



# Sabu, Inc.

Helping those  
who must deal with  
*whole elephants*

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**Date** November 20, 2000

**TO:** Participants in Nov. 16  
*Executive Team* discussion

**RE:** LENSES AND GAUGES

# M E M O

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Those of you familiar with my role at some of Pam and Jerry's meetings know that part of it includes providing, if possible, another perspective on the issues being discussed. Some have referred to it as a "20,000 foot view," others an "elephant-eye view." In that context, I'd like to offer my reflections on what I consider the beginnings of a critical discussion at the 11/16 *Executive Team* meeting.

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Much of the energy driving the dialogue came from Jerry's sense that there was something valuable behind Fran's way of looking at a school that might offer a way to look at all instruction through a common lens. If found, this might be a "process standard" which would then make it possible to have "gauges" to determine what was going well, and what not, so help could be focused in the right places. Moreover, as Pam pointed out, it would enable the *SAS* to hold people accountable for *processes* they actually can influence, rather than *results* they don't totally control.

In the search for that common core process, two needs were recognized -- for a *common language*, and for a *common frame-of-reference* [or elephant]. At the end, there was a consensus that a group needed to come together to find MCPS's elephant, describe it in a way that everyone could relate to [regardless of which leg they had hold of], with words and concepts that had similar meanings for all, and which, most importantly, would reveal the fundamental interconnections that enabled the elephant to function and accomplish its purpose in life. This memo may offer helpful background for that search.

Underlying it are three assumptions I make about the *fundamental nature* of the MCPS elephant. By that I mean three conditions over which we don't get a vote. They are "givens." We can ignore them [and usually do] but then have to deal with the consequences.

- People as learners. Everyone's mind -- child and adult -- is already preprogrammed to learn. And it learns through a process of *continual "gap-closing"* -- narrowing the gap between *purposes* and *results*.
- The School District as a *bounded, connected system*, [albeit sometimes dysfunctional] and
- Time, as the *continual medium* within which our actions take place-- many of them responsive *at-that-time* interactions that require them to become priorities.

Further, I recognize that standing in the way of our taking advantage of these non-negotiable conditions are that they can't easily be "seen." They may be inside the elephant, and in spaces between or around its parts. They can be easily ignored because of the press of more visible conditions within which we work.

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The Parable of the Blind Men & The Elephant

## Finding the process

Human beings cannot “not learn.” Unfortunately, we seldom create organizational structures or processes designed to nurture or take advantage of that natural capacity.

I mention that because this is where I believe lies the answer to Jerry’s continual probing of Fran to discover how she “thinks.” Her answers tell me that her “rubric” for understanding the “instructional focus,” or anything else, about a school she visits is an underlying mental model structured around her beliefs about how people make continual decisions and choices as they accomplish their, and the school’s, *purposes* in their work. One advantage this gives her is that this is an underlying process common to everyone in the district. She can *make sense* of any program she looks at.

Near the end of the meeting, when again pressed by Jerry to describe that lens she looks through, Fran said she felt a “barrier” but couldn’t put it into words. She couldn’t move back deep enough into her unconscious to surface the nature of the window she looks through. She shouldn’t be faulted for not being able to articulate that “model” - - one I agree with by the way -- because we all have the same trouble surfacing the underlying paradigm that enables us to believe what we see and also see what we believe.

As a kick-off point for your discussions, I’m going to take a crack at articulating that core “process” model, below, but first want to take note of two related issues that were part of the discussion - “elephants” and “gauges.”

## Finding the elephant & assessing its health

And here is where Louis offered several helpful insights around the idea that one way to make sense of all these different parts we had our hands on was (1) to recognize that they were all part of an common elephant of which we lacked a “picture” and a common language for drawing it, and (2) that this elephant was already “on the table.” That is, not something to be “created” by the Baldrige or any other approach, but already there and usually ignored.

Sorry if I added a few additional words to your thoughts, Louis, but now you’re in my part of the zoo, and using my governing metaphor. And what I’ve learned is that it isn’t sufficient for the “blind men” to see only the outer shape of the beast. They also must have MRI’s that enable them to see the internal connections between its parts that provide the means for it to function and accomplish its “purposes” whatever they might be. This is a core process common to all elephants which, as with people, gauges and thermometers can monitor. But without “seeing” and understanding that process, elephant-doctor’s “gauges” may be measuring the wrong symptoms.

