**Green Eggs and Ham: Inspiration for Reaching Reluctant Learners**

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(Submitted)

**Introduction**

You do not like them.  
So you say.  
Try them! Try them!  
And you may. (Sam, p. 53)

Dr. Seuss’ *Green Eggs and Ham* is an inspirational guidebook for teachers. This popular children’s book offers many compelling strategies for motivation and instruction. It also speaks to our personal spiritual struggle as teachers, when we try to engage reluctant learners. *Green* is a sixty-two page masterpiece, offering lessons to teachers and learners at every level—early childhood, K-12, and higher education.

For the past decade, the first author has started each of his preservice science methods courses with a read aloud of *Green*. His students major in early childhood, elementary, or secondary teaching. Each year about one hundred and fifty novice teachers experience the dialog and tension between the main characters. Many students report a new or renewed enthusiasm for trying to engage reluctant learners, as well as a better sense of the kind of teacher and teaching that can make a difference.

First, we'll recap the story. Next we'll examine the characters, and then the eggs and ham. We'll highlight the many teaching strategies. We'll finish with our broader interpretations.

**Recap**

*Green* focuses on a conflict between two characters. Sam appears first, riding unusual beasts and introducing himself with bold signs. Sam approaches the man in the top hat, who we’ll call the Skeptic. Sam wants the Skeptic to try eating green eggs and ham, but the Skeptic refuses. Sam offers a variety of contexts for eating the eggs and ham: here or there, in a house with a mouse, in a box with a fox, in a car, in a tree, on a train, in the dark, in the rain, with a goat, and on a boat. Sam doesn't just describe these contexts: he confronts the Skeptic with each context, or even accompanies the Skeptic into the context. With each new context, the Skeptic repeats his refusal. The Skeptic recites the growing list of unsuccessful contexts, to emphasize his exasperation with Sam and his unconditional dislike of green eggs and ham.

As he pursues the Skeptic, Sam demonstrates an unflinching optimism that the Skeptic will accept the offer if they can find the right context. Sam and the Skeptic are joined by all the people and animals they meet along the way. Sam’s strategies are progressively bigger and bolder, including driving a speeding car down a hill and riding a train into the ocean. Finally, the exhausted Skeptic bargains with Sam: he will try the eggs and ham if Sam will let him be. Lo and behold: the Skeptic likes green eggs and ham! This delights Sam and the crowd of people and animals. The Skeptic recites the list of contexts a final time, only now he does this to emphasize his unconditional fondness for the eggs and ham:

> And I will eat them in the rain.  
> And in the dark. And on a train.  
> And in a car. And in a tree.  
> They are so good, so good, you see! (the Skeptic, p. 60)
The Skeptic eats all the green eggs and ham. The story ends with the Skeptic holding the empty plate and his other arm around Sam. The Skeptic emphatically thanks Sam.

The Characters

Sam and the Skeptic are defined by their appearance, attitudes, and actions. Like most characters in children's literature, their past and future are unknown and probably irrelevant. Sam and the Skeptic exist to play out this entertaining and educational story.

We encourage readers to consider which character they identify with more. In their first encounter with Green, children may identify with the Skeptic, since many children resist trying new foods or new experiences. Or perhaps they identify with Sam, since he's a lively and energetic character. We believe Sam is a good role model for teachers. We believe that as teachers, we need to understand the Skeptic and how Sam treats him, to better understand reluctant learners.

Sam finds the Skeptic reading a newspaper. The Skeptic's hat, newspaper, and frequent indignation convey the image of a "Serious Person": someone with staunch, sensible opinions and little patience for frivolity. He often raises his fist for emphasis, and his tone seems loud and annoyed. A Serious Person is a classic target for comedy. We smile as the Skeptic rants from the hood of the speeding car, and as his top hat droops from seawater. The Serious Person tries to maintain his dignity in face of the ridiculous, becoming ridiculous himself. We can look to Mary Poppins' Mr. Banks for a similar example of this archetype: "A British bank is run with precision. A British home requires nothing less."3

And yet... While the Skeptic is a comical character, Sam doesn't mock him. When Sam accompanies the Skeptic into each new, outlandish context, Sam isn't trying to humiliate him. Sam acts with sincerity; Sam hopes that the right context will persuade the Skeptic to try the eggs and ham. This is the main joke of the book: Sam's sincere, creative strategies, juxtaposed with the Skeptic's ardent refusals. The joke is especially amusing if we've read the book before. We know that the Skeptic will like the eggs and ham, if only he would stop being so stubborn and try them. Of course, there's a bit of the Skeptic in all of us, or else his stubbornness wouldn't be so amusing.

