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Hunting and Fishing Are Different

Zane L. Berge
Contributing Editor

I grew up in central Pennsylvania. My father taught me to hunt in the fields and woodlands of Union and Snyder counties and to fish the Susquehanna River and the streams and creeks that are tributaries to that river. Over the past quarter century, I have fished in many other places in the world.

Hunting and fishing are different.

When I cast my line, I am not sure if the fish that strikes will be 8 inches or 28 inches long. (I know that I catch a lot more of the smaller ones!) I am not even sure what species of fish may be attracted to my lure: small-mouth bass, sunfish, white fish, or an occasional muskellunge, walleye, or northern pike.

While I have not hunted for many years, going to my grandfather's hunting cabin and tramping the fields around my dad's house each fall was a memorable part of my life growing up. When one goes hunting, what will be shot must be seen and known before executing the process. It is highly unlikely that I would, for instance, shoot at a white-tailed deer and bag a pheasant instead!

Training and education are different, too, in much the same way as hunting and fishing are. When hunting, I can articulate an outcome clearly. The primary method used in most training is direct instruction, resulting in a clear outcome. Instructional designers know many techniques and have many models to choose among when training for specific performance-based objectives. Like hunting, it makes sense to decide beforehand what you want the outcome to be.

To be most successful at fishing, I must know how to present the lure, cast where fish are most likely to be located in the stream, and use a dozen other general principles to increase the probability of attracting fish to my line. The techniques and methods I use change depending upon such environmental factors as the clearness and depth of the water, the temperature of the water, and how fast the current is running at that particular part of the creek. I know my general goal is to fish (a process) and if possible to catch fish (an outcome). In education, I have a general goal to move a learner's thinking along, to acculturate the learner to a field of study, and to motivate or inspire that learner to want to follow up on his or her own about some aspect of the chosen profession. I have principles that guide my actions, and I know that I am more likely to be successful in achieving my goals than if I disregard those principles.

Training is like hunting in that I know the skills that the learner must acquire before training begins. When hunting, I make adjustments because of environmental factors, such as whether there is a fresh tracking snow. Education can be defined as what remains after training is forgotten—with an important goal of education being to help a student change from relying on the instructor to determine what is important to know and do, to the student being self-reliant in directing what is to be learned.

But wait, you say! While both hunting and fishing are recreational activities, comparing them is like comparing apples and oranges. When I read the debate about "traditional ISD" versus "constructivist" influences on the field, it seems to be a lot like debating whether today is a good day to go fishing or a good day to go hunting. Training is performance based. Education often does not have much to do with performance, even though both have to do with teaching and learning.

My graduate work at Michigan State University was in educational systems development. Much of what I know of this field was first introduced to me by Professor Stephen Yelon. At heart and in practice, Steve Yelon is a trainer. He has forgotten more about techniques, methods, principles, and models of direct instruction than I will probably ever know. He is by far the best classroom instructor, using "traditional ISD," that I have seen. I feel privileged to have that background and foundation.

But it is a rare workshop I develop, or a small part of any of my lesson plans, in which I go hunting as I learned to do through Steve's efforts. My approach when conducting graduate level education is more commonly facilitative, inquiry-based, and indirect. I have a set of principles that guide my work. Still, the guiding set of principles I use in education is quite different from Steve's powerful principles of instruction.

When I cast my lure into the stream, I do not know exactly what will come of it. If I follow certain principles and techniques, I know my chances of catching fish are better than if I ignore them. Similarly, when I create an educational environment, will my modeling and management motivate learning in students? In education, as in fishing, I don't know all the outcomes with any exactness before the process is well underway. What I do know is that on most days now, whenever I have the opportunity, I go fishing.

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