

**Foreword to *The Way It Spozed to Be* by James Herndon  
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We all know what's "spozed" to happen in school. Teachers know it, policy makers know it, and the students certainly know it. We know it so well that when something happens that isn't the way it's spozed to be – even if it's better, even if it's staggeringly more meaningful and more encouraging of true learning – we can't see its value.

This is what Herndon's story is about. Into a junior high school full of mostly defeated and demoralized kids walks Herndon, a new teacher with very few theories about how to make a difference. Others tell him what he's spozed to do: keep order. Toward that end, keep the kids busy – but not necessarily with anything they understand, hence the repeated suggestion that Herndon have the kids copy a paragraph from the blackboard each day even though many of them can't read it.

Herndon rejects this advice in favor of something that looks chaotic and messy but is actually real and valuable. For what was in many cases the first time, the kids in his classes began to do things that actually worked. They organized reading and writing projects. Kids who hadn't read or written before began to care about being able to. By the end of the year, the kids were keeping *themselves* busy with activities that grew out of their own concerns and furthered their own development (in general, but also with regard to literacy in particular).

One example, of many, is the Slambooks: notebooks in which the kids wrote what they thought of their classmates. Slambooks, as anyone familiar with them knows, are a classic kid-culture activity; they're the sort of thing no teacher would think up that that kids seem to think up regularly. Most of the other teachers talked only of how to get rid of these forbidden books, but Herndon saw the matter differently:

Again, I'd been in there with 9D too long; all I could see was that they'd finally come across something that needed to be written down to be successful or interesting to them, which couldn't even exist without writing, and they were doing it as enthusiastically as possible.

This is Herndon in his characteristically diffident style, letting you know almost offhandedly that he's noticed something crucial. But that's his gift. Where others saw only rebellion, Herndon saw the connection that would be the roots of true literacy learning.

And yet despite this and other such connections, despite what looks to the reader like indisputable learning and success in his classroom at the end of a difficult year, Herndon gets fired. Results are not the point. What matters is that teachers do what they're spozed to do, that they carry on with school as we know it, not that the students are actually learning in unprecedented amounts.

Herndon wrote this book thirty years ago. In a sense, it must seem as if current school reform efforts do make results the point. “We’ll raise standards, we’ll require that kids learn such-and-such before they graduate,” these reforms promise. But such mandates fall prey to what we might call “spoed thinking” as much as anything that happened in Herndon’s time. We’ve decided what’s spoed to happen, they say, and we’ll make sure that it does. A reader of this book might ask, how *can* we make sure, when Herndon’s colleagues thought that what they did was a way of making sure, too? Requiring kids to keep notebooks and be graded on them might sound like a way of ensuring that certain writing standards be met, but in fact, as Herndon observed, most kids didn’t do the assignments and knew almost nothing of “adverbs, how to spell, punctuation . . . many hadn’t even learned how to read.” Most of the kids *had* been receiving failing grades for years, and it’s hard to see how tougher standards would have changed that.

The Slambooks, on the other hand (along with other such activities), did what no federal mandate could: they give the kids an actual, believable, understandable reason to write and to want to get better at writing. Imagine a government mandate that said to teachers, “You *will* be attentive to where your kids actually are, to what actually excites and interests them, and you’ll stop playing that familiar and futile game of telling them what’s required so that they can spend a lot of time not doing it and protesting it and figuring out how to get around it, day after day and year after year.”

Of course, no government can mandate that teachers engage in the kind of careful and sustained observation that Herndon did, nor can it ask that teachers be willing to discard old habits for untried new ones. But Herndon’s example can inspire that response in people who read him. Herndon’s successes were amazing and unprecedented, but they are also believable and duplicable. They’re the sort of successes that other teachers – regular, everyday teachers trying to muddle through as Herndon was – ought to be able to emulate. As John Holt wrote in a review of the original edition of the book, “We are not helped by hearing how brilliant and gifted people did miracles in the classroom. . . . But Herndon did no miracles; all he did was to get his students, after years of apathy and rebellion, to begin educating themselves. He had never taught before, and had no special training or talents; we all have it in us to do what he did -- if we want to.”

In the middle of the book, Herndon devotes a concise, devastating two pages to the following advice from a colleague: “If you want the goat to pull the cart,” a teacher tells him, “but he doesn’t want to, you hold a carrot out in front of him. He tries to reach the carrot because he does want it. In doing so he pulls the cart. If, she said with a kind of wink, if you’ve attached the carrot to the cart.”

Herndon tries to restate the advice: “You mean, to get the student to do the assignment because of some reward he’s going to get, not because he realizes that the assignment is valuable or interesting to him. You mean, the assignment itself can’t be the carrot. . . .”

The teacher smiles because Herndon understands, as indeed he does, as indeed we are all meant to. Says Herndon, “I sneaked a quick smoke, my mind filled with carrots and outrage, and arrived upstairs a bit late to greet 9D.”

Herndon has been called the funniest of the school reform writers, and this book is as hilarious as any I know. It reads like a great novel, in the tradition of Salinger, Kerouac, Vonnegut. But like any great novel, it’s also telling us something important about ourselves and how we got to where we are. Savor this book. Let it fill your mind with carrots and outrage and delight and fury, but above all, let it show you the way it really is for kids in school. In any discussion of reform, that’s the only sensible place to start.

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