As Sam and the Skeptic travel through the outlandish contexts, there is barely a hint of danger. The artistic style is cartoonish, and Sam and the Skeptic are very agile. For example, throughout their madcap trip, Sam deftly balances the eggs and ham, often with one hand or on his head. The Skeptic shouts and pumps his fist while standing atop the speeding train. The Skeptic is so incensed by the wild notion that he might like the eggs and ham that he is oblivious to his wild circumstances. Yet the outlandish contexts aren't meant to threaten the Skeptic; rather, they emphasize Sam's resourcefulness and sincerity. Sam will try almost anything to motivate the Skeptic.

The story focuses on Sam and the Skeptic, but there are many other characters. Sam recruits various animals as possible dining companions for the Skeptic. The train engineer, passengers, and boat captain are similarly drawn into the adventure. These allies and bystanders usually convey a cheerful serenity. They calmly smile while Sam careens the car down the hill, and even as the train plunges into the ocean. The animals and people aren't oblivious to the argument: they demonstrate great interest when the Skeptic finally agrees to try the eggs and ham. Perhaps this is the ideal behavior for other learners when a teacher is trying to reach a reluctant learner. Sam's allies are ready to assist, if their presence will help the Skeptic to engage with the eggs and ham. But like Sam, the allies aren't impatient or disparaging. Perhaps they already know how they feel about the eggs and ham, and they want the Skeptic to come to the same informed opinion.

The Eggs and Ham

Many of Dr. Seuss' books have strong messages, either overt or via allegory. For example, The Lorax is an allegory of the dangers of over-exploiting natural resources. Since Seuss embeds such messages, it's worth looking for deeper meaning in Green Eggs and Ham.
The main joke of the book is its allegory. The Skeptic would like the eggs and ham, if only he’d try them. “Children, look at the Skeptic’s ridiculous attitude! Try something before you refuse it.” If we apply the allegory of *Ham* to reaching reluctant learners, then the eggs and ham represent the content we teach. Sam believes the eggs and ham are good. Sam is optimistic that with the right strategy, the Skeptic will agree.

The Skeptic starts with the certainty he does not like the eggs and ham. We can assume that the Skeptic has never eaten green eggs and ham, or hasn't eaten them in a very long time (e.g., since childhood). Perhaps he has read or heard that the eggs and ham are bad. At the end, the Skeptic is pleasantly surprised to discover that he actually likes green eggs and ham.

Some of our students may come to us with preconceptions and prejudices about our content. Even worse, our content may seem like that greenest of green ham: "When am I ever going to use this?" Before we can really teach anything, we must coax our students into engaging with the content. They must engage intellectually and affectively, to both grapple with the ideas and problems, and to appreciate their beauty and value.

Our students' preconceptions and prejudices reassure their inner Skeptics. Most students are sincerely interested in learning things that are interesting and useful. But learning takes work. So if our students can preemptively trash our content, then they don't need to work. In the language of identity construction, they can foreclose on an identity that would include intellectual and affective engagement with our content. Based on their preconceptions and prejudices, they prematurely decide they aren't scientists, mathematicians, historians, writers, artists, or what-have-you.

There are caveats. Sometimes a learner's reluctance isn't just a motivation problem. Reluctance can be based on real obstacles, including a curriculum that's too easy or too hard, or learning disabilities or other special needs (e.g., an Emotional Behavioral Disorder). As teachers, we need to tailor our curriculum to our students' abilities and prior knowledge, and we need to accommodate exceptionality. The lessons of *Ham* apply to all reluctant learners, but reluctance can be more complicated that preconceptions and prejudices.

