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Education is becoming!

A while ago I was reading *Education Week*, a trade journal geared towards teachers of grades K–12, when I encountered a commentary entitled “The goal of education is becoming” (May 2014). This caught my eye because I thought the title had been printed wrong, as if words were missing. Should it have been titled “The goal of education is becoming more difficult” or “more elusive” or even something else? I decided to read on to find out.

The author, Marc Prensky, has written five books about education and spends his time thinking about future educative processes. Prensky argued that today’s schools are focusing largely on ‘learning’ with the goal of students becoming ‘learned’, just like we once did in schools: amassing great amounts of information and then regurgitating it on tests. But Prensky didn’t title his commentary “The goal of education is becoming learned.” Instead he wrote to express that schooling should be about ‘becoming’ with the goal of creating yourself as you want to be, learning your strengths and interests, pursuing what you find appealing, realizing how to make the world a better place, and so on. Prensky means that education is about fulfillment because there are many reasons for needing to be trained or learned.

As I wrote in my chapter of *Management of Laboratory Animal Care and Use Programs* (CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL, 2001), training material can be “offered on a need-to-know, good-to-know, or fun-to-know basis.” With so much information

to know, to learn and to be trained about, how can we possibly and realistically prioritize which material to learn? I argue that it depends upon the circumstance and the purpose of our learning. Obviously, we must know the regulations that relate to lab animals, but it is not always necessary to understand the details of PCR analysis when delivering tissue samples for genotyping. Of course, if after learning about animal care, someone hopes to educate herself to become a biochemistry technician, these details are very relevant. This is what Dr. Malcolm Knowles, the father of adult learning, would have us bear in mind when working with trainees, as I covered in a previous Fruits of Education column (*Lab Anim. (NY)* 43, 251; 2014). What is it that our trainees want to become through the education that we provide? What are the experiences, needs and motivations that urge them on to both learning and becoming?

The vivarium is a veritable classroom in which members of the lab animal community can become. Animal rooms are full of technology for measuring environmental parameters, with smart chips inside animals, which are, themselves, sophisticated models for research studies. Cage-washing is no longer an entry-level task, as many facilities now have computer-controlled washing machines that are operated by robots. The equipment in the core centers of facilities is specialized for imaging, genetic technology, surgery and other advanced research. In other words, there are many, many opportunities to learn and become.

To simply “know stuff,” Prensky writes, is an “old sense” of school learning and “hardly today’s ambition for most of us or our kids.” Prensky ponders what it would mean for school teachers to “think about what each of their students is becoming. It would be far more useful and interesting to a parent or a potential employer.” And we, as members of the lab animal profession, can contribute to this kind of education by participating in outreach with our local school systems. School kids enjoy learning about lab animal science, and those of us who have experienced that moment of ‘becoming’ know how rewarding it is. I believe that Prensky would see this kind of outreach as an investment in the workforce of vivaria. And, to school kids, this kind of learning experience makes knowledge “fun-to-know,” and encourages them to learn subjects like math and science that are so important to our field.

The context of Prensky’s writing is the school environment of grades K–12, and he reflects on the Common Core Standards, Next Generation Science Standards and support of ‘STEM’ subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) which are being implemented in most schools across America. We trainers need to be paying attention to these movements because those young students will soon be our adult trainees in the lab, learning and training on laboratory animal technology. We have an obligation and should be contributing to, in his words, the “goal of education” and the process of becoming.