



Robert Gowin

December 11, 1925 – November 14, 2016

Bob Gowin, an American philosophy educator, consultant, author, and inventor of the Vee Heuristic died peacefully at home in San Carlos, California on November 14, 2016. He was 91 years old; born on December 11, 1925 in West Palm Beach, Florida. His loving partner, Virginia Pugliese, survives him. He has three children, Sarah, Robin, and John.

Professor Gowin became Professor of Educational Foundations in the Department of Education Studies and Teacher Preparation in 1970 after serving as a courtesy professor at Cornell for three years. He had a distinguished career as a member of the faculty of Cornell's Department of Education for over 20 years. He was a renowned education researcher and author of several books on the use of pedagogical tools such as concept mapping and "V diagramming" in education. He became Professor Emeritus in 1990.

He received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Texas in 1948, his A.M. from Stanford University in 1952, and his Ph.D. from Yale in 1956. He was a High School teacher from 1951-1953, and started his career in higher education at the University of Bridgeport, CT, then the University of Chicago as an assistant professor. He served in the United States Navy from 1944-1946.

He was a Fellow in the United States Office of Education and the Philosophy Education Society, where he served as president from 1968-1970. He held memberships in John Dewey Society, the American Educational Research Association, the Association Process Philosophy Education (charter trustee), and the editorial board of *Social Epistemology*. Bob was the author of 15 books and monographs, and was an inspiring teacher and mentor.

Professor Gowin wrote many papers and manuscripts and had a strong impact on the theoretical and practical aspects of metacognitive learning in the field of educating. His research included explaining the uses of innovative ways to evaluate thoughts and feelings, such as, how does the V release energy for imaginative thinking and research? His publications were the culmination of many years of working with students, sharing ideas, following conferences, and, an always recurring theme, becoming close friends with his collaborators. His manuscripts *The Art of Educating with V Diagrams*, *Learning How to Learn*, and *Educating* were commonly referenced. His interests ranged from theories of learning to the practical implementation of their use in varied classrooms. Working with Professor Gowin was enlightening; involving learning about philosophy, the give and take of writing, and mutual respect. In a 1999 lecture entitled "Simplifying Complexity Without Denying It" his message was clear:

Educating, as an eventful process, changes the meaning of human experience by intervention in the lives of people with meaningful materials, to develop thinking, feeling, and acting, as habitual dispositions in order to make sense of human experience by using appropriate criteria of excellence. - D. Bob Gowin

Beyond his ground breaking research on the relationships between philosophy and education, Professor Gowin is remembered as having a profound influence on his students. His art was to plant questions in their minds: What makes a discipline disciplined? To what end do we teach? What are the events of educating? How can we conduct value inquiries? He taught his students to seek an event-sense of any subject of interest. Academic discourse was encouraged. In one of his classes the discussion would go back and forth about what constituted the "event" of interest in a paleontological inquiry. Was it the fossil? The preservation process? The behavior of the creature recorded in rock? Professor Gowin demonstrated how shifting conceptual lenses made possible seeing events from multiple perspectives.

Many of his doctoral students stayed in touch with Bob throughout his life. One of those students was Charles "Kip" Ault, who shares his remembrances:

"Asking a philosopher to serve on my Cornell doctoral committee seemed like an unusual move in 1977 for an elementary school teacher interested in environmental education. And so began Professor Gowin's remarkable influence on my career, convincing me to remain an educator and not jump ship to geology or paleontology. His epistemology course took us through topics that would soon become his provocative and "telling" book, *Educating*. I've always loved his phrase: "telling questions." Questions do tell. Decades into teaching new science teachers, I would sum up my philosophy of education with the simple dictum, "Teach the question." It was my homage to him.

One summer in the 1980s I attended a conference organized by Joe Novak at Cornell where it was my distinct privilege to attend a session--sort of an epistemic refresher--led by Professor Gowin. His incisiveness mesmerized me. I have never witnessed anyone who could think more quickly and with such clarity on fundamental issues in education.

Quite serendipitously, in May 2013, I found myself having lunch with Joe Novak in Ohio. He knew Professor Jinshan Wu at Beijing Normal University, who wished to develop a meaningful

learning tradition in Chinese higher education and had organized a set of workshops for that purpose. Thanks to Joe, I had the good fortune to be invited to teach in this project. I dusted off my Gowin's Vee notes and my concept mapping resources and, joined by Michael Brody (another Gowin student), soon found a receptive audience for meaningful learning and Vee diagramming despite the language barrier. Many of our students were doctoral candidates from diverse disciplines: linguistics, geography, mathematics, neuroscience, and even traditional Chinese medicine. I think we succeeded in helping them become smarter. How satisfied Professor Gowin would be to know that his work has found an eager audience in 21st century Beijing! And that, as part of the course, I had finally settled on the event of interest in geological and paleontological inquiry: "traces of the past."

The most colorful moment of philosophical debate I have ever experienced took place during the defense of my dissertation in 1980. Verne Rockcastle chaired the committee. He and Bob often sparred over such notions as warranting an inference. Their very animated debating considered the elephant "not in the room." Rocky argued that if an elephant's trunk was poking into the room through the door, then there must be an elephant in the hallway. Bob used this thought to riff on the problem of inductive inference. Soon talk turned to the meaning of "geologic time," the focus of my research (children's grasp of geologic time). Bob argued that "geologic time" was a construct within a context of inquiry. Rocky took the position that it was a fundamental fact of existence--a clear case of the discovery of "deep time," not a mere and tentative construction. For Bob, the use of time in constructing explanations was paramount. For Rocky, having a sense of the vast duration of earth history was a heritage from science for all to grasp. In keeping with good Ausubelian thinking as taught by Joe Novak, I struggled for an "integrative reconciliation" of these two viewpoints while the third member of my committee, paleontologist John Cisne, sat quietly with a bemused look on his face. Their debate is seared into my memory like no other intellectual experience. Thirty years later I at last found the rhetoric for integrating their positions: having a sense of geologic time means giving deep respect to the present moment. Not deep time but deep respect for the present moment is at the heart of my event-sense of geologic time. That view stands in contrast to treating all of human history as just a smidgen of geologic time. Vast duration is not the central issue. So much has happened to create the present moment and in this moment and no other we have responsibility for what might come next. Having Bob Gowin's voice echoing in my head--and posing telling questions--for many years has helped me to construct (or perhaps to discover) this insight. I trace what is my most important thought as a science educator back to my Cornell class with Professor Gowin and the spirited debate between him and Professor Rockcastle at my dissertation defense. I am so deeply indebted to the philosopher who did his best to make me a little bit smarter.

Thanks, Bob.

The words of Bob Gowin struck his students as the wisest and most telling of any they had ever known, and for most, the words stayed with them throughout their careers. Bob's research and teaching captured what is true, and frustrating, about educational reform:

There abounds a false idea of Knowledge.
This false view leads to a Debilitating Rigor.
This obsessive Rigor leads to a Silencing:

Questions of fundamental interest are forbidden.

Therefore, Questions Not Asked

Result in a False Idea of Knowledge.

The cycle is safe and therefore popular.

(from "The Learning Environment, 1986, at Cornell University: Ten Questions in Search of Answers")

Written by Marino Alvarez, Charles (Kip) Ault, and Joseph Novak, Memorial Committee