

Wesley Becker, the Man

It was the late '60s and our project at the University of Illinois was in trouble. Carl Bereiter, the director, had decided to go to The Ontario Institute of Education, which left our project without a director. I could not be director, although I had shared responsibilities with Carl in directing the infamous Bereiter-Engelmann preschool, which was based on the unpopular premise that disadvantaged kids were far behind in skills and if they were to catch up, they needed an efficient program that compensated for their deficiencies. I was not on the “tenure” track at the U of Ill, but rather had the position of Senior Educational Specialist, a title that sounded good but that carried very little clout. The U of I did not like the project, and it seemed to be only a question of time before they dismantled it. Then something wonderful happened. One day Jean Osborn told me that Wes Becker would take over the program.

That was great news for a couple of reasons. The best was that the administrators at the U of I were afraid of him. He was a true hot shot, not in the sense of being a showboat but an extremely gifted person who was not easily intimidated. How gifted was he? To the best of my knowledge, he still holds the track record for entering college as a freshman and terminating with a Ph.D. at Stanford University. He did it in six years, graduating with degrees in both clinical psychology and statistics.

I had heard about Wes extensively from my sister-in-law, who was a Ph.D. student at the U of I. Wes was her advisor and his name occurred with sometimes-irritating frequency in any discussion about “school.” It was the “Wes this,” and “Wes that” routine. From her descriptions, Wes would have been able to cross large bodies of unfrozen water without getting wet. The only time I had actually met Wes was at a seminar he’d conducted for our group. He presented data on the work he had been doing on changing student behavior by changing teacher behavior. His motto, and the core practice of the training that he provided teachers, was, “Catch kids in the act of being good.” In other words, don’t nag them after they’ve done “bad things.” Set things up so they can succeed, and when they do, praise them for what they did.

After the seminar, Wes and I exchanged pleasantries, and while we were talking about kid performance, I mentioned something about the learning tendencies of naïve kids in learning skills like classification (vehicles, animals, containers, etc.). When I finished describing the tendency, Wes smiled and said, “Where’s the data?”

I said, “I don’t have any formal data.”

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged. The message was clear: Get the data or shut up. That message—Where’s the data?—was, I believe, the quintessence of Wes Becker. Personal prejudices and easy ways out were not his way, even if taking a stand on the side of data led to unpleasant consequences.

A couple of years earlier, Wes had delivered an address at the American Psychological Association in which he disavowed all the professional papers he had written and the orientation that he had espoused. In his address, he indicated that correlational studies and developmental trends (such as those postulated by Piaget) do not address the causes of behavioral change. So at the expense of professional contempt and embarrassment, he told it the way it was, just as he always did.

I often asked myself how Wes was strong enough to resist the lure of remaining a college professor in clinical psychology rather than laboring as a trouble-shooter and full-time on-call problem solver for a project that was unpopular with just about everybody who was supposed to be in the know about children and learning-academics, school administrators, decision-makers, and even teachers. In his clinical-psych professor role, he had the opportunity to work with very talented students; he could spend most of his time doing what he wanted to do; and he could remain a prestigious figure. As the director of our project, he had to engage in battles, work ridiculous hours, maintain the travel schedule of those who travel for a living, and receive precious little thanks or recognition for what he did.

He did it because the data told him so.

As no surprise, Wes proved to be singularly reliable. Being late was not in his skill repertoire. If he indicated that a report would be written within a week—even though he hadn't started it yet, and even though he would not take time out from his other duties to write it—it would be completed on time, thoughtfully composed, and reasonably well-proofed. And, I often marveled at his speed and ability to do things like analyze complex data to find flaws.

Wes remained the director of our project through the '70s, the '80s, and into the '90s. During this time, he managed to be a remarkably prolific writer. He authored over 100 pro-

fessional papers, wrote more than 20 seminal technical reports, delivered many addresses, and wrote four books on educational psychology. The three-volume series, *Teaching, a course in applied psychology*, wove the strands of developmental theory, behavioral research, and logic into a practical interpretation of what to do, how to do it, and why.

The lasting traditions that Wes created were the annual DI conference in Eugene, and the *Direct Instruction News*, which now carries the title *Effective School Practices*. Somehow, Wes found the time to find or create the pieces and edit the publication.

Wes left behind other legacies. He was a pioneer in the field of applied behavioral analysis—among the first to take the principles of reinforcement and apply them to teachers and kids in the school setting. Before that time, all the work on behavioral change had been done in the laboratory. Wes believed that the true arena for behavioral change was the classroom. His research in the early '60s showed clearly that if teachers changed the way they responded to the students, the students' behavior changed.

Wes influenced the field of school psychology, particularly at the University of Oregon, where he served as a professor and associate dean from 1970 through 1992. He showed his students why the traditional labels of "learning disability" and "developmentally delayed" were mere aptitude labels that didn't indicate what the recipients of these labels didn't know or how to fix them up. Wes showed the kind of testing that revealed specific information about kids' problems; he showed the kind of remedies that were needed to correct their problems.

Wes also served on the board of directors of Oregon Research Institute from 1972 until 1986. He was the driving force that brought that organization from near collapse to a thriving enterprise that now has more than \$11 million in annual grants and contracts. He extended this work to parents and kids. His

book, *Parents are Teachers*, delivered to parents the same message that proved effective in the classroom—if you change your behavior in specific ways, the kids will predictably change their behavior.

Wes was also a co-author of several levels of *SRA's Corrective Reading* series.

All these statistics and facts about Wes don't really capture the man. Wes was vital, enormously competitive, and almost a study in perpetual motion. He loved to play baseball, golf, and volleyball. He loved to build things, and he was a first-rate carpenter, plumber, and electrician. And although he often gave the impression of being hard-nosed, he cared a great deal about teachers and kids. The data was important to him only because the kids and teachers were important. He left education and Eugene, Oregon in 1993, because he could no longer bear the insults of the system. He gave up on the system, which he considered abusive and singularly unenlightened. Basically, he could no longer stand the pain and frustration of knowing that we could save millions of kids from school failure, and could mold teachers into experts in managing behavioral change, if school districts and decision-makers made decisions that were based on data. They didn't, and in 1993, Wes rejected them, his involvement in education, and anything connected with education. So in the end, Wes' strength—his iron will—took him out of education in the same way that it brought him in.

Ironically, some of the things that Wes had worked so hard for showed signs of occurring after Wes had retired. For instance, the *Corrective Reading* series had been available to the schools for more than 20 years; however, it wasn't until after Wes had retired that the series was recognized and adopted by schools as a key instrument for reversing school failure. Ironically, in the year that Wes died, the series achieved greater sales in the state of California than it had achieved nationally since its publication. Other positive changes that

would have pleased Wes are also occurring. Slowly, the field seems to be gaining awareness that failure in school is a serious health problem that doesn't have to occur. I'm sorry that Wes couldn't have seen some of these changes.

I knew Wes very well, not only as a worker, but as a dad and a man. I worked with him and accompanied him on many planes, in many cities, and in many hotels. I had many discussions and arguments with him and attended many meetings with him. I had picnics with him, played softball with him, rode trail cycles and drank beer with him. Through this kaleidoscope of experiences I had with Wes, I'm left with the overwhelming conclusion that I never knew anybody more talented and more dedicated to doing what he believed was right. I will miss the man a great deal—and I mean, The Man.