

Achievement vs. Accomplishment

An important distinction in education

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“Nothing builds self-esteem and self-confidence like accomplishment”
– Thomas Carlyle

“**A**chievement” and “accomplishment.” Are they the same thing?

Many use the terms interchangeably. A student who earns high marks is “achieving.” Getting a PhD, or even getting through a particular grade or course, we might say, is “quite an accomplishment.”

But I suggest we put a finer point on it. I believe there is an important distinction to be made here — whatever the words we use to make it.

The distinction I suggest we make more carefully is between a person’s doing something that benefits only (or principally) him or her (= an achievement), versus a person’s doing something (or being part of doing something) that benefits others and the world outside of that person (= an accomplishment).

Climbing to the top of Mt. Everest, for example is an achievement. Climbing a mountain — “because it’s there” as many say — benefits no one but the climber. And often, it leaves the world with a trail of debris and even dead companions. Winning a race is an achievement. But it typically benefits only the winner.

In education, obtaining a 4.0 average, or high marks on an exam, or a special prize are achievements. Getting elected to school office is an achievement. In fact most of what we expect from our students is achievement. Achievement takes effort, often a great

deal. And that effort, if positive, should be celebrated. We should laud the achievements of our students teachers and others.

Accomplishment

But that is quite different, I submit, from *accomplishment*. Winning a race, or getting good grades, or getting to the top of a mountain, are achievements but NOT accomplishments (as I suggest we use the word). This is because those things benefit no one but the person who did them. I suggest we reserve the term “accomplishments” for things people do that benefit others and the real world.

Helping find a cure for a disease is an accomplishment. Getting that cure into the field and eliminating the disease is an even bigger accomplishment. Starting (or contributing to) a magazine that becomes influential is an accomplishment. Starting a successful company that does something useful is an accomplishment. Helping improve your neighborhood is an accomplishment.

Even the highest achievements are not necessarily accomplishments, and we shouldn’t, I believe alternatively describe them as such (despite the fact that in ordinary language we often do.) I believe we should reserve the word accomplishment for things we do that help the world, or part of it. We achieve, in fact, so that we *can* accomplish.

School kids may collect achievements. But our students typically have far fewer accomplishments. This is because so little of what kids do in school do affects the real world. But our students could — and should — be accomplishing as well.

Writing a report that is accepted by the government in place of the one consultants used to be paid to do — as happened with one sixth grade class recently — is an accomplishment that is far better than the achievement of getting an A on a paper on the environment. Getting a team’s design for a community waterpark approved by the local board and built — as a fifth grade class did — is an accomplishment far beyond the achievement of creating a good, or winning design.

Accomplishments are things that go in the “experience” section of the resume, beyond where you went to school, what your grades were and your extracurricular activities.

Why the Distinction Matters in Education

Why is the distinction between “achievement” and “accomplishment” so important in education? Because “high achievers” in school often accomplish little — many studies show that grades are a terrible predictor of success in life. And, at the same time, there are many people who accomplish a great deal for the world, but were never high achievers in the academic sense. Winston Churchill is a great example.

What we really want from our students, I believe, is accomplishment and not achievement. We want them not only to understand the distinction between achievement and accomplishment, and what an accomplishment really is, but to accomplish, over and over, as many times as they can during their school years — so that they will know they *can* accomplish things in the real world, and how good it makes them feel. “Nothing builds self-esteem and self-confidence like accomplishment,” writes Thomas Carlyle.

Today some schools require real-world “service” or “capstone” projects as a (small) part of their programs. These can and should be expanded to the entire curriculum. Our young people should be working to build in school is a resume of accomplishments, and not just achievements.

Were our schools to measure student accomplishment (i.e. the positive projects a student has had an important hand in getting done), instead of student achievement (how high a grade or rank each student can get) the perceptions we have of our students — and our education — might be quite different.

So let’s begin carefully distinguishing “achievement” and “accomplishment.” And there are other important distinctions relative to education that we ought to begin making as well, including “learning” vs. “becoming,” and “school” vs. “education.” I will write about those separately.

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