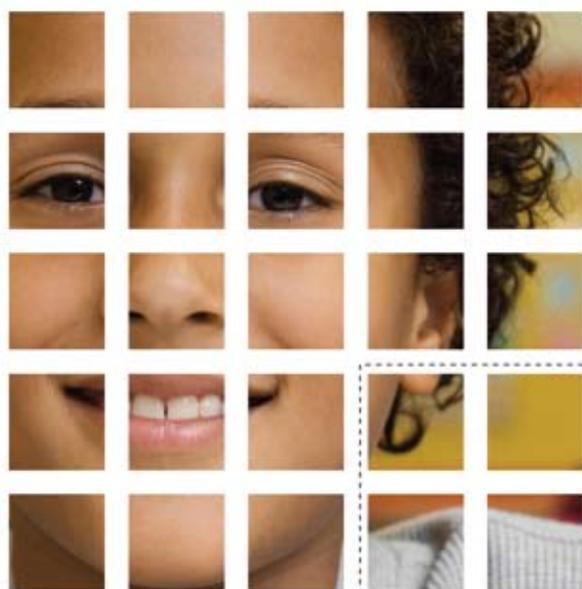


ENGAGING THE  
Whole Child

Reflections on  
Best Practices in Learning,  
Teaching, and Leadership



Edited by  
Marge Scherer



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**Whole Child**

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**Marge Scherer**

**ASCD**

Alexandria, Virginia USA



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## Foreword

The 21st century demands a highly skilled, educated work force and citizenry unlike any we have seen before. The global marketplace and economy are a reality. Change and innovation have become the new status quo while too many of our schools, communities, and systems use models designed to prepare young people for life in the middle of the last century. We live in a time that requires our students to be prepared to think both critically and creatively, to evaluate massive amounts of information, solve complex problems, and communicate well, yet our education systems remain committed to time structures, coursework, instructional methods, and assessments designed more than a century ago. A strong foundation in reading, writing, math, and other core subjects is as important as ever, yet insufficient for lifelong success.

These 21st century demands require a new and better way of approaching education policy and practice—a whole child approach to learning, teaching, and community engagement. What if decisions about education policy were made by first asking, “What works best for children?” What if the education, health, housing, public safety, recreation, and business systems within our communities aligned human and capital resources to provide coordinated service to kids and families? What if policymakers at all levels worked with educators, families, and community members to ensure that we as a society meet our social compact to prepare children for their future rather than our past?

The answers push us to redefine what a successful learner is and how we measure success. It is time to put students first, align resources to students’ multiple needs, and advocate for a more balanced approach. A child who enters school in good health, feels safe, and is connected to her school is ready to learn. A student who has at least one adult in

school who understands his social and emotional development is more likely to stay in school. All students who have access to challenging academic programs are better prepared for further education, work, and civic life.

ASCD proposes a definition of achievement and accountability that promotes the development of children who are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged.

## ASCD's Whole Child Tenets

- Each student enters school **healthy** and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.
- Each student learns in an intellectually challenging environment that is physically and emotionally **safe** for students and adults.
- Each student is actively **engaged** in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.
- Each student has access to personalized learning and is **supported** by qualified, caring adults.
- Each graduate is **challenged** academically and prepared for success in college or further study and for employment in a global environment.

ASCD is helping schools, districts, and communities move from rhetoric about educating the whole child to reality. No single person, institution, or system can work in isolation to achieve such results so we have launched a Web site for educators, families, community members, and policymakers to share their stories, access resources, assess their progress, and advocate for children. Join us at [www.wholechildeducation.org](http://www.wholechildeducation.org). Our children deserve it. Our future demands it.

—Molly McCloskey  
Host of the [Whole Child Podcast](#)

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## Introduction

### Inviting Students to Learn

Several years ago I had the privilege of interviewing Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi for an issue of *Educational Leadership* titled “Do Students Care About Learning?” (September 2002). The psychologist and author of the best-selling book *Finding Flow* talked about his study of how teens spend most of their time. He asked teenagers to wear for one week a pager that would go off eight times a day at random moments. When they heard the buzzer, the teens recorded in a journal what they were doing, what they were thinking about, how happy they felt, and their levels of concentration and creativity.

The students reported that 30 percent of the time what they were doing felt like work; 30 percent felt like play; and 30 percent, neither work nor play. Only 10 percent of the time did they record that what they were doing felt like both work *and* play. Sadly, many students never had the experience that Csikszentmihalyi calls “a state of flow,” that is, a state in which they were so involved in an activity that nothing else seemed to matter; the work was as enjoyable as play, and the play was as worthwhile as work. Csikszentmihalyi describes this “optimum state of engagement” as occurring when both the individual’s level of skill and the challenge level of the activity are high. This kind of engagement of the mind and heart, if experienced often enough, results in young people seeking a life of achievement and realizing a high level of self-efficacy.

As a psychologist, Csikszentmihalyi is interested in exploring what situations in families, schools, and society help young people become competent adults who frequently experience well-being, productivity,

and enjoyment in life. Frequent themes in his work are the need for a balance of work and play and the need for challenge and support from family and school.

