beyond its predecessors in the quality of behavior it sought to nurture in its children.

An inquiry-based curriculum built on a foundation of students' experience would demonstrate its successes in the changed behaviors, perceptions, and insights of individual human beings.⁴ In the various interpretations of what it means for students to have a "learning experience," the idea that experience has the capacity to change behavior is perhaps the one constant. Whatever the nature of such an experience, it affects both the cognitive and the affective domains and is designed to change behavior profoundly — and for the better. Having had an *experience*, we are never the same. Our perceptual field is altered; our cognitive maps reconstructed.⁵ These are heady ideas, even for 21st-century schools.

So what then can an experience include? Whether within the classroom or outside, experiences require the active engagement of the learner. Experiences can never be had at arm's length. They must be lived, and they must evoke strong emotional response. And to derive meaning from experience requires us to reflect on experience, to reach for important understandings and meanings, to bring ourselves to new awareness, to sift through data and examine assumptions, and to build new concepts.

While we often use the words *activity* and *experience* interchangeably, we seem to accord more weight and

power to experience. Experiences trump activities because of their greater potential to teach. The teacher's task, then, is to provide experience and to use that experience in the Deweyan sense to engage the intellect and to develop new awareness and important understanding. When our thinking and our behavior have been changed, we can say that we have had an experience.

Weaving these threads into the fabric of a learning experience creates the following picture: activities are those tasks we pursue that do not demand serious intellectual engagement, nor do they require deep emotional involvement. Activities are rarely memorable, nor do we think of them as having the power to affect us in long-lasting ways, to change our thinking and our behavior. Experiences, on the other hand, deeply engage us, on both a cognitive and an affective level. There is certainly mental engagement, for one cannot remove the mind from experience. But it is clear, too, that some experiences are so powerfully felt that we are dramatically and significantly changed by them.

Powerful life experiences rarely make their way into the curriculum because of the constraints endemic to classroom life. But as teachers strive to move learning away from textbooks and toward more powerful intellectual and affective modes, they can offer learning experiences that will deepen students' understanding of and appreciation for the larger issues in the curriculum, build students' habits of thinking, generate emotional connections, and alter students' perceptual fields.

CONNECTING MEANS WITH ENDS: WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

The goal of providing an in-school experience to enable students to identify with the plight of the starving population in Darfur is a noble one. On the one hand, we want our students to *know*, even at a remote distance, on both cognitive and affective levels, how such a tragedy came to be and what life has become for the people of the western Sudan. On the other hand, we certainly do not want our students to experience needless suffering. How do we strike a balance between a representative experience and placing students in harm's way?

Any curriculum experience needs to begin with the teacher's question: What's the big idea? In the answer to that question lies the purpose for creating the experience. When the big idea is made explicit, it serves as a road map for developing the curriculum plan, as well as for directing the reflection on experience that must follow. Thus focusing on the big idea brings teaching strategies (means) into alignment with curriculum

goals (ends). A curriculum experience that is rooted in big ideas not only identifies the direction of the study, but also illuminates its relevance for serious work. If the big idea is a substantive one, then the experience has the potential of taking students' inquiries somewhere of value. If the idea is narrow in scope, then there will be limited opportunity to reach for deeper meanings in the study.⁶

While this may seem patently obvious, it is rare that teachers do, in fact, sit down first to identify the "big idea" behind a planned curriculum experience. The task usually comes first: let's have a famine.

Big ideas guide the development of concepts during the process of inquiry into and reflection on the educational experience. Big ideas make statements rather than ask questions. They have relevance; they matter. Some big ideas contain moral and ethical implications. While they have a clear focus, they also promote open-ended inquiry. Big ideas may come from curriculum source books, from the school district's curriculum guides, or from the standards or benchmarks found in curriculum frameworks of state departments of education. They may arise from the concerns of students or teachers, from current events, from history, from the media, from community affairs, from textbooks, and from the day-to-day experiences of students.

