

THE WISDOM OF THE HANDS BY DOUG STOWE

When I was in high school and college, I worked summers and holidays in my father's hardware store. I would slip away for an hour or so each afternoon to restore an old car under the guidance of a master craftsman. One day he said, "Doug, I don't know why you study to be a lawyer when your brains are so clearly in your hands." His comment was prophetic. It led me to reexamine my academic path, alerted me to the pleasure I received from learning and working through my hands and ultimately caused me to question the artificial and unproductive separation between hands-on learning and academic pursuits. I became a professional craftsman and then an author of woodworking books and articles.

In many schools, woodshops have been discontinued to allow for greater emphasis on academic studies. As a craftsman, author and parent, I have found myself in Internet conversations in which I learned that woodshops were no longer considered relevant in our information age. Instead of making things, we would buy everything we needed from some developing nation.

In my own shop, I never felt that what I was doing was obsolete. Woodworking enabled me to use a variety of skills, integrating the arts, science, history, mathematics and business. It occurred to me that woodworking in school could become central to the learning experience, making all the other conventional studies more relevant and meaningful to children's lives. If learning were more relevant, more meaningful and more fun, school would more readily engage our children's attention and lead to their success. Thanks to my early craftsman mentor, I had noticed something about my own hands that I believed to be a valuable tool in education; when the hands are engaged, the heart follows.

In the fall of 2001, I helped launch the Wisdom of the Hands program at Clear Spring School in Eureka Springs, Arkansas, to demonstrate the value of woodcraft as a part of the school curriculum. We named the program Wisdom of the Hands in the belief that bringing the hands into direct action on behalf of learning would enhance knowledge in all areas of the conventional school curriculum for all students. We started at the high-school level and over the next two years extended the program throughout the elementary grades.

The Demonstration at Clear Spring School

The Wisdom of the Hands program is different from conventional school art and woodworking classes. Each project is planned in cooperation with core classroom teachers to integrate with current studies. We make tools that fit a variety of different categories, each intended to enhance the school's basic curriculum. Some of the tools enable children to do work, while others are used to

expand the children's understanding of concepts. Some are used for investigation and demonstration of scientific principles, some are used for organizing and collecting data, and still others provide additional interest in classroom activities.

Working tools are those that provide the children opportunity to do other projects, often involving crafts. Examples are looms for weaving, knives for carving and pens for learning cursive writing.

Conceptual study tools include geometric solids for the study of geometry, abacuses for doing math problems and developing numeracy, models of the solar system, puzzle maps for study of geography and plate tectonics.

Investigatory tools include windmills for studying meteorology, bug boxes and nets for catching insects and projectile launchers for the study of trigonometry and physics.

Organizational tools include divided trays for the collection of rocks and minerals, display boxes for collections of insects and numbered stakes for marking plant species on the school nature trails.

In addition, the children of all ages have a love of making toys, which we use as tools to expand interest in specific areas of study. As examples, the children have made trains and various animals inspired by their reading, boats for the study of the sea and cars and trucks for the study of economics and transportation. Toy making increases the child's enthusiasm for learning at all ages. Each project tests new ideas and ends with play. Every child has a collection of treasured objects that remind him or her of lessons learned and skills developed.

The variety of tools that can be made in the school woodshop is without limit. So what is the difference between making an object and making a tool? Tools are intended to have use and impact beyond the time spent in the woodshop. For example, the simple tray made for the collection of rocks and minerals is not complete until the contents have been collected, organized and labeled. A loom is not complete until it holds a completed cloth. A toy is not complete until it has been played with and enjoyed and learned from. Tools have particular effectiveness in bringing the hands to work in the classroom far beyond note taking and keyboarding. In my opinion, the hands' profound impact on learning has been widely ignored in education, but may offer the pathway to educational reform and renewal.

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