We also need to be wary substituting flash for substance. The eggs and ham deserve Sam's energy and creativity, because the eggs and ham are worth tasting (as proven by the Skeptic's eventual enthusiasm). Exciting, visceral experiences can boost motivation where the value of the content isn't obvious, but no madcap journey should be used to gloss over content with no real value.

Since the eggs and ham are valuable, Sam demonstrates the effectiveness of adding some showmanship and surprise. *Ham* is an exciting story, because it connects with our sense of adventure. We thrive on exploration: it arouses us, and it recruits our attention, energy, and persistence. Adventure and exploration should be part of any curriculum, if we can connect them to the big ideas: "What's really happening?" "How does it work?" "What if…?" As the story of an adventure, *Ham* is about trying new things to learn and grow.

The Teaching Strategies

We know that our eggs and ham taste good: that our content is valuable. But how do we convince the Skeptic--the reluctant learner? Let's look closer at some of Sam's strategies.

In the beginning of the story, the Skeptic seems surprised and distracted by Sam, and he expresses his dislike for Sam. The Skeptic's initial dislike of Sam may color his reaction to the eggs and ham. We should consider how our relationships with our students may influence how they react to our content.

Sam uses a variety of tools to introduce himself and the eggs and ham (e.g., a telescoping hand holding the plate). Sam has a plan and he is resourceful, much like a teacher with a variety of strategies and educational technology. Sam isn't bound to one approach: he keeps trying new ones. As teachers, we need to focus on our goals and continually re-evaluate the best tools and strategies. When the Skeptic
lists the unacceptable contexts, Sam knows that the Skeptic is attending to Sam, so it's the strategies themselves that have failed. It's important to get feedback from our students, to evaluate our past strategies and inspire new ones.

Sam is extraordinarily well-prepared. For example, the goat is apparently in the car for at least 16 pages before Sam presents him. As teachers, we should have a similar, inexhaustible supply of strategies. We need to keep up with best practices in our focus areas. We need to exercise our creativity to stay flexible and inventive. We need to collaborate with our goats, er, colleagues.

Sam doesn't merely describe the possible contexts; he accompanies the Skeptic into each context, urging the Skeptic to taste the eggs and ham under extraordinary and visceral circumstances (e.g., with the wind streaming through his ears as the car careens down the hill). Like any great teacher, Sam doesn't settle for the strategy of "I've been there and I'll tell you about it," but instead uses the strategy of "you're going there, so you'll know."

In Ham, the Skeptic has a visceral, immersive experience through a variety of contexts. Sam creates a journey for the Skeptic that has the palpable immediacy of "being there" and "doing it." Thus, at journey's end, the Skeptic's passion is transmuted from a fierce repugnance of green eggs and ham into an equally emphatic enthusiasm for the stuff: "Say! I will eat them ANYWHERE!" (p. 61).

We know that our dispositions towards our content color our students' dispositions. Sam demonstrates a healthy, respectful irreverence to the eggs and ham. Sam isn't indifferent to the Skeptic's refusals, but he's unflappable and persistent. Sam doesn't take the refusals personally; he doesn't become belligerent or distant. Neither does he mock the Skeptic. Sam is too sincere to mock. Sam is committed to sharing the delicious eggs and ham, first and last.

A change in dispositions can follow conceptual change, or vice versa. The Skeptic finally agrees to try the eggs and ham "if you will let me be." Perhaps fundamentally, the Skeptic is resisting identity change. The Skeptic is comfortable in his dispositions towards and concept of green eggs and ham. Yet a better future awaits the Skeptic, filled with a new favorite food, if he can change. Piaget described radical conceptual change as disequilibrium leading to accommodation: first learners must experience unpleasant confusion and the dissolution of the prior, brittle identity, before they can triumph in understanding and the reformation of a more sophisticated, truth-finding identity. A change in dispositions or understanding may be unpleasant but necessary for learning and growth. It tastes bad, but it's good for you.

Change can occur to both the teacher and learner. Sam clearly hopes that the Skeptic will open himself to the contexts, and allow his identity to change. As teachers, we should model this openness. Admitting ignorance, taking risks, and making mistakes can be scary. Sam is willing to publically fail many times, because he's focused on reaching the Skeptic.

