

The Girls and Boys in the Boats

An Analogy

by

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Just down the road from where we live outside of Chestertown, Maryland, is the Chester River Yacht & Country Club (C.R.Y.C.C.). It is not a fancy club, nor do many yachts dock at the marina, but it is a favorite gathering place for many in our small town with good dinner facilities, a nice golf course, bocce courts, and, across the road, our nicely maintained marina. The Chester River, which empties into the Chesapeake Bay several miles downstream, is a quarter to a half mile wide across from our Club & Marina.

Each summer the Commodore organizes a sailing school for young people. Sailing School lasts one week for different age groups from 8-14. There are about a dozen or so sailors, both men and women, who teach sailing. Most are retirees, and some are in the early 70's or early 80's. They are all very experienced sailors. When watching the sailing school sessions over the years, I have yet to figure out who has more fun, the sailing instructors or the young students.

A few years ago, the Commodore, hearing that I was an educator, asked if I would speak to the instructors about how they could maximize their teaching effectiveness. I told her that unfortunately I wasn't a sailor. "Oh, that is OK," she replied. "We know sailing. Just give us some teaching advice."

Thus, I met at the Club with about twenty or so sailors. I already knew many of them, but I was reminded in the introductions what an expert group they were. One had sailed the America's Cup. Two had sailed around the world. All had sailed the Bay and nearly all had sailed the Atlantic from Maine to the Caribbean. One was regarded, I later learned, as the finest sailor to ever attend Harvard University. It was indeed an impressive group.

I talked to them about the instructional language they used, not to talk too much, ask good questions, encourage hypothesizing and speculation, and help students reflect on their own sailing behaviors. They liked the concept of metacognition, a term they hadn't heard before.

Soon after our meeting, I went to the marina to watch the classes. On Monday, the first day, the sailing faculty talked to the new students for a few minutes, took them across the road to the Club pool to make sure they could swim, and then back across the road to the marina. The students donned life vests, listened to their instructor for just a few minutes, got in their boats, pushed off from shore, raised the sails, and began to sail. The boats are especially designed for beginning sailors. Nearby each boat with the novice sailor there was a little motorized chase raft with an instructor, giving advice. It wasn't smooth sailing this first day, but it was sailing. The important observation is that within less than an hour after arriving at sailing school everyone was in a boat! Class ended at noon, so around 11:30 a.m. these novice sailors came back to shore, lowered their sails, pulled their boats up on dry land, and stowed their equipment. Then the instructors talked to them a bit, made suggestions, answered questions, told them how pleased they were with their initial performances, and dismissed them until the next morning. The next day's routine was similar, sans the swimming test. The students sailed further offshore, some to the middle of the river with the chase or support boat nearby.

By Friday most of the young sailors were sailing a mile or so upriver or downriver almost out of sight, with the support boat available but much further away. If there was a stormy morning, the instructors would use this time to teach nuances about sailing, to share what the students were doing well, and give advice and support on how students needed to improve their performance. This instruction was of course more meaningful because the students already had the experience and prior knowledge of being in a boat and sailing.

My experience of observing the sailing school was informative. I hadn't thought much before about how one would teach sailing effectively. I probably assumed that you would first teach students a lot about the skills of sailing and then, and only then, put the students in boats. But alas, I didn't know anything about sailing!

If I had suggested to these successful teachers of sailing that they should first teach the *skills* of sailing and *then*, maybe by Thursday and Friday, they could finally put the students in boats, they would have regarded me with suspicion. "How in h### can you teach anybody to sail without getting in a boat?" they would have asked.

There is a lesson here. Those who teach children to read, or make suggestions about how to teach reading, or impose mandates about how to teach reading, should take note. Young people learn to sail by first getting into a boat. Young people learn to read most effectively by first getting into a book. In both cases, the skills are best taught not as a prerequisite but along with the process of doing.