



Teaching Beyond The Test

Professor Emeritus of Education Bruce Mitchell sees an alternative to “drill and kill” teaching strategies

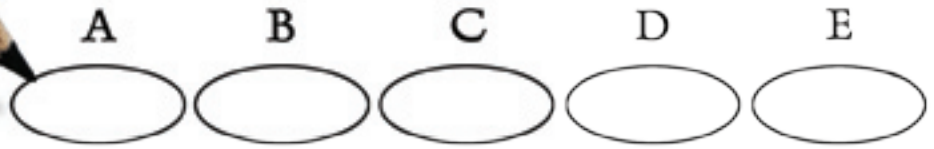


Photo courtesy SHSKI

“It was important for me to do Pantherfest to provide a change of pace for my class, to provide some ‘real world’ experiences, and to teach them the value of helping others in your community and in the world.”

Jeff Mitchell ('87 BA international studies, '91 BA education)

The cafeteria at Ocotillo Elementary School was packed with students, teachers, parents and other guests. The performer singing on stage was Alyssa, a visually impaired young lady with a once-in-a-lifetime voice. She was an alumna of Ocotillo, a Title I school in Palmdale, Calif.

Waiting to go on was a remarkable jazz quartet consisting of a talented tenor sax player named Ronni, his son Josh (an Ocotillo alumnus) on bass, a fine keyboard player named Dathan, and a sixth-grade teacher and drummer who doubles as my son Jeff.

Jeff and his students had taken the lead in an educational effort at Ocotillo that culminated in this musical fundraiser. It became a challenging, creative attempt to rise above the so-called drill and kill education spawned by the dominance of low-level cognitive testing.

Jeff's class had discovered an exciting charity called Students Helping Street Kids International (SHSKI). Through SHSKI, they learned about a young boy in Brazil named Joel who was considered a piano prodigy. But, as the students found out, Joel had one really big problem: He had no consistent access to a piano, and, as a victim of grinding poverty, he wasn't likely to acquire an instrument of his

own. But that's how the fun at Ocotillo started.

As a Title I school, Ocotillo enrolled many students from low-income backgrounds. These students might not have suffered conditions as severe as those that beset Joel, but many of them had experienced firsthand the problems associated with poverty.

From a DVD supplied by SHSKI, the sixth-graders learned that Joel not only needed a piano, but also lived in a house that was badly in need of repair. When they became aware of the severity of Joel's plight, they decided to take action. They set out to raise enough money for some house repairs and a piano.

In order to raise the money they would need, the students brainstormed different strategies. They eventually settled on a school festival, which they dubbed Pantherfest after the school's mascot. In organizing the festival, the students left no stone unturned. In addition



to the benefit show, which also included a hand drummer and a variety of other performers from the Ocotillo school community, there were food booths and a raffle for door prizes.

Working on this project called on the considerable range of talents and abilities that a motivated class of sixth-graders – with the help of friends, families and teachers – can muster.

Most of the door prizes, for example, were solicited by the sixth-graders from local businesses. Armed with an “official letter” from their teacher, they approached local merchants and asked for donations of various kinds. Of course, along with accepting the donations came the obligation to organize the raffle and account for all the donations. In addition, the students sent thank-you letters to all whose generosity made Pantherfest possible, including those who performed in the benefit.

Consider what is entailed by the apparently simple decision to offer a range of food – for profit – at Pantherfest. The students had to research rental fees for such gadgets as snow cone and popcorn machines. Then they had to decide how much to charge if they were to make a decent profit. A better introduction to the real-world value of mathematics would be hard to imagine.

How does an extended project such as Pantherfest fit in with the current press for high achievement as measured almost exclusively by performance on high-stakes tests that are machine-scorable? After all, most decisions about education today, whether at the district, state

or federal level, are made on the basis of such tests. And much of the funding that now goes to support these tests and the preparation for them might once have been used to support field trips, music and art programs, and other valuable curricular and cocurricular offerings.

Clearly, the learning demonstrated by the students who organized Pantherfest cannot be measured directly by machine-scorable standardized tests. Measuring such higher-level learning requires different kinds of assessment. In the current climate, the critical question will ultimately be whether the creation of a school festival, such as the one described here, will translate into solid test results.

Many teachers have chosen to “teach to the test” because of school district requirements that leave them little time for crucial curricular topics that are not tested formally. And while drill and kill teaching strategies may help raise test scores, there is increasing evidence that conscientious and committed teachers who provide a comprehensive, exciting classroom curriculum will produce test results that surpass those of the drill and killers. Happily, the test scores of Ocotillo students continue to be among the best in the district.

However, the aspect of this tale that is perhaps most significant for educators is the manner in which the Ocotillo students took responsibility for much of their own learning. This was a venture they will never forget, and these young people will undoubtedly derive far more from the learning activities surrounding Pantherfest than they will from any mind-numbing drill and kill procedures directed solely at raising test scores.

The attendance at Pantherfest was much better than anyone anticipated. In the end, Joel received \$1,300 for his piano, along with \$400 to help repair his house. And the sixth-graders learned that it’s worth caring about all people on the planet who suffer from poverty.

They learned that it is possible to do well by doing good. **E**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Bruce Mitchell was a professor in EWU’s Department of Education for more than 30 years. He is a cofounder and codirector of the Satori Camp for gifted junior and high school students, which is held every summer on the EWU campus in Cheney. Mitchell is a noted researcher and author in areas of creativity, gifted education and multicultural education. He is retired and living in Oxnard, Calif.



His son, alumnus **Jeff Mitchell** (pictured at left with students), has been teaching for 16 years. After graduating from EWU (the second time) in 1991, he worked for a year at Columbia High School in Hunters, Wash. He subbed at Lewis and Clark High School in Spokane for a year before moving to California, where he’s taught just about every grade level over the past 14 years.