Here are a few big ideas that might guide a study of famine:

- A famine is a social and economic crisis that is commonly accompanied by widespread malnutrition, starvation, epidemic, and increased mortality.
- Although many famines stem from national or regional shortages of food, famine has also occurred amid plenty because of acts of economic or military policy, warfare, and terrorism that have deprived certain populations of sufficient food to ensure survival.
- Historically, famines have occurred as a result of drought, crop failure, and pestilence and as a result of manmade causes, such as war or misguided economic policies.
- During the 20th century, an estimated 70 million people died from famines.
- Modern African famines are characterized by widespread destitution and malnutrition, with heightened mortality seen especially in young children.
- In 2006, the most serious humanitarian crisis in Africa was in Sudan's Darfur region, with an estimated half a million people dead from hunger, violence, and disease.

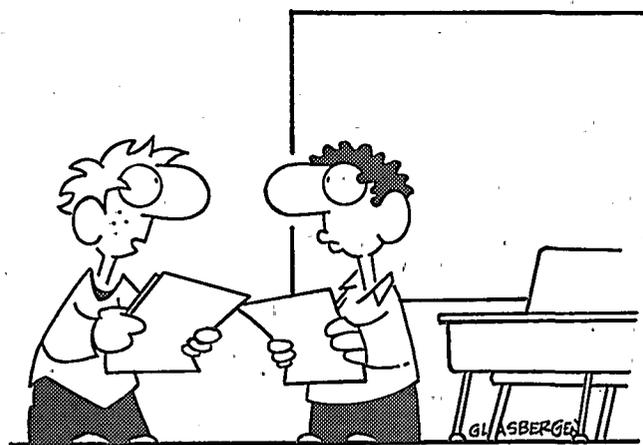
In contrast, the statements of the North Fork 11th-graders offer examples of big ideas that are not framed well enough to give rise to a coherent curriculum plan:

- To appreciate what we have in Canada.
- To learn how it feels when your country has a famine.

A “famine” in which students fast for 21 hours in the school gymnasium would not, even stretching a point, serve to provide an experience that would illuminate any of the big ideas listed above. There would be no experience of starvation, for going hungry for a brief period cannot be equated with starvation and malnutrition. There would be no experience of regional shortages of food or of the genocide that contributed to the famine in Darfur. There would be no experience of the widespread disease and destitution or of the terrible hopelessness that is part and parcel of what genocide brings. Of course, this is fortunate, for we would never wish for our students to experience, at first hand, such unspeakable events. What is unfortunate, however, is the distinct possibility that students coming from a 21-hour fast would believe that they had, in fact, experienced what a famine is like, that they had a shared experience with the Sudanese.

EXPERIENCE IS NOT ENOUGH: ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

We can and do make meaning from vicarious experience — from the documentary representations of books, photographs, and assorted realia; from the experiences of others; and from various types of simulations. Much of what we learn in school does, in fact, come through representative learning experiences. But what can teachers, who work primarily with the tools of documentary representations, do to help students make connections between documents and realities? Can teachers use representative experiences or simu-



“My report is called ‘The Perils of Plagiarism.’ I copied it off the Internet.”

lations to enable students to extract meaning and find empathy with what they have seen and vicariously experienced? Can classrooms become places where the understanding of life events is enriched, where nuances and complexities are appreciated, and where genuine feeling is elevated?

Experiences themselves — whether life experiences, simulations, or representations — do not necessarily lead to informed, critical understanding. We need to work at the process and apply sophisticated habits of mind if we are to benefit richly from experience. To extract intelligent meaning from experience requires reflection on that experience, which in turn leads to insight, to meaning-making, to wisdom. Thoughtful, critical analysis of an experience helps us to develop that insight, to see the experience from new perspectives, to deepen our understanding, and to elevate our feelings. Unless such reflection occurs, the richest of experiences may not benefit us.

