CHAPTER 5

LEARNING

Learning is not attained by chance,
it must be sought for with ardor and diligence.

—Abigail Adams

In Professor Karen Brennan’s “T-553: Learning, Teaching, and Technology” class at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, the assignment on the first day asks her hundred-plus students to each submit a one-sentence description of what they believe the purpose of education should be. It’s not uncommon for them to look around at one another, a bit perplexed, about what may come across as a rather simplistic assignment, especially for graduate students who have already dedicated their lives to the topic!
The students are given a few minutes to type up their one-sentence purposes and then submit them electronically. Once all the submissions are in, a teacher’s assistant collates them, removes the students’ names, and then broadcasts the sentences onto the smartboard.

Several answers always come up in one form or another, such as, “To prepare students for jobs,” “To prepare students for college,” “To teach critical thinking skills,” “To develop good citizens,” and “To help students learn to think independently.” But dozens of new, and sometimes creative, answers turn up in every class.

“What do you notice?” Brennan asks them. “They’re all different,” her students note. It turns out that every one of her students has within them a different idea of what the purpose of education should be. She has never once gotten two sentences exactly alike.

The point of Professor Brennan’s exercise isn’t to get her students to come to a unanimous decision on what the purpose of education should be, but to make them aware that not only does everyone not have the same understanding as they do, but that no one does! It’s an eye-opening experience for her students as it forces them to examine their own biases, assumptions, and preconceived ideas, on the very first day of class. We have a tendency to believe that everyone else thinks like we do, but in reality, that’s hardly ever the case, even among people who share the same goals. If these hundred budding education experts in the same class, at the same school, can’t even agree on what education should do, it’s no wonder that it’s been so difficult to improve it for millions of students across the country.

While it’s true that most people can’t agree on the purpose of education, what most of them do agree on is that at the very
center of it is learning. Whether a student has been properly educated is an opinion and cannot be proven, but whether or not they have learned is a fact that can be assessed. Once we become more aware of our own biases, believe that every student has the potential to succeed, and begin motivating them to want to learn, the next step in rewiring education is to shift our focus away from the broader concept of education, and toward a narrower definition of learning.

**WHAT IT MEANS TO LEARN**

Along with asking her students for their own views on the purpose of education, Professor Brennan also asks them on day one to write one-sentence personal definitions for learning (and teaching as well, but we’ll get to that later!). Just as with education, she always receives a lot of variety about how they define learning, so I think it’s important to clarify right up front what it is we mean by the word. If we look up the meaning in the dictionary we get a vast array of definitions, including “to acquire knowledge of something,” “to become informed or acquainted with something,” and “to memorize something.”

What we most often mean by “to acquire knowledge of something” is to learn about something. In this definition, the noun “knowledge” refers to information. So, in other words, this definition is referring to us getting information about something. To me that’s not learning, that’s researching. While there may be some useful short-term learning going on in terms of information, there is no indication that any real learning is taking place.