

Salt Licorice and Self-Regulation

Alan Stel (Principal, Penticton Secondary) writes about the power of self-regulation ... but leaves himself a little room for self-indulgence.



Back in my thirties I began to carry a little more weight than I was used to. Vanity is a motivator. Right around that time I took up running. Like all athletes, I needed a goal.

With some urging from a friend I committed to running the Vancouver half-marathon. When May rolled around I was ready.

To fully appreciate my intentions here you need to know that I was introduced to Dutch “Zoute Drop” at a very young age. I became addicted to this traditional, black, salty, licorice candy. When I offer this candy to friends and colleagues who taste it for the first time, their facial expressions remind me of the first time I was introduced to cod liver oil. They usually spit it out. Addicts like me are pained by this response, not because we are sympathetic, but because we are aggrieved by this wasteful and wanton action. There are few, if ever any converts.

I arrived a day early for my race in Vancouver because that is what athletes do. Athletes acclimatize, and I took my training kind of seriously. Perhaps it was my youthful naiveté or likely just plain ignorance, but I made an unscheduled visit to the Dutch store which is often a part of my Vancouver trip ritual. I bought a generous half pound of salted licorice. Sweetly oblivious to the salty side effects, I began to consume them immediately. I ate them all; coveting every piece.

We arrived at the race early the next morning. I was in good form. It was a beautiful day and the run began smoothly until I reached the end of the first five kilometers. My best guess is that the vast amount of sodium I had consumed the day before functioned as a diuretic. My bladder felt like it was going to burst. There was no relief. At first I was able to wait a few kilometers between bathroom breaks, but the frequency increased to the point where my entire focus became a quest for the next facility. My friends were very amused by my discomfort. They took photos.

This school year, on the October 23rd Provincial Development Day, I joined in on a session sponsored by the The Canadian Self-regulation Initiative. I listened to Sandra-Lynn Shortall, Mike McKay, and Chris Kennedy describe how self-regulation has become embedded as a school district goal and a curriculum. They kept referring respectfully to the work of Stuart Shanker, so I bought his book: *Calm, Alert and Learning: Classroom Strategies for Self-Regulation*. I’m not sure what comes first, inspiration in the form of new thinking or sound common sense type beliefs that simply resonate with us because they are already informally part of our practice. Self-regulation feels like the latter. Without ever looking at it in a systematic or

formal way, I have been a believer in self-regulation since the beginning. My parents modelled it, and subsequently I have always believed in balance and moderation. This is probably true for most of us.

Shanker speculates that EQ (Emotional Quotient) in the twenty-first century replaces IQ (Intelligence Quotient) as the major psychological construct of the twentieth century. Essentially, EQ helps students self-regulate enabling them to access their learning. “The better a child can stay calm, focused and alert, the better he integrates the diverse information coming in from his different senses, assimilates it, and sequences his thoughts and actions.” Again, I believe this applies to everyone. I make better decisions when I am tuned into my physiological responses. Some of this is dictated by sleep patterns, diet, physical activity, even breathing exercises, however, I realize with increasing frequency how my effectiveness and capacity for problem solving is determined by how calmly I approach the issue, particularly if others are involved. Monitoring my own responses and thinking processes makes me a more effective problem solver. Articulating this understanding and shifting it from the realm of instinctive practice into the domain of intentionality is the challenge and a growing educational mandate. Teaching others to self-regulate is another dimension of the critical thinking curriculum.

It is easy to see why self-regulation

continues page 11

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Enrollment is fast, easy and free to any registered elementary, middle or high school in the province. There are bonus prizes, online resources, and remember—your school keeps all deposit refunds. A win for your school—and the environment.









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is getting some traction with educators, especially if it helps students master complex skills and concepts and ultimately reinforces metacognitive thinking. There is nothing really very mysterious about it. As a parent and a teacher, being mindful and intentional about teaching students techniques and strategies that reinforce behaviours that help us monitor our actions and thoughts, making us better thinkers and learners, and ultimately better citizens.

The more I read of Shanker's book, the more I am convinced about the necessity of designing a curriculum that incorporates strategies that embody self-regulating techniques. Pen High continues to work at implementing an inclusion model, facilitating a literacy and critical thinking culture, and promoting authentic assessment practices. I do believe more than ever that mindfulness, self-awareness, self-regulation or whatever you choose to call it has the potential to improve learning and achievement when they are integrated with the above curricular goals, particularly if it is done systematically and with intention. It can be life changing.

I am now in my fifties, gravity and time continues to temper my vanity and my humility. I eat less sodium. I exercise more. I occasionally surrender to the odd impulsive act. I am more cognizant of my actions and their consequences, except when it comes to Dutch licorice. Some addictions defy impulse control. In every other respect, when it comes to self-regulation as an instructional methodology for our students, I am a convert. 

Alan last wrote for *Adminfo* on helping students with anxiety (February 2015). He can be reached at:

ASTel@summer.com