As I began compiling the articles for this book on engaging the whole child, I saw that many of our authors have explored the same themes that Csikszentmihalyi does. Indeed, ASCD's emphasis on the whole child stems from an urgent need for an emphasis on work and play, health and safety, challenge and support, achievement and engagement. The whole child initiative is, in some ways, a counter to an overemphasis on rigor and competition for their own sake, but it is also a counter to low expectations for young people and to an acceptance of mediocrity and boredom as part of every child's school experience.

Since Csikszentmihalyi conducted his study, our children's lives have only gotten busier and more fragmented even as they have enlarged immeasurably with the advent of new technology and more globalization. Indeed, disengagement among young people is an international phenomenon, and it sometimes confounds assumptions, as Reva Klein writes in "Engaging Students Around the World." Apathy is not only rampant in highly developed countries whose students feel great pressures to outperform their peers, but also, for reasons of scarcity and poverty, in countries whose literacy rates are low. Everywhere students say they want—and are not getting—from their schools what Klein calls the 3 *Rs*: relevance, respect, and reward.

The articles in this book describe how to impart relevance, respect, and reward while also teaching traditional and not so traditional curriculum subjects. They span all grade levels and subjects and offer both inspiration and practical advice. We hope you find this compilation useful as you instill purpose for learning and create the connections that are so necessary to opening your students to learning—heart, mind, body, and soul.

—Marge Scherer  
Editor in Chief, *Educational Leadership*



# Part 1

Engaging the  
Whole Child:  
Heart, Mind, and Soul



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# Joy in School

Steven Wolk

*Joyful learning can flourish in school—if you give joy a chance.*

Two quotes about schooling particularly resonate with me. The first is from John Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938): "What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul?" (p. 49). If the experience of "doing school" destroys children's spirit to learn, their sense of wonder, their curiosity about the world, and their willingness to care for the human condition, have we succeeded as educators, no matter how well our students do on standardized tests?

The second quote comes from John Goodlad's *A Place Called School* (1984). After finding an "extraordinary sameness" in our schools, Goodlad wrote, "Boredom is a disease of epidemic proportions. . . . Why are our schools not places of joy?" (p. 242). Now, a generation later, if you were to ask students for a list of adjectives that describe school, I doubt that *joyful* would make the list. The hearts and minds of children and young adults are wide open to the wonders of learning and the fascinating complexities of life. But school still manages to turn that into a joyless experience.

So what can schools and teachers do to bring some joy into children's formal education? Children typically spend from six to seven hours each day in school for nearly 10 months each year. During the school year, children generally spend more time interacting with their

teachers than with their parents. What happens inside schools has a deep and lasting effect on the mind-sets that children develop toward lifelong learning.

Dewey's point about the destructive power of our schools should make us ask ourselves some fundamental questions: What is the purpose of school? What dispositions about learning, reading, school, the world, and the self do we want to cultivate? Ask young adults why they go to school. You will hear nothing about joy.

I am not using the word *joy* as a synonym for *fun*. For many children, having fun is hanging out at the mall, watching TV, text-messaging their friends, or zipping down a roller-coaster. Having fun certainly brings us joy, but students don't need to be having fun in school to experience joy. According to my Random House dictionary, *joy* means, "The emotion of great delight or happiness caused by something good or satisfying." Surely our schools can do some of that. Joy and learning—including school content—are not mutually exclusive. Many of our greatest joys in life are related to our learning. Unfortunately, most of that joyful learning takes place outside school.

As educators, we have the responsibility to educate and inspire the whole child—mind, heart, and soul. By focusing on the following essentials, we can put more joy into students' experience of going to school and get more joy out of working inside one.

## JOY 1: Find the Pleasure in Learning

Why do people learn? I don't mean inside school—I mean learning as a part of life. Surely a large part of our learning is necessary for survival and a basic quality of life.

But there is another, entirely different, reason to learn. Learning gives us pleasure. This kind of learning is often (but not always) motivated from within, and no outside forces or coercions are needed. We also don't mind the possible difficulties in this learning. We often expect the challenges we encounter; we tend to see them as a natural

part of the learning process, so we are far more open to taking risks. Some love to learn about cars, others love to learn about history, and some find great joy in learning how to dance. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), such learning is an example of *flow*, which he defines as

the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it at even great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it. (p. 4)

If we want students to experience more flow in school—if we want them to see school and learning as joyful—we need to rethink how and what we teach. No longer can schooling be primarily about creating workers and test takers, but rather about nurturing human beings (Wolk, 2007). By helping students find the pleasure in learning, we can make that learning infinitely more successful.

## JOY 2: Give Students Choice

Outside of school, children are free to pursue their interests, and they do so with gusto. They learn how to play baseball or the drums; they learn how to ice skate or play video games; they read comic books, graphic novels, skateboard magazines, and Harry Potter.

But during a typical six-hour school day, how much ownership do students have of their learning? Practically none. It's not surprising that their interest in learning dissipates and that teachers complain of unmotivated students.