**So what I’m suggesting can come out of your search to clarify the process nature of “instruction” is a *standard* -- a process standard independent of content -- from which “gauges” might monitor a school’s capacity for providing instruction to each child. And which would provide the focus for developing the rest of the systems capacity to provide appropriate responsive instruction for all children.**

If it’s of any help to mix metaphors, hospitals have such a core process standard underlying all their critical decision’s -- called *diagnosis & prescription*. While doctors and nurses make those decisions, the hospital is held accountable for providing the information, tools and resources that make it possible for them to respond individually to each client. What might make this a relevant analogy to our situation is that in a hospital, it is the universally-accepted, fundamental common nature of the human body that supports the core work of diagnosis and prescription. It’s the universal acceptance of everyone’s “sameness”-- in the ways we are internally organized and function -- that actually enables the work of medical practitioners to focus on and respond to the “differences.” This fundamental self-correcting process of interactive diagnosis and prescription [e.g., “Take two aspirin and call me in the morning”] grounds *all* medical practice. This *informed interaction* has become such a transparent “given” in the equation that it is just assumed. One wouldn’t go to a hospital that treated everyone the same.

So with the above general reflections on the meeting as context, here are some thoughts that represent what I have learned about the “elephant” and its “core processes.”

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## Everything's connected to everything else...but how?

Like most of you I frequently have found myself frustrated by the unseen web of “the system” restraining my “autonomy. Logic told me that there were connections between learning, teaching, and schooling, but they never seemed to be what theorists and planners proposed they be. There appeared to be an anomaly in our knowledge base about the *connected nature* of three processes -- learning, teaching, and schooling;

For me, that basic anomaly didn't surface until recent research on the workings of the human mind appeared. It had to do with learning; the ways it develops through interaction, and the ways it gets applied to difficult situations through interdependent interaction.

I feel a little silly suggesting that “learning” -- the unquestioned reason for schools -- has an unknown or unseen dimension. *Learning* is supposed to be the school's “product.” Yet, if we stay with that metaphor for a moment, we'd note that the core work processes of every organization are structured to address the nature and operating requirements of its “product” - whether it is a widget or a service. But not necessarily in education! The core work of the entire organization does not address what we now know the basic nature of a developing mind requires.

No one is to blame. Only recently, as a consequence of research on the human brain, understanding of *learning* -- the seldom questioned reason why classrooms, schools, and school systems are structured the way they are -- turned around 180°.

- Learning is now understood as more than accumulated *content*. It is, instead, a biological *capacity* inborn in every child.
- Learning, we now *know* is a natural process that develops a capacity - a stored capacity to act.
- This capacity to weave skills and knowledge into effective actions is driven by a natural will that if not extinguished in the early years of life can fuel life long learning.
- The continual development of this learning capacity is schooling's purpose or “*end*.”

This research-based knowledge offers schools a common process base, similar to hospital's, about the common nature of the “product” they are developing.

Unfortunately, unlike other work settings, these understandings of the nature of the “product” have yet to be related to the everyday *work processes* of schooling. Several education reformers quickly picked up on implications for schools, but couldn't translate them into connected, coherent practices. One reason may be that the word “learning” in schools is used interchangeably to mean a *process* [the learning process] and the *outcome* measures of that capacity-developing process [what is learned.]

We periodically track the development of this capacity through testing, and use those “results” to inform a variety of decisions that can enhance the continual development of that capacity. Unfortunately, most of the data collected today may go to the least important decision-makers in terms of supporting *timely* actions -- decision-makers outside the immediate instructional environment. They aren't intended to be used by those who could modify their own immediate capacity-developing actions.

An example of failing to adequately distinguish between learning as a “result” or as a “process” can be found in *Baldrige's* education criteria. On page. 35 of the Criteria document's presentation of their core beliefs and values one finds:

### “Learning-Centered Education

Learning-centered education places the focus of education on learning and the *real needs* of students. *Such needs* derive from the requirements of the marketplace and the responsibilities of citizenship. “

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It would seem from this that responding to “student needs” should be the core of the school’s work process. What they refer to as “student needs” are really needs *stakeholders* have for the ways they want students to perform. They are indicators of the presence of a capacity that developed from a student’s learning process and which has common development needs.

