

A Review of How Difficult Can This Be?

The Effect of Non-Research Based Approaches in the Classroom

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“F.A.T. City: How Difficult Can This Be?” is a workshop for teachers who want to better understand the perspectives of children with learning disabilities in the classroom. From reviews in popular pedagogy magazines, we see the non-stop impact this 1987 video has had on teachers even through 2020. But a glance through a catalogue database (e.g. EBSCO) shows that the piece is not heavily cited in research. That might leave a viewer to wonder, if this approach is not research-based, how do we know if the workshop is indeed contributing to the process of understanding learning disabilities?

The video of this workshop provides viewers with an authentic situational analysis of what it means to have a learning disability. Lavoie, the workshop’s developer and host, starts off with a simulated class paced at a speed that leaves the participants with no time to process the page that they should be on or to absorb the questions being asked. The viewer sees how some participants can adjust to the rapid pace, while others are left stammering, stretching for inadequate answers. The presenter shows no kindness and barks at the participants to “go to the first page!” and “earth to Carol!” to show how anxiety further exacerbates performance. Lavoie presents a reading assignment, with the words in a coded arrangement that puts significant weight on the cognitive function of a learner, which the “students” stumble to read aloud and comprehend. Lavoie asks the “students” to look at a picture and provide a meaningful title; the picture has two viewpoints, but Lavoie shows how in the classroom, it is always the teacher’s perspective that matters and that a picture can be difficult to process for some.

The viewer feels the frustration firsthand and learns from a commentary just how embarrassed the slower “students” felt. From a reading of the transcript (F.A.T. City Workshop Transcript), a principal had stormed out of the room in tears over memories of his own struggles

with learning disabilities, and a teacher flew home to a learning-disabled son he had never before understood and hadn't spoken to in ten years. We see that the challenge in educating those with learning disabilities starts with our educators learning what having a disability means.

"How Difficult Can This Be?" was developed solely by Richard Lavoie, an educator and director of residential programs for children with special needs. He is a lecturer and serves as a consultant to the NY Times and National Center for Learning Disabilities and his video is one of the top selling videos from PBS (Rosen). His work started as a quest when he realized that he didn't really understand what it was like to be the learning-disabled children that he worked with (Lavoie). He tells the story of a student from his residential program. Lavoie had marked up the learner's essay in red and then invited the child to sit one-on-one to review the mistakes. The results brought the child to tears, as the learner had spent extra-time to proofread his work, time his peers spent on the basketball court. When Lavoie replied he understood how the child must feel, the child correctly pointed out that Lavoie didn't understand at all. From working with the children in his school, a sort of "living laboratory," Lavoie developed and refined his methods.

But in watching this video, the viewer should beware that just watching may not make you a better educator. As one educator's review put it, "Even if I know who these learning-disabled students are, I don't have any particular skills to help them" (Barlow, 1996). That may be why in the forty years since this video was made, much in our education systems remain unchanged. The participants feel the plight of the learning disabled, but what might be missing is a deliberation on what to take back to practice. There are some reinforcements on messages of kindness and empathy, consideration of pace, and that the subjects must be broken down before taught. However, what PBS could have added with their production of Lavoie's work is the inclusion of research-based methods, to collaborate with researchers to ensure that the workshop

was having its intended effect and to capture empirical data. When I think of workshops that I have attended, most recently the Yale University's, "The Science of Well-Being," the materials are research-based and the successful outcomes are carefully measured by the institution.

I can watch this video and just keep those points in mind, and I will watch it before I start each school year to remind myself that all children need empathy, kindness and differentiation in the classroom. Personally, I collected and mailed to Lavoie my red pencils from a math club I held as a symbol of gratitude as I now recognize that big eyes on contest mistakes are no more enjoyable to mathletes than the "throwaway sarcasm" was to the participant in the video. But, if anything, I more worry about what is next. Will empathy and an understanding of those learners that have disabilities be enough? Will I have the training and research-based methods to put into practice to serve all learners in my classroom well? The video might not be enough.

References

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