Joy in learning usually requires some ownership on the part of the learner. Students can own some of their school learning in several ways. They can choose the books they want to read through independent reading. In writing workshop, we can inspire them to be real writers and choose for themselves what genres to write in. During units in math, science, art, and social studies, they can choose specific subtopics

to study; then, as “experts,” they can share their learning with the class. Students can also choose which products they want to create to demonstrate their learning. What brings more joy—studying the civil rights movement in the United States through a textbook and lectures or creating comic books, writing and performing plays, interviewing people to create podcasts, and proposing your own ideas? Which would *you* rather do?

I advocate giving students one hour each day to study topics of their choice in what I call “Exploratory” (Wolk, 2001). In Exploratory, teachers collaborate with students to help shape student-initiated ideas into purposeful, inquiry-based investigations. During this time, students are scattered around the room, absorbed in an endless variety of topics that matter to them. While one student is studying the life of ants, a second is researching the workings of the FBI, and a third is exploring the life of Frida Kahlo. While two students work together to investigate the history of soccer, another is engrossed in surveying adults on their opinions of video games. Exploratory can teach students that school can be a place that nurtures curiosity, inspires them to ask questions, and helps them find the joy in learning.

### JOY 3: Let Students Create Things

People like to make stuff. Having control of our work and using our minds and hands to create something original give us a tremendous sense of agency. There is a special pride in bringing an original idea to fruition. It empowers us and encourages us; it helps us appreciate the demanding process of creating something from nothing.

The list of what students can create across the curriculum is virtually limitless: newspapers and magazines, brochures, stories, picture books, posters, murals, Web sites, podcasts, PowerPoint presentations, interviews, oral histories, models, diagrams, blueprints and floor plans, plays and role-plays, mock trials, photographs, paintings, songs, surveys, graphs, documentary videos—the list goes on and on. At its best,

school should help and inspire students to bring their own ideas and creations to life.

## JOY 4: Show Off Student Work

Our schools and classrooms should be brimming with wonderful, original student work. School spaces that are devoid of student work perpetuate a sterile and joyless environment. I tell my teacher education students that the walls of their classrooms should speak to people; they should say exactly what goes on in that space throughout the school day. I can tell what teachers value by simply walking into their classrooms and looking at the walls.

The same is true for a school building. My son, Max, is in 4th grade, and his school, Augustus H. Burley School in Chicago, is a joyous place to visit. The hallways and classrooms are filled with remarkable student work, and there is rarely a worksheet in sight. The teachers also show off the students themselves. There are photographs of students next to their favorite books, above their posted work from writing workshop, and next to the doors of some classrooms.

## JOY 5: Take Time to Tinker

Gever Tulley has started a unique summer school in California called the Tinkering School. His blog describes it this way:

The Tinkering School offers an exploratory curriculum designed to help kids—ages 7 to 17—learn how to build things. By providing a collaborative environment in which to explore basic and advanced building techniques and principles, we strive to create a school where we all learn by fooling around. All activities are hands-on, supervised, and at least partly improvisational. Grand schemes, wild ideas, crazy notions, and intuitive leaps of imagination are, of course, encouraged and fertilized. (Tulley, 2005)

At Tinkering School, students are allowed to dream. They come up with their own ideas for an object, and the faculty and staff help them sketch, design, and build it. When have you seen a public school that encouraged students to come up with “grand schemes, wild ideas, crazy notions, and intuitive leaps of imagination”? In fact, schools actually work to prevent this from happening.

Our school days are too planned, leaving no room for spontaneity and happenstance. Kindergarten is the last refuge in school for letting kids tinker. Once they enter 1st grade, students must banish the joy of “fooling around” with objects and ideas and, instead, sit at their desks most of the day listening to lectures, reading textbooks, and filling out worksheets.

Sometimes the best ideas come from tinkering—and teachers, not just students, should be doing more of it. We must push beyond the teacher-proof curriculum the textbook industry has created, which tries to plan every subject for every hour of the day. Far from being think tanks or workshops, our schools continue to be assembly lines. We need to free teachers to take risks, experiment, play with the art of pedagogy, and feel the joy that comes from tinkering with their teaching.

## JOY 6: Make School Spaces Inviting

Why do classrooms need to look so much like, well, *classrooms*, with desks in rows or arranged in groups, with a chalkboard or whiteboard at the front? When I walk into a classroom in my son’s school, I usually see a space that looks a lot like a family room. There’s a large rug, a class library with the best in children’s and young adult literature, bean bags, couches, comfortable chairs, pillows, colorful curtains, fabric hung over the ceiling lights, and lamps scattered about the classroom. In fact, sometimes the ceiling lights are off, and the lamps warmly light the room.

And what about the public spaces inside and outside the school—the hallways, foyers, meeting areas, and school grounds? Anyone who has spent time at a university knows how integral these spaces are to the learning and social dynamics of the campus. The same can be true for a school. Why not transform these often unused and sterile spots into places for small groups of students to work or cozy nooks for kids to read or write? How about filling a foyer with plants and flowers? Why not give a large wall to the students to create and paint a mural? One colorful mural can transform a barren hallway or entrance into a vibrant and joyful sight. And schools can turn outdoor spaces into gardens, sculpture parks, walking paths, and quiet reading areas.