Focusing on “student needs,” is not the same as focusing on the *needs of the learning process*. The brain’s *learning process* itself imposes requirements that are common for *all* children, and should be the core around which everything else aligns.

### ***Interaction speaks louder than words***

Once one begins to see these natural, and universal, requirements of the *learning process* as a given, something else about the learning-teaching connection becomes understandable.

The same brain research about *learning* as an “*end*,” also contributed a related understanding about “*means*.” The single concept emerging from brain research and neuro-science about how the human brain develops and continues to increase this capacity throughout life is that this result we call “learning” is the product of *interaction*. While this was not new information to anyone close to teaching -- effective teaching has always been a process based upon managing interactions appropriate to the needs of *each* child -- it provides a key knowledge bridge for linking to it the work of everyone else in a school system.

Consider that, in any field of human endeavor, it is *informed interaction* between the “worker” and the object of the work that engages the human mind’s natural trial and error way of solving problems and achieving purposes. At the “end” of that process, the “quality of results” -- the match between intentions and outcomes, between needs and results -- is directly dependent upon the frequency of that interaction and its appropriateness. And “appropriateness” is shaped by the knowledge that informs it.

Industry calls that critical, quality-producing interaction the “*moment-of-truth*” -- the choices made by the last person in the “line” that fulfill or diminish all those decisions from “above” that went before. In medicine they call this type of informed interaction “sound diagnostic/prescriptive” health care. In education, it’s always been known as the essence of good “teaching.”

Yet, with this knowledge of the power of interaction from both research and experiences in non-school settings, why have most school systems not yet been able to take advantage of these understandings to support the continual interactions of teaching and learning’s *moments-of-truth*?

From 20,000 feet [and here you might want to put on your oxygen mask before considering this counter-intuitive thought] it seems to be that in education the responsibility for the quality and quantity of that interaction has been placed primarily on *one person* -- a teacher. It may rock the under-the-ground world of unquestioned assumptions to suggest that teaching as a process, and the unique acts of a teacher in that process are not the same thing. [When one believes they are, then the primary way to fix teaching is limited to fixing teachers.]

But consider that in other professions, such as health care, the *organization* is held accountable for outcomes of the core process. To fulfill that accountability, work is structured to sustain the *informed interaction* supporting those moments-of-truth. The organization’s flow of information informs that interaction, and time and tools are provided to support the process’s *interactivity*. In these other organizations, results become a *shared responsibility*. Individuals are held *accountable* for creating, managing and sustaining the processes for achieving them. This *shared accountability* is often thought of as co-management.

More significantly, other professions themselves support this different concept of accountability because they recognize that the core work that defines one as a “professional” [think nurse, doctor, lawyer...] is structured around interactivity. In fact a Texas judge recently banned sales of a do-it-yourself legal software package [Quicken Family Lawyer 99] because it “ventured into the unauthorized practice of law.” The reason: its interactivity.

Yet, as most other school systems address “accountability” today, the persons at education’s end point -- where the “system” interacts with the child [teachers and principals]-- are expected to be accountable as isolated, autonomous practitioners. Interestingly, no one expects a hospital staff member to function without the

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organization providing the means to continually monitor and do something about his or her effects on a patient. The hospital, as a total organization, is held accountable for informing and supporting the interactions the individual doctor or nurse manages or contributes to.

### **Back on the ground**

As you move forward now in your search for a common way to look at the interconnected processes of learning, teaching, and schooling, and a common language for describing it, I hope that these thoughts may at least provide a common jumping-off place. From what I've heard so far, you already have most of the "answers" you're looking for residing in the experiences and expertise of the people in the room, awaiting a safe format for their emergence.

With your permission, I hope to continue my role.

Lew

*Noticing*

*The range of what we think and do  
is limited by what we fail to notice.  
And because we fail to notice  
that we fail to notice  
there is little we can do  
to change  
until we notice  
how failing to notice  
shapes our thoughts and deeds.*

*R.D. Laing*