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The SABRE-TOOTH CURRICULUM

A Humorous Look at the History of Education

Adapted from J. Abner Peddiwell, aka Harold Benjamin by James W. Van Wormer, Ph.D.



New-Fist-Hammer-Maker, Palaeolithic Educational Theorist, and Practitioner 8000 B.C.

This allegory is a compilation of what many wise people have taught us and what we have learned ourselves. Our tale begins with an examination of a vignette featuring a school system with a curriculum referred to as *Sabre-Tooth*:

1. Fish-grabbing with bare-hands
2. Woolly-horse clubbing;
3. Sabre-tooth tiger scaring with fire



The Sabre-Tooth Curriculum was the invention of New-Fist, the first great educational statesman, theorist, and practitioner. It was he who first observed that children should engage in purposeful activities rather than to play with coloured stones just for the fun of it. New-Fist was a thinker! He noted that children seemed to have no purpose in their play beyond immediate pleasure in the activity itself. He compared their activity with that of the grown-up members of the tribe.

It was New-Fist who first posed the question: "What things must future tribespeople know how to do in order to live with full bellies, warm backs, and minds free from fear?" The answer was the skills sets of the future Palaeolithic Workforce. New-Fist was a doer! New-Fist's insightful question led to the creation of the cave-to-work program. New-Fist proceeded to construct a curriculum for reaching that goal: fish-grabbing with bare-hands, woolly-horse clubbing, and sabre-tooth tiger scaring with fire.

Having developed a curriculum, New-Fist took his children with him as he went about his activities. He gave them an opportunity to practise these three subjects. The children liked to learn. It was more fun for them to engage in these purposeful activities than to play with coloured stones just for the fun of it. They learned the new activities well, and so the new educational system was a success.

For a long time, however, there were certain more conservative members of the tribe who resisted the new, formal educational. These wise old men and women argued that if the "Great Mystery Who Speaks in Thunder and Moves in Lightning" had wanted children to practice fish-grabbing, horse-clubbing, and tiger-scaring, he would have taught them these activities himself by implanting in their natures instincts for fish-grabbing, horse-clubbing, and tiger-scaring. More than one of them cried out "If you oppose the will of the Great Mystery, you must die," and the remainder sang derisively in unison, "You can't change human nature."

But as New-Fist's children grew older, it was plain to see that they had an advantage over other children who had never been educated systematically. Some of the more intelligent members of the tribe began to do as New-Fist had done, and the teaching of fish-grabbing, horse-clubbing, and tiger-scaring came more and more to be accepted as the heart of real education. It came to pass that all children practised systematically the three fundamentals and the tribe prospered and was happy in the possession of adequate meat, skins, and security.

It is to be supposed that all would have gone well forever with this good educational system if conditions of life in that community had remained forever the same. But conditions changed, and life which had once been so safe and happy in the cave-realm valley became insecure and disturbing.



A new ice age was approaching in that part of the world. At length, the ice sheets reached the headwaters of the creek which ran through the tribe's valley. The water grew muddy from the dirt and gravel which the glacier dropped into the once crystal-clear stream. No one could see to catch fish with the bare hands. The water grew muddy from the dirt and gravel which the glacier dropped into the once crystal-clear stream. No one could see to catch fish with the bare hands. The country grew wetter and unsuited to wild woolly horses. The best trained woolly horse-clubbers employing the most efficient techniques taught in schools returned empty handed. The new dampness in the air gave the sabre-tooth tigers pneumonia to which they succumbed. The best tiger scaring techniques thus became only academic exercises, good in themselves, perhaps, but not necessary for tribal security. Worse yet, ferocious glacial bears appeared which were not afraid of fire and could not be driven away even by the most advanced methods taught in the tiger-scaring courses in the schools.

The community was now in a very difficult situation. There were no fish, no hides for clothing, and no security from the hairy death that walked the trails by day and night. Fortunately for the tribe, however, there were men and women in it of the old New-Fist breed, people who had the ability to do and the daring to propose that the schools change to meet the demands of the new Neolithic Age and set aside the sabre-tooth curriculum of fish-grabbing, horse-clubbing, and tiger-scaring if the tribespeople wanted to eat, keep warm, and have some measure of security from sudden death.

Fist-Change was one of these Neolithic thinkers. It was he who first tied a chard of fractured flint to an elongated horse club and created a formidable weapon tribespeople could use to not only kill the ferocious glacial bears but solve the skin and food problems with one telling thrust. Fist-Change went on to suggest that flint chard fracturing and bear-killing be added to the sabre-tooth curriculum.

But the wise old men and women who controlled the schools, resisted these People-of-Change. "Why flint chard fracturing and bear-killing wouldn't be education, they would be mere training," they explained. "Furthermore, with all the intricate details of fish-grabbing, horse-clubbing, and tiger-scaring with fire, the school curriculum is too crowded already. We can't add fads and frills like flint chard fracturing and bear-killing. Why, at the very thought changing the sabre-tooth curriculum, the body of the great New-Fist, would turn over in its burial cairn."

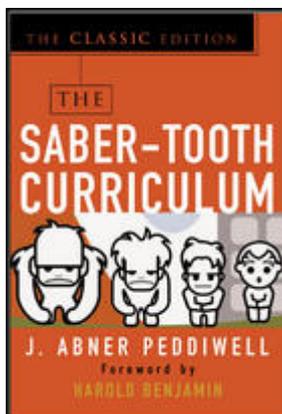


Burial Cairn of New-Fist-Hammer-Maker, 7982 B.C.

These wise old men and women remarked that if the "Great Mystery Who Speaks in Thunder and Moves in Lightning" had wanted children to practise bear-killing, he would have taught them the activity himself by implanting in their natures instincts for bear-killing. No, the old subjects must be retained for their "cultural value," the school people contended.

They further contended that: "Training to catch non-existent fish with bare hands is the best way to achieve muscular coordination and agility; training in clubbing horses that do not exist is an education in stealth and ingenuity; practising to frighten tigers that do not exist develops courage. These things are fundamental and sacred in education and must not be changed."

"The moral of this story is that our present public education system was designed for another age! We must significantly change what, when, and how tribespeople are taught if we are going to close the gap between what schools now provide what our students need."



The brief preceding story was freely adapted from J. Abner Peddiwel a.k.a. Harold H. Benjamin, *The Sabre-Tooth Curriculum: Including Other Lectures in the History of Paleolithic Education* (1939). This book is a satire on how curriculum is adopted and how it becomes irrelevant with changes in the real world. Written in a wonderfully humorous style, we see how schools are forced to teach students material that they won't need and how the instruction is delivered in ways that are behind the times.