## JOY 7: Get Outside

I am bewildered by how much time students spend inside schools. I don't mean that the school day should be shorter; I mean that more of the school day should be outside. We adults know all too well how much we like to get outside for a respite during the workday, and the same applies to students and teachers in school. They need a break from being confined inside a classroom all day. Fresh air, trees, and a sunny day can do miracles for the human spirit.

Interacting with nature brings a unique joy. Gavin Pretor-Pinney (2006) writes, "I have always loved looking at clouds. Nothing in nature rivals their variety and drama; nothing matches their sublime, ephemeral beauty" (p. 9). Naturalist and artist David Carroll (2004) describes his childhood enthrallment of seeking out turtles as he walked the ponds and marshes:

The sheer joy of being there, of simply bearing witness, continued to be paramount. I went out neither to heal my heartbreaks nor to celebrate my happiness, but to be in nature and outside myself. Turtles, spotted turtles most significantly, were a living text moving upon an endless turning of the pages of the natural world. (p. 27)

The easiest way to get students outside is simply to have recess. There is a special joy in standing amidst the students as they burst from the school and spread out like a swarm of hungry ants. Kids say that recess is their favorite time in school. Recess was also one of my favorite times of the day as a teacher because I was outside and surrounded by children having fun. Tragically, recess has become a rare sight, which may say more about our schools today than anything else. Why do so many schools find it so difficult to allow children 20 minutes each day to play?

As a teacher, I would often take my students outside to read, write, or have a class meeting. It is delightful for a student to sit under a tree and read or for a class to sit in a circle on the grass and talk. Much of our science curriculums could directly include the outdoors. A school does not have to be near a forest or the ocean for students and teachers to explore nature. Ecosystems are all around us. Have students dig a hole in a patch of dirt, and they will witness the flourishing life in the soil beneath their feet. Don't underestimate the power of sheer joy that children—and adults—can experience from tipping over a large rock and seeing the ground teeming with life.

## JOY 8: Read Good Books

Everyone loves a good story. We all know that if you have a 5-year-old sitting on your lap and a good book in your hands, you will soon experience the magic of stories. And what amazing stories there are! We are living in an astonishing time of children's and young adult literature. Immerse students in a culture of good books, and you surround them with joy.

For the past few years, I've been working on a grant with a Chicago public school, in part to help teachers make literature an important feature of their classrooms. I have brought loads of good books into the school. As I did book talks in 4th and 8th grade classrooms about dozens of new titles we ordered, the room was abuzz with students

who could not wait to get their hands on the books. When I walk into a classroom now, I am met with the excited voices of the students telling me what books they're reading.

Of course, if we want joy in schools, then sometimes students should read books that aren't so "serious." I believe that books with important themes can make a better world, but we must also sometimes allow—even encourage—students to experience books for sheer pleasure. Have 3rd graders read Dav Pilkey's *Captain Underpants and the Perilous Plot of Professor Poopyants* (Scholastic, 2000). Have 5th graders read Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* (Amulet, 2007). Have young adults read Sherman Alexie's very funny (and serious) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Little Brown, 2007). Encourage students to read thrillers; romance novels; action-adventure books; stories about sports, animals, and pop culture; graphic novels and manga; and nonfiction on topics they love. You will see plenty of joy.

## JOY 9: Offer More Gym and Arts Classes

In recent years, with our zeal for increasing test scores, "specials" in school have become nearly as rare as recess. It is not uncommon, especially in more impoverished schools, for students to have no art, music, and drama at all, and gym only once or twice a week. In my son's previous school in Chicago, he did not have gym until January.

With his work on multiple intelligences, Howard Gardner has helped us better appreciate the uniqueness of children and has spoken to the need to give students opportunities to use their varied strengths and interests in school. For the legions of children who have a special affinity for the visual arts, theater, music, or sports, classes in these subjects are golden times for them to experience joy in school. But how much joy can they experience when it's limited to 45 minutes each week?

## JOY 10: Transform Assessment

When I was a kid, I dreaded report card time. When I was a teacher, many of my students were anxious about their grades. For far too many students, assessment in its dominant forms—tests, quizzes, letter grades, number grades, and standardized tests—is a dark cloud that never seems to leave. Must it be this way?

The idea of assessment in school is not inherently bad; children assess themselves all the time. When they're busy doing something they love outside school, such as tae kwon do, baking, or playing the saxophone—when they're experiencing *flow*—they don't mind assessment at all. In fact, they see it as an important part of the process. But for most students, assessment in school is the enemy.

We can, however, make it a more positive experience. We need to help students understand the value of assessment. We also need to rethink “failure.” Our schools see failure as a bad thing. But adults know that failure is a vital part of learning. Portraying failure as a bad thing teaches a child to avoid risk taking and bold ideas. Imagine if we graded toddlers on their walking skills. We would be living in a nation of crawlers.

