THE OPPOSITE OF CONTENT IS NOT PROCESS
(With thanks and apologies to Alfred North Whitehead)

Reed F. Spencer

To me it is disconcerting, even frightening to be involved by choice in the deliberate attempt to prepare our students for a world about which we know so very little—a future possessed by marvels even the boldest dare not predict. I wonder in what ways and to what extent these marvels will render inert the things our students are learning day?

While the sheer amount of knowledge continues to increase almost exponentially, how much of what we teach today will become obsolete before students ever need to actually use it? In a time when “bubble” memory may allow anyone to carry a full set of encyclopedias in a wrist watch, how will we prevent our students from becoming victimized by the ease with which limitless amounts of information can be accessed and manipulated? Faced with a future which refuses to be anticipated, what of substance can we give our students that will remain when school days are gone and school-learning all but forgotten?

Romance. We can give them romance.

Not the boy-girl kind. Not the first pleasantly disquieting revelation that usually comes when a child learns there is something nice about the differences between boys and girls, nor the jolts of first love in later school years most of us somehow survive. No, I mean the romance you feel for what you are teaching, for your subject. Long after students have forgotten what they had to memorize to pass your tests, they will still remember how you felt about what you taught, and how they felt about what they learned. Whether a student becomes chronically infected with romance for a subject will ultimately open (or close) doors and shape futures more than any other factor—more than “intelligence”, more than good grades, more than high test scores, more than anything.

Did you have any of these teachers? The first time I remember being romanced was in ninth grade geography. The teacher let us sit anywhere we wanted (no one else ever did that) except the center seat of the first row. He always sat on that desk and shared tales of faraway places (we didn’t think he was really teaching, but we liked it!). I became interested and excited, as he was, about maps, peoples and places. Then there was my college chemistry professor who was just tickled to death with chemistry! He was always grinning from ear to ear while he put that stuff I can’t remember now, all over that enormous blackboard. This guy actually believed Chemistry was the most important subject anyone could every study. I’ll never forget a young math teacher, who I am sure to this day sleeps with a trig book under his pillow. I think he really believed that any rational person would have to agree that mathematics was the most interesting subject. I may never forgive the psychology professor who enticed me into a life-long wonder and frustration at trying to understand the human mind.

I remember these teachers, but most of all I remember their subjects. These great teachers were in love with their disciplines, and made me fall in love with them too.

That is our challenge—to unlock the future by romancing students with the subject matter before we suffocate them with its structure and content.

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The key to making what we learn useful is not how much we learn, but how much we love what we learn. It isn’t the merely well-informed people in a discipline who become the movers and shakers, but those who are romanced by what they do.

Share that romance with your students. Make sure they see you get genuinely excited about what you are teaching. Do it deliberately and systematically. NO classroom should be without it. If you don’t honestly feel it for the specific subject or topic (and its only normal that you won’t all the time), introduce your students to someone who does feel it. Students must feel the exhilaration of learning, especially the thrill and excitement of self-motivated exploration and discovery. That feeling, that romance, will sustain them through the very real work of learning and relearning as technologies and applications advance.

We will, and must, continue to restructure schools, rethink curriculum and retrain administrators and teachers. The aphorism “the only thing constant is change” will continue to be true for American education.

But whatever may change in our glorious futures, the need for romance never will.

Following 2 quotes from The Middle School and Beyond.
Paul George, Chris Stevenson, Julia Thompson & James B.

Charles Adams (1989), recently retired after teaching for fifteen years in Fayetteville, Arkansas, talked about Maggie, a 6th grader with extremely poor reading skills. He had tried several ways to help her, but without success. One day, in a conference with her mother, he found out that Maggie liked to cook and sew but was frustrated by her inability to read recipes and sewing patterns. Adams had his hook. Beginning with a list of cooking and sewing vocabulary words, he explained to her that if she could learn these words, she could use them for the rest of her life. It worked. Soon Maggie was able to bake Adams’ favorite banana cake, which she proudly brought to school to share with the class. Adams learned something very important in working with Maggie. He says he learned “never to stop trying to find something a child has interest in and using that interest to motivate the child” (p. 50).

Sitting at the back of the room, the observer watched as a group of 8th graders worked through the lengthy test that their teacher gave at the end of each unit. Having glanced slyly backward several times, one of the students finally turned to the observer and said, “This test is stupid.”

The observer, supposing this was just another one of those notorious 8th grade behaviors, said nothing.

“This is stupid,” the student protested again, this time in a louder voice.

Not wanting to create a scene, the observer whispered, “What’s stupid?”

“This,” said the student, pushing the test forward.

It was a test like other tests, several pages filled with multiple-choice, matching, and short-answer questions. So the observer said, “It doesn’t look stupid. It just looks like the teacher is trying to find out whether you learned what you were supposed to.”

“That’s what’s stupid about it. It’s all what the teacher thinks we should know. Why don’t they ever want to know what we know?”