There are surely many ways in which teachers can promote such reflection, but “asking the right questions” has great potential for doing this job.⁷ It is no doubt true that the richer the experience, whether real-life or representative, the greater its potential for helping us plumb its depths for deep meanings, new insights, new awareness. And it is also likely that a teacher skilled in the use of provocative and probing questions and guided by the big ideas will lead students to dig for the gold within the experience, putting the big ideas under the lens of critical examination. Not every question will have this effect, and an off-the-cuff, ad hoc bunch of interrogative demands will surely not serve this end. Like planning powerful and rich curriculum experiences, a teacher must also plan the questions that will be used to uncover the issues, taking care to address both the cognitive and affective aspects of what has been experienced.

It is difficult to conceive of questions that would link the situation in Darfur to students’ “famine” experience. What can a teacher ask that would bring more meaning to students’ understanding of any of the big ideas? “How does it feel to be hungry?” That would fall easily into the category of “stupid” questions.⁸ In trying to conceive of questions that would connect the students’ “famine” experience with what is happening in Darfur, my mind fails me.

If I had chosen a representative experience for the students — say, viewing the documentary film *All About Darfur*⁹ — I would plan my post-film discussion questions around the following big ideas:

- A famine is a social and economic crisis that is commonly accompanied by widespread malnutrition, star-

vation, epidemic, and increased mortality.

• Although many famines stem from national or regional shortages of food, famine also occurs amid plenty as a result of acts of economic or military policy, warfare, and terrorism.

With these ideas clearly in mind, the questions I would prepare in advance would be organized according to the sequence below:

1. *Data-gathering questions*: asking for observations of data; asking for differentiating between what is seen and what is assumed; asking for identification of assumptions and value judgments; asking for summaries of the important ideas of the film; and asking for data about specific characters in the film.

2. *Questions calling for analysis of data*: asking that statements be supported by data; asking that comparisons be made; asking for hypotheses that might explain situations; asking about the conditions that led to the famine; asking about the health consequences of systematic and enduring starvation.

3. *Questions calling for evaluations*: asking for opinions; asking for criteria to support judgments.

4. *Questions about value positions*: asking about where a student stands with respect to what is depicted in the film; asking about the role of other nations in providing assistance to the Sudanese; asking about the role of the Sudanese government in protecting citizens of the country.

5. *Questions calling for action*: asking what individuals or groups of students could do in support of their positions; asking what plans are viable; asking which plan is most promising; asking for an examination of potential consequences of that plan.

Questioning that follows such a sequence builds the kinds of habits of mind that allow for data gathering, analysis, and evaluation to precede any suggestions for action. Therefore, action flows from data and from data analysis, as well as from the values we hold.

However, a good discussion is not a matter of simply asking good questions. A good discussion relies on the rhythm — the “dance” if you will — of combinations of questions and responses. After a question has been asked and a student has responded, there begins a brief interactive dialogue between teacher and student in which the teacher “works” with the idea to further the student’s thinking, to get to the heart of the idea, to see how the idea is supported, to examine its logic. It is a one-on-one dynamic between teacher and student, the aim of which is to examine the student’s ideas for the quality of the thinking behind them. And in the process, no idea is considered “good” or “wrong”; no value judgments are made. This makes it possible for

students to enter into the discussion without fear of being judged, of being “wrong,” or of being considered “silly.”¹⁰

Such a discussion has the potential to engage students in a rigorous intellectual examination of the issues. Skillful discussion-teaching also has the potential to provoke powerful emotional responses. Formulating questions that are clear in what they are asking students to think

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about, that are inviting and not demanding, that build trust in the interactive relationship, that respect students’ ideas — these skills are at the heart of a successful and fruitful examination of experience.