We should limit how we use quantitative assessments and make more use of narrative assessments and report cards, portfolios of authentic work, and student presentations and performances. In addition, parent conferences should not only include students, but also encourage the students to do much of the talking, using the conference as an opportunity to present their work and discuss their strengths and areas to focus on for growth.

As a teacher, I had my students regularly do self-assessments. This gave them some real power over the process. They assessed most of their schoolwork before I did my own assessment. And during report card time, I passed out photocopies of a blank report card and had my students complete it, for both grades and behavior, before I filled it out. I don't recall a student ever abusing this opportunity. At another school

in which I taught, I redesigned our report card to include space for a photograph of the student inside; the cover was left blank so students could either draw a picture or write something meaningful there.

## JOY 11: Have Some Fun Together

Recently, when I was visiting a school, I was standing in the hallway talking to a teacher when a tall 8th grade boy from another classroom exuberantly walked up to that teacher. They began some good-natured ribbing. Back and forth it went for a few minutes with smiles and laughter. What was this about? The teacher-student basketball game held earlier that week. Here were two people—an 8th grader and his teacher—having a joyous good time.

Schools need to find ways for students, teachers, and administrators to take a break from the sometimes emotional, tense, and serious school day and have some fun together. Sporting events, outdoor field days, movie nights, school sleep-ins, potluck meals, visits to restaurants, schoolwide T-shirt days, and talent shows can help everyone get to know one another better, tear down the personal walls that often get built inside schools, form more caring relationships, and simply have a wonderful time together.

## Teaching As a Joyful Experience

Recently, I visited a former graduate student in her classroom. It is her third year as a teacher, and I was excited to see her creative and thoughtful teaching. But she said to me, “I never imagined this job would be so hard. I’m tired all the time.”

Yes, teaching is hard. John Dewey’s quote—about school sapping our souls—can be as true for teachers as it is for students. Considering the staggering turnover of new teachers in urban schools, it is in everyone’s interest to help teachers find joy in their work. So teachers must strive in whatever ways they can to *own their teaching* so that each

morning they can enter their classrooms knowing there will be golden opportunities for them—as well as for their students—to experience the joy in school.

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# The Moral North Star

William Damon

*How do we help students understand that academic excellence can get them where they want to go?*

When I entered high school, achieving excellence was about the farthest thing from my mind. I had no reason to believe I could excel in coursework, and I saw no particular reason to try. I did care about not getting in trouble, but that required only a modicum of effort. Like many students, I quickly learned the lesson that TheodoreSizer (1984) formulated in *Horace's Compromise*: As long as I did well enough not to humiliate myself or the school, most teachers would leave me alone.

But two things happened during 9th grade that changed my attitude toward academic pursuits forever. Neither experience seemed dramatic or strange, nor did their significance dawn on me immediately. Yet they remain memorable because they ignited sparks of motivation that still endure. What's more, in my recent research I have found that the academic awakenings of students who find their own "paths to purpose" (Damon, 2008) often occur in ways that are strikingly similar to the initial stirrings of interest that I felt so long ago.

## Two Turning Points

Early in that first year of high school, for one of my weekly assignments in English class, I handed in my usual half-finished and thoroughly mediocre piece of work. But this time I made the mistake of muttering

a feeble excuse as I passed the essay to my teacher, along the lines of “I didn’t spend much time on this, but I know these weekly assignments don’t count for much.” My teacher, a crusty old gentleman who had undoubtedly seen thousands of similarly lackadaisical efforts in his time, nevertheless took the time to pull me aside for a word of advice. He peered over his glasses, fixed me in a stern gaze, and said, “Mr. Damon, *everything* you do in this world counts.” Perhaps because of the earnest way he said it, or perhaps because the idea was so foreign to my careless way of thinking at the time, the message left an impression that kept ringing in my ears from that day forward.

My other memorable experience came later that year when I worked on the school newspaper. I joined the newspaper to cover sports: I wasn’t a good enough athlete to make the teams, but I enjoyed watching the games and hanging out with the players. My first assignment was to cover a game that was of little interest to anyone. A group of Eastern European immigrants had formed an amateur soccer team and had requested a practice match with our varsity team. It was a pretty good game, with the visiting team more than holding its own, but that was not the story that captured my imagination. I stayed to talk with the immigrants after the game, and they spoke passionately about coming to America, the hard lives they had left behind, what political freedom meant to them, and their hopes for themselves and their families in this new land. This conversation opened a world of cultural and historical understanding that went far beyond what I had been learning in social studies. What’s more, when I wrote a story for the newspaper about these immigrants’ lives, my friends read it and commented that they were fascinated.

I had found an enthralling purpose. In my 14-year-old mind, the act of discovering previously unknown information and then communicating it to others seemed incredibly worthwhile and powerful. After that, I had no trouble devoting attention to my school writing assignments. I was determined to learn the skills that I would need to successfully pursue the mission I had found so captivating. My eventual

choice of a career as a scholar and researcher began with the personal passion I discovered that day.

These two 9th grade experiences had a number of things in common. First, they increased my motivation to learn and gave me a reason to strive for excellence. Second, they made me think about what kind of person I was and what I could accomplish with the knowledge my school offered. Third, they imparted to me the idea that my efforts could serve a useful purpose if I made good choices about how to spend my time.

