

Zig's Memorial
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A few years back I had the good fortune to spend a week at the Grand Canyon. I will never forget standing on one of the rims and looking out over this incredibly vast canyon. I pulled out my camera and tried to take a photo. I stopped when it was clear that my camera, even with a wide angled lens, would just capture a very small piece of this immense feat of nature. Why bother I thought.

I feel the same way right now standing before you in trying to capture in a few words the vast works and profound impact that Zig Engelmann has had in the field of education. I will focus on just a small piece of his legacy, his brilliance, and hopefully, through the collective tributes from so many others today, we may present a reasonable, yet limited, degree of testimony to this man's amazing achievements and contributions.

I wish to speak briefly to how Zig's approach to instruction has been applied, so successfully, to managing problem behavior and in teaching students with severe disabilities.

My association with Zig began in Australia back in 1976 when I began graduate studies in behavior disorders. It wasn't long before my advisor told me that I needed to go to America to get a run at an applied doctorate to meet my needs and interests. So, I ended up at the U of O for spring term, 1977. At the end of the term I was a little disappointed as the classes seemed much the same as the ones I'd taken in Australia. Then one of my classmates told me that I should join him at Sheldon High School and listen to this fella Zig Engelmann who is giving the closing presentation at the Summer Direct Instruction Conference. Which I did.

His topic was **misrules**. He explained how some children attend to the unintended or incidental features of instruction and subsequently make errors. He said they have learned a misrule. He'd say "They have learned the wrong way." Zig went on to show how it was perfectly reasonable and predictable that some children would pick up on the wrong cues. He not only saw the error patterns but he could explain them from the learner's

perspective. He then showed us how to teach the students who'd learned misrules, or more accurately reteach them, so they would "learn the right rule." He emphasized that by cleaning up the instruction, we could prevent misrules, and make it far more likely that the students will learn what is intended.

This talk grabbed me like nothing I had ever heard. It was like an epiphany (not that I know what they're like). Here is what struck me so forcibly back then – misbehavior or established problem behavior can be treated as a misrule: **"They have learned the wrong way."** I visited with Zig the very next week and told him how excited I was about applying misrules rules to the analysis of behavior problems. His immediate response was **"That's one side of the coin. The other is that if you want good behavior you have to teach it."** Keep in mind, at this time behavior management was predominantly treated through consequences, i.e, "If you want good behavior you have to punish bad behavior," – a far cry from an instructional approach. However, today Zig's approach to instruction has been widely adopted by so many professionals around the country, including many in this room, and is used as a model for addressing and preventing problem behavior at school-wide, classroom, and individual levels. We have seen a substantial nationwide shift in the schools, from a reactive punitive approach to behavior management to a proactive instructional approach. Zig's footprints are strongly present in the field of behavior management.

In like manner, Zig's approach to instruction was applied to teaching students with severe disabilities, the "low performers" as he liked to call this population. Because these students had very limited communication skills and very short memories, Zig really zeroed in on being incredibly precise in controlling interpretations of what is being taught. I remember him saying that "brighter kids will learn in spite of the teaching. But low performers will learn what the teacher teaches." In other words, Zig taught us that teachers of students with severe disabilities need to pay careful attention to knowing exactly what is being presented to the kids and in making highly deliberate and detailed steps to control for misinterpretation. There are endless testimonials as to how this approach has enabled these students to make extraordinary and unexpected gains in many skills.

Zig's legacy regarding instruction may be predominantly aligned to academic areas, as in reading, writing, math, and spelling. However, let us not forget the game-changing impact he has had on teaching and learning in so many other areas. In a word he has not only **transformed** instruction and learning right across the board but he has also **enabled** and **inspired** us to deliver his approach. Thank you Zig for everything.