C. Roland Christensen, known at the Harvard Business School as the “father of discussion teaching,” used to spend several hours before class preparing the questions he would use to teach a case. That was true even for cases he had taught many times before. His list of questions followed a hierarchy, beginning with data-gathering questions, moving to questions that called for analysis, then to questions that called for evaluation, and finally to questions that suggested potential for action. To keep himself on track, he would make a “crib sheet” of his questions and refer to them during the discussion. Observing his discussion, you would see him opening the dialogue by calling for observations on the case that had been studied. When a student responded, he would follow up with a “playback” of the student’s response and engage that student over several minutes of interactive dialogue.¹¹

The following guidelines for teaching through discussion may be helpful for teachers who are trying to help students make intelligent meaning from their experience.

1. *Prepare your list of questions in advance.* There are no “wrong” questions, but those that follow the sequence suggested by Christensen have greater potential for building the habits of mind that enable students to reflect on and to draw out what is significant from experience.

2. *Ensure that the questions flow from the big ideas that you want the students to examine.* This is more easily done when the teacher has identified the big ideas at the outset and developed questions in advance that al-

low those ideas to be put under examination.

3. *During the interactive dialogue, listen to and be clear about what the student is saying in response to your question.* Work hard to comprehend what is being said. If you don't understand at first, ask for clarification. Try to get the student's idea accurately positioned in your mind. As you listen, begin to formulate a response that will be a clear reflection of the student's statement.

4. *Use a response that calls for the examination of the student's idea from a fresh perspective.* You can "play back" the student's idea in a new way, adding elements that he or she has not considered.

5. *Choose a follow-up response that takes the student's thinking one step further.* A follow-up response may call for supporting data or ask for examples. It may ask for a comparison to be made or for observations of related incidents.

6. *Decide when the interactive dialogue with that student is finished.* Staying with one student for the right amount of time is important. Too much time with one student may mean keeping that student on the "hot seat" for too long and could cause others to feel left out. Too little time doesn't give the teacher a chance to work with the ideas.

7. *Frame questions and responses so that they are always respectful, nonthreatening, and productive.* Even tone of voice may betray a teacher's subtle judgment. Keeping questions, tone of voice, and facial expressions interested, but neutral, is key to providing a climate in which students are free to express their thoughts.

8. *Keep in mind the purpose of the question.* Do you want to find out what the students know? Or do you

want them to use what they know to arrive at some better understanding? Questions that call for students to remember serve one purpose; questions that call for students to apply learned principles to new situations are a different breed. Know when to use which, and be clear about the intended results.

9. *Know the right time to challenge a student's thinking.* A highly challenging question asked too soon may backfire. Timing is everything.

10. *Know when to shift gears and move to the next question on your list.* Spending too much time exploring in and around a single question will exhaust it and leave precious little time for other questions.

11. *Refrain from making judgments.* Avoid saying, "good idea" and even "that's interesting," as these judgments have a way of closing down students' responses.

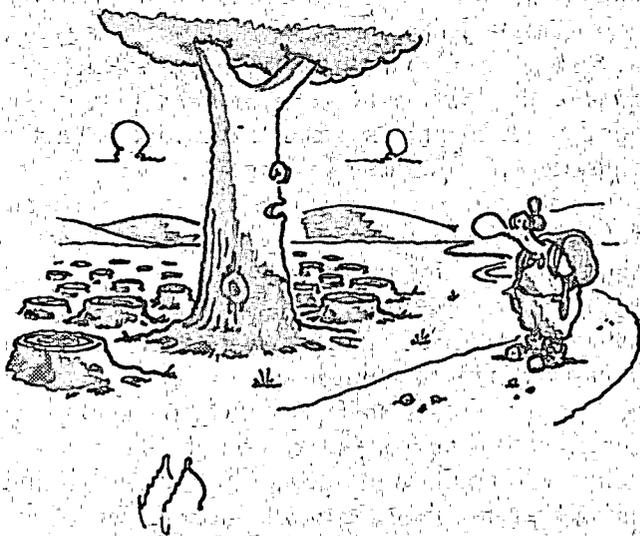
12. *Work the interactive dialogue so that meanings are searched for, understandings grow, students think about issues, and students feel safe in offering their ideas.*¹² Successful interactive dialogue doesn't just happen. You need to prepare for it and be alert for unexpected opportunities to help students push their thinking.