In the first incident, I became aware that my actions matter. In the second, I found a way to contribute something of value through an engaging activity that drew on academic skills. The notion of accomplishing a worthy purpose captured my imagination, guided my choices, and spurred my energies toward the pursuit of excellence.

My 9th grade experiences had one other commonality that I note with regret: Despite the invaluable educational benefits that they imparted, both experiences are marginal to the main concerns being expressed about U.S. schools today. Across the education landscape, policymakers, experts, and practitioners are engaging in great debates about the need for testing and accountability, the content of the curriculum, and the proper uses of instructional methods such as computer technology. I do not mean to diminish these essential concerns. But largely missing from the debates is a central question: How can we get students to see the knowledge and skills we expect them to learn in school as important to their own lives and aspirations?

This is not simply a matter of academic motivation in the conventional sense—motivation to study hard enough to get good grades and fulfill course requirements. Rather, it is a question of the *purpose* behind the requirements. Why is schooling useful in the first place? On a personal level, why should a particular student bother to learn the knowledge offered in school and strive to use it in a masterful and ethical way—that is, aim for intellectual and moral excellence?

## Students with Purpose—and Without

Some educators may worry that introducing the big “why” questions that help students find purpose may distract attention away from the subject matter that schools are expected to convey. The opposite is true: Only when students discover personal meaning in their work do they apply their efforts with focus and imagination.

The question of purpose is what psychologists call an *ultimate concern* (Emmons, 1999) because it gives meaning to short-term goals (such as passing tests and getting good grades) by asking where these short-term goals will lead. Purpose acts as a moral north star on the route to excellence: It offers a steady beacon for inspiring and directing students’ best efforts over the long haul, within the classroom and beyond.

Unfortunately, highly purposeful students are the exception rather than the rule in our classrooms. In research for the Stanford Youth Purpose Project (Damon, 2008), we found that about 20 percent of students in our diverse national sample were approaching their studies with a clear sense of purpose. These youngsters stood out from their peers because they knew why they were in school: They had found a meaningful direction for their lives, and they wanted to prepare themselves for it. They appeared to be thriving in the classroom and beyond.

Some of these highly purposeful students are truly amazing. These are a few such students:

- Ryan, a boy who became concerned about families in Africa without enough clean water to drink. By age 12, Ryan had raised millions of dollars to build drinking wells in developing countries and had started a foundation to further these efforts.
- Nina, who after witnessing the ravages of lung cancer in her West Virginia town spent years of her adolescence leading a

youth chapter of the American Cancer Society to support cancer research and social policy and is now pursuing a medical career.

- Pascal, an aspiring jazz musician who combines a creative flair with serious study, intense practice, and a good grasp of the pragmatic realities of succeeding in a music career.
- Barbara, who by age 16 had joined with a friend to lead an organization called “Don’t Be Crude!” which promotes environmentally cleaner ways for Texas farmers to dispose of used oil from their tractors than simply dumping it on the fields.

At the other extreme, approximately a quarter of our sample had little interest in long-term goals of any kind. It was difficult to talk with them about purpose because they were not looking for much beyond their day-to-day existence. Some were content with their purposelessness, seeming to enjoy the hedonistic opportunities that this state of mind offered. Others felt dejected, anxious, apathetic, or some combination thereof. Not many of these students were making good use of their school years, let alone seeking excellence.

In the mid-range of our sample, between the purposeful and purposeless students, we found a large group (55 percent) who had experienced moments of purpose but who had not yet sustained a commitment to any particular aspiration. Some among this group were dabblers who were skipping from one interest to another without quite knowing why; some were dreamers who had visions of what they would like to become but no realistic sense of how to get there. With the right kind of guidance, all of these students could find the unique purpose that would give meaning to their work in school—and in life. But to make this happen, teachers must address the question of why academic knowledge is important.

## Addressing the “Why” Question

Teachers can address this “why” question across the curriculum. Why do people need to learn history or math? Why is it useful to read and write well or to spell words correctly? Why do we expect you and your fellow students to excel in the work that we assign you?

In my work with high schools, I have found that instruction in the sciences offers a vivid context for raising “why” (and “why not”) questions. Such questions can spur students’ interest in what many of them see as an obscure and difficult subject. Some years ago, I tried out this approach during a summer school program for gifted high school students. We discussed research in microbiology in the context of ethical questions such as the desirability of human genetic engineering and cloning. Students applied themselves vigorously to the difficult scientific readings, motivated at least in part by their enhanced appreciation for the contested moral issues at stake.

Beyond the curriculum, teachers and school counselors can raise questions of purpose in the context of vocational choices. “Why have I [the teacher] chosen teaching as my occupation?” Addressing this question with students, which teachers too rarely do, exposes students to a respected adult’s own quest for purpose. The idea that teaching is a calling for a dedicated individual would provide inspiring insights into vocational possibilities for our students.