Sam deeply believes that the change will be good for the Skeptic: "You do not like them... Try them and you may, I say" (p. 53). Sam is emboldened by his passion for the eggs and ham, just as we should be emboldened by our passion for our content. Above all, boldness and creativity are Sam's pedagogy and methods. No single strategy persuades the Skeptic. Ultimately, the Skeptic is persuaded by Sam's inexhaustible enthusiasm and creativity.

**The Takeaway**

We want to close by contrasting Sam's sincerity with the poison of cynicism. As teachers, all of us have at least tasted the cynicism of giving up: if our students have bad attitudes, then why should we even try?

The Skeptic is a Serious Person, without the time or patience for Sam's unusual food or outlandish contexts. In comedy, the Serious Person can represent our collective skepticism, pessimism, or even cynicism. Some people say that we live in a cynical society. For example, we seem to delight in the faults of public figures, in their missteps and misadventures. We doubt that anyone can be as honorable or as resolute he claims. We scrutinize our leaders and achievers closely, and since they're only human, we
inevitably discover some faults. Then we bitterly congratulate ourselves on being miserly with our faith in humanity. In the same way, we may be miserly in our receptivity or engagement with entertainments and products. The new movie is probably over-hyped. The new restaurant is probably over-priced. Nothing is ever free. There's always a catch.

If we are cynics, we distrust the appearance of virtue and we seek out hidden flaws. Discovering flaws validates our worldview: "See? I told you so." In contrast, if we are optimists, we distrust our first impressions that something is worthless or unredeemable. We seek out hidden virtues in people and situations. If Ham's narrative arc validated a cynical worldview, it would end differently: the Skeptic would try the eggs and ham and hate them. ("See? I told you so.") Instead, the arc validates Sam's optimism. Sam doesn't gloat or upbraid the Skeptic. ("Why did you waste my time? Do you know how much all this cost me?") Sam simply accepts the Skeptic's gratitude.

As teachers, when we struggle to reach reluctant learners, we may be struggling against dispositions society has ingrained in them. When we present something as interesting and useful, our students may suspect another deceptive sales pitch. We can resent their skepticism, and thus be poisoned with it. Instead, we should follow Sam's example. We should recommit to finding or infusing value in our content, and to reflectively applying different strategies until our students take a bite.

Beyond our classrooms, our students face problems of enormous importance and complexity (e.g., issues of social justice). Cynicism robs of us the most useful tools for tackling hard problems: effort, collaboration, and creativity. Cynicism tells us that the problems probably won't be solved, so why try? That people and institutions are corrupt and fractious, so why organize? Cynicism squanders our imagination on dire predictions, rather than on nonlinear approaches.

We need to regularly reconnect with our belief in our content. We need to dream as big as Sam, and find the pedagogical equivalent of crashing a train into the ocean. The Skeptic responds to Sam's inexhaustible enthusiasm, and our students will respond to our unapologetic dreams and passions.

Did Dr. Seuss write this story for teachers? No. And yet... Sam knows the eggs and ham are delicious, and he wants to share this experience with the Skeptic. We are teachers because we believe in the value of the content we teach. We see our content as beautiful and delicious. We're often brutally reminded that our students are initially blind to our content's value and beauty. Dr. Seuss writes Sam as undaunted by such skepticism. Sam doesn't try to give the Skeptic a comeuppance, nor does Sam skip over the Skeptic to focus on someone less resistant. Sam tries to improve the Skeptic's life, by coaxing him to be open to change. Sam cannot make the Skeptic like the eggs and ham. Sam can only do this: have faith in the beauty and taste of the good things he has experienced, model an openness to further adventure and change, and try a variety of strategies and contexts. This is the spirit of good teaching.

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2 Like many Seuss characters, Sam's gender is unclear and mostly irrelevant. We'll treat Sam as a man, since this is how many readers likely see Sam, but perhaps Sam is short for Samantha.
4 For other Seuss allegories, see "The Sneetches" and "Yurtle the Turtle."
5 We mean "educational technology" in the broadest sense, including high-tech and low-tech tools and media.