These guidelines should help teachers make good use of their discussion time. And using discussion teaching is a critical second stage of making intelligent meaning from a learning experience. It is the beginning of reflection on the experience.

BRINGING LIFE INTO THE CLASSROOM: REAL, REPRESENTATIVE, AND VICARIOUS EXPERIENCES

The study of history is filled with the potential for real and simulated experiences for students. Through such experiences, history is "brought to life" for students, and they can more clearly understand the how and what of important concepts that have shaped our world. If history has the potential for informing thinking and for providing the framework for understanding both the past and the present workings of social, psychological, cultural, economic, geographic, and political events, it is definitely worth considering the kinds of experiences that strategically connect means and ends, that illuminate the big ideas under examination and offer rich opportunities for reflection.

Real-life experiences provide the richest and most fertile soil for developing understanding and promoting inquiry. And despite the constraints imposed by school schedules, rigid curriculum requirements, high-stakes tests, and the time and effort that must go into planning and carrying out bona fide experiential programs, many schools have nonetheless introduced them in a variety



"Excuse me for not congratulating you on your best-selling novel!"

of ways. In many secondary schools, for example, work/study programs and outreach programs enable students to become actively engaged in community, civic, and social projects. Some even offer course credit.

The Gibbons Walkabout model,¹³ with its advocacy of five “passages” — self-selected experiential challenges that students take on in five different areas of

Entire schools have found ways to weave real-life experiences into their students' lives without diminishing educational standards or causing havoc.

competence — still resonates with secondary teachers and administrators. They can easily see its potential for enriching students' real-life experiences and using them as a basis for acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

Community service projects, social surveys, civic action, and studies of local social issues — all of which were part and parcel of curriculum experiences in the Eight-Year Study¹⁴ — are still seen in secondary schools, where individual teachers, whole departments, and even entire schools have found ways to interweave real-life experiences into their students' lives without diminishing educational standards or causing widespread havoc. In fact, it would appear that the opposite is true.

At the Urban Academy in New York City, students participate in extensive experiential learning programs, working in diverse settings throughout the five boroughs. In these placements, students learn to work productively with adults and to assume responsibility for tasks both menial and challenging. Then they return to their classrooms to discuss their ideas and observations.¹⁵

But what about representative experiences or simulations? As many teachers will tell you, students do not necessarily have to leave the classroom or school to have rich and powerful experiences. It would not be far-fetched to suggest that, when students are busy with some task in which they are personally and educationally engaged — not just listening to their teacher or scouring their textbooks — the level of their experience has already been raised several notches.

Films, both commercial and documentary, can make powerful statements about world conditions, social issues, political issues, and so on. Photographs, which are graphic displays of real events, can be studied and meanings extracted from them. Role playing, in-class projects, out-of-class projects, computer simulations, study-

ing facsimile documents — there are hundreds of ways in which representative experiences can spark awareness and understanding that go far beyond the effects of lectures or textbooks.

THE NORTH FORK FAMINE

So what about famine? What ways might be used to raise students' levels of awareness of what it is like to live with famine? How might we help students to feel, as well as to know about, the deprivations and the immense tragedy of Darfur?

Of course, what we create as a representative experience about Darfur must be chosen carefully, for the reality of what is happening there is more than heartbreaking. It is obscene. How much should students be exposed to? How much representative experience is too much? Where should we draw a line? This, of course, depends on the teacher's professional estimation of what is appropriate for a particular class.