In a broader sense, students could benefit from more discussion in school about the vocational implications of the coursework that they are doing. Not only, What kind of jobs can people who excel in algebra do? but also, What does this kind of work accomplish? Why is it important? How can I find out more about where my math talents could take me and how I could use them to establish a fulfilling career?

To foster the pursuit of moral excellence, teachers can introduce students to figures from recent history who have acted with integrity and courage in the face of pressure and personal risk, such as Nelson Mandela, Václav Havel, Katharine Graham, and Boris Yeltsin. In

addition, teachers and other school staff can address ethical problems that arise in schools not simply as rule breaking but also as violations of deeper moral purposes, helping students reflect on the question, Why do we have rules against cheating in the first place? If students realize that the moral purpose behind such rules is to preserve standards of fairness, honesty, trust, and integrity, they will endorse and uphold the rules with far more determination than if they merely see the rules as another set of demands from school authorities.

We can build a culture of purpose for students in thousands of ways throughout the school day. Some of these ways require nothing more than a well-directed remark or question from an attentive teacher. Others open up new possibilities for enlivening the curriculum materials at the core of the school's academic mission. A working paper that Stanford graduate student Matt Andrews prepared for me documented a number of ways in which teachers can foster reflection about purpose in the classroom. These strategies—which include many that teachers have used throughout their careers—gain greater power when teachers use them in combination as part of an intentional effort to put purpose at the center of schooling. For example, teachers can

- Engage in regular conversations with students about their hopes, dreams, and aspirations in life.
- Recognize student accomplishments that indicate beyond-the-self concerns.
- Link present school activities with the future life plans of students.
- Probe for deeper thinking by frequently asking, Why? when students give cryptic answers to questions.
- Connect school lessons to larger world issues.
- Provide students with the pedagogical reasons behind a particular activity or lesson.

- Develop lessons that make visible how students' actions contribute to wider systems (for example, a science unit that links student behavior to ecological impact).
- Introduce students to purpose in discussion of vocations.
- Create biographical units about purposeful people that include both famous people and locals who have direct contact with students.
- Nurture civic purpose by encouraging responsible citizenship within the school and beyond.

## Building Purposeful Citizens

This last item, nurturing civic purpose, is crucial today. Among all the causes that inspired the purposeful youth in our study, civic leadership came in dead last. Few young people today aspire to positions of civic responsibility (mayor, council member, senator, president, and so on).

There are many possible explanations for this finding, such as the paucity of admirable political leaders as portrayed by current media accounts. Whatever the reason, the lack of civic purpose is a grave concern for the future of democracy, which relies on constant renewal by new cadres of committed young people. A democratic society will wither if it does not benefit from the talents and energies of each generation as it comes of age.

Schools must live up to their responsibilities to prepare students for full citizenship, and they must do so with the same standards of excellence that they hold for more narrowly defined academic pursuits. As in all areas of learning, the surest way to encourage dedication to informed citizenship among students is to help them understand why their participation is important—why it matters, how they can make a difference, and where they can find their personal sense of purpose.

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# Teaching as Jazz

Carol Ann Tomlinson and Amy Germundson

*Like jazz musicians, great teachers blend sounds from different traditions, hear and echo students' rhythms, and improvise on a dime.*

Years ago, we worked with a young woman who wrote the most beautiful curriculum. When other teachers read her work, they felt both humbled and charged up, ready to create something new and compelling for their students. Interestingly, however, our colleague was a mediocre teacher and didn't stay long in the profession. She once said, "I like thinking of ideas, but I lack the energy to sell them to teenagers." Her comment reflects a key reality: Even exemplary curriculum remains flat on the page if it's all the teacher has to offer. Our colleague excelled at one of the practices teachers must fuse to teach creatively, but she fell short in other elements essential to the teaching mix.

Teaching well, we believe, is like creating jazz. Jazz blends musical sounds from one tradition with techniques and theories from another. It uses blue notes for expressive purposes and syncopation and swing to surprise. It incorporates polyrhythm. It uses call-and-response, in which one person comments on the expression of another. And it invites improvisation—a state that indicates a personal awareness of the moment and an understanding that allows for a range of expressions to fit the situation.

Teaching, too, makes music with the elements at the teacher's disposal, merging them just so to ensure a compelling and memorable sound. Like jazz, great teaching calls for blending different cultural

styles with educational techniques and theories. It requires recognizing that there are independent rhythms in the classroom. Most of all, great teaching demands improvisation in how teachers invite an array of young lives into the music with us. Different teachers create jazz in different ways in the classroom. But excellent teachers always create it.

## Four Elements of Quality Teaching

Real teaching is the servant of real learning. A great teacher can't settle for less than reconfiguring the minds of students in ways that make them more fully human. Doing so day after day calls on the teacher to combine four essential elements in a jazzlike fusion: curriculum, connections with students, instruction, and assessment. At any given moment, one element may be in the forefront, but the others must be nearby, about to enter into the mix.

### Curriculum with the Soul of Jazz

Jazz emerges not from a list of names, dates, facts, and terms, but from a longing that springs from a connection or a need to make one. Our teaching was turned on its head by reading Phil Phenix's (1964) ideas about asking the big questions. Phenix said that once human beings evolved to a point when they no longer had to spend all their time building fires and slaying dinner, they began to seek answers to a single question. To this day, he says, we are born—and we die—asking, "What is life, and who am I in it?" Human beings developed the disciplines of history, the arts, English, science, and math to answer that question.