Many films, for example, can be very graphic in their content. The documentary *All About Darfur* gives voice to ordinary Sudanese, who tell about how deeply rooted prejudices can suddenly burst into a wildfire of ethnic violence and murder. The commercial film *Hotel Rwanda*, while not about the Sudan, presents graphic images of the genocide in Rwanda. It centers on a hotel manager who sheltered over a thousand Tutsi refugees during their struggle against the Hutu militia. *Darfur Diaries: Messages from Home* is a documentary made by three activists who smuggled themselves across the Sudanese border into the rebel-held territory to document the atrocities in Darfur.¹⁶ The film focuses on the personal stories of those who have witnessed firsthand the horrors of the Janjaweed massacres, the mass rapes of women and girls, and the destruction of villages — a situation that has become one of the world's largest political and humanitarian crises. The famine in Darfur is just the tip of the iceberg. The genocide and the war crimes perpetrated by the Janjaweed, with little or no outside intervention from the rest of the world, is the big, big idea behind this tragedy.

Viewing such films is considerably more horrifying than a 21-hour fast in the school gymnasium. These films are not for the faint-hearted, and teachers may be reluctant to expose students to such brutality and inhumanity. But to tackle the notion of what it means to live with famine and, specifically, how the famine in Darfur came about, it may be necessary to go for the “down and dirty” of what the Darfur story entails.

Beyond films, there is the option of inviting guest speakers who have firsthand experience of the situa-

tion in Darfur. In fact, those who made *Darfur Diaries* offer “educational events” and welcome the opportunity to come and talk to classes.¹⁷ There are photographs that contain images that are more graphic than we could possibly bear. There are first-person accounts that would make grown men weep. And, of course, there is the Internet.

Using simulations like role playing can also bring deeper meaning to historical and current events. Role playing a scene in the U.S. Congress, for example, in which a debate is raging about whether and how to provide help to the Sudanese could prove of immense value in examining the poor response of the community of nations to the plight of the Sudanese. Studying actual documents — letters, newspaper articles, written accounts of firsthand experiences — is invaluable.

In short, there are many ways to bring life into the classroom through real or representative experiences. But in doing so, teachers need to ensure that the big ideas are explicitly stated and that these ideas give birth to the experiences that follow. Furthermore, it is important to remember that an “experience,” in and of itself, is not enough to guarantee that students will work to process the deeper meanings and to make sense of what the experience reveals. A follow-up discussion — or perhaps several discussions — will be necessary for students to develop the critical habits of mind that enable them to make meaning of what we consider important for them to learn. Through experience and reflection on experience we have a good chance of creating the behavior change that is an indicator of real learning. Having lived an experience, students will never be the same.

Despite my jaundiced view of the North Fork Senior Secondary School famine experience, I want to make it clear that I am unequivocally *in favor of* involving students in real-life or representative experiences that provide more three-dimensional perspectives on big ideas worth examining. I am unequivocally *in favor of* discussion teaching that illuminates big ideas and gives students more to think about.

I am *in favor of* bringing life into the classroom, but when teachers select real or representative experiences without first identifying the big ideas, making sure that there is a clear connection between means and ends, and following up with opportunities to reflect on experience, they are in grave danger of trivializing what is important. Although the North Fork teachers’ intention was good, I can imagine what the students took away from the experience: “Oh, yeah! We had a famine. It was so cool.”

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12. Wassermann, *This Teaching Life*, pp. 118-19.
13. Maurice Gibbons, “Walkabout 10 Years Later: Searching for a Renewed Vision for Education,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1984, pp. 591-600.
14. Craig Kridel and Robert V. Bullough, *Stories of the Eight-Year Study: Reexamining Secondary Education in America* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
15. For more on the Urban Academy, visit www.urbanacademy.org/alternative/alternative.html.
16. For information, visit www.darfurdiaries.org.
17. For information, visit www.creativewell.com. Browse speakers by topic and look under “films and filmmakers.”



“Yes, I did accept an apple from my third-grader, Billy Smith, but there was no quid pro quo.”



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