The great questions want to be answered in each of us. We almost can't help but attend when those questions are raised. To teach is to help our students raise questions they care about and to set out together to look for answers.

To create curriculum with the soul of jazz—curriculum that gets under the skin of young learners—we must hunt for big ideas embedded in the lists of content that often parade as curriculum (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). We must share these big ideas with our students and invite them to hunt for more or better ideas with us. We must then arrange what we teach to represent the concepts and principles around which experts organize the disciplines (Erickson, 2006). And we need to help students make connections by seeing how concepts and principles both change and stay the same within and across times, places, and disciplines—and how the same concepts that help students make sense of history or science can help them make sense of themselves (Tomlinson et al., 2001).

Curriculum that brings soul to the music helps kindergartners see that a change in their lives is something like a change in the weather or the change that happens in a story.

Curriculum with soul helps 1st graders answer the question, “What is a true friend?” when they read *Frog and Toad Are Friends*, and answer it years later reading *A Separate Peace* in high school, and yet again when they study international relations in college.

Curriculum with soul lifts the concept of witch hunts from the pages of *The Crucible* to the study of American history, to the evening news, to the school cafeteria, and to the dark corners of our own minds.

Curriculum that brings soul to the music doesn’t neglect the details of content. It helps students see a reason for these details and makes them memorable, useful, and transferable.

Such curriculum is fundamental to the jazz of teaching and learning. But, as shown by our colleague who could create a stellar curriculum but faltered in implementing it, curriculum is not enough.

## Connecting with Students as the Reason for Jazz

Connections with students drive the jazz of teaching. It's far more fulfilling to listen for and respond to the multiple rhythms that students bring into the classroom than to see students as essentially interchangeable and unknowable. Students need connections to learn—and so do teachers.

From a student's perspective, the keen interest of a teacher is an affirmation of personal worth. It is an invitation to learn—a bridge between security and the unknown. Students learn best when they feel appreciated, acknowledged, respected, and validated (Lambert & McCombs, 1998). For many students, a positive relationship with a teacher provides motivation to learn (Fullan, 2001). From a teacher's perspective, it's difficult to teach a student whose character remains amorphous in your thinking. It is virtually impossible to make things relevant for or expect personal excellence from a student you don't know (Littky & Grabelle, 2004).

There is a deep power for teachers in connecting with students. Teaching is relentlessly demanding, full of details that multiply faster than the teacher can attend to them. Without some source of rejuvenation, teaching can consume the teacher. The same can be said of parenting: Parenting is exhausting but also renewing because of the love and responsibility parents feel for their children. Teachers don't, of course, feel parental love for their students. But when we connect with a student, we know that student in enough depth to see his or her vulnerabilities and to see how our teaching can contribute to that student's well-being. We accept responsibility for the student. With such a connection, teaching becomes a renewing as well as depleting profession. There is then something essentially human at the core of straightening books, making small talk with students, grading papers, and planning for tomorrow's lesson.

## Instruction as the Expression of Jazz

If creating curriculum is composing the melody line for the jazz of teaching, and connecting with learners is finding the underlying reason for the jazz, instructing is making the music. Instruction is about connecting content with human beings, sharing ideas that matter with people who matter. Teaching without a sense of interdependence with students can be like practicing piano scales day in and day out—rote, routine, leaving little room for discovery. Teaching becomes an art when the teacher is struck by the power of curriculum to dignify a life and by students' need for that dignity.

The melody line notwithstanding, the teacher must find some way to move the student with the music. Maybe the simultaneous sounding of two or more rhythms will do it. Perhaps syncopation or swing is called for, or call-and-response. The teacher throws out a line of music. For learning to happen, the student must respond with a personal commentary or connection. Teaching requires two-way communication. To instruct well is to be keenly aware of context and to develop a range of options to reach a given student in a given moment.

For example, a teacher might introduce images and sounds of the ocean at rest and of the ocean's fury to help landlocked students who have never seen the ocean gain a sense of its power. Students could respond to the images by proposing an extended analogy for the ocean's shifting energy—such as shifting moods in music, alternating game plans while playing a sport, or fluctuating human emotions.

Differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2003) is a jazzlike approach. The teacher who uses differentiation in practice says, "Whatever it takes to ensure success for each student, I'm willing to try." In those moments of purpose, sensitivity, and improvisation, jazz happens.

## Assessment as the Refinement of Jazz

Educators now understand the role of assessment in teaching and learning in a more expansive way than in the past. Time was when

assessment was a judgment of learning. Necessary as it is to figure out what a student understands and can do, that kind of assessment has an ominous finality about it. A teacher may see who “got it” and who didn’t—but it’s time to move on. Other than passing judgment, such assessment *of* learning has little to offer either teacher or student.

We have more recently begun to think about assessment *for* learning and even assessment *as* learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003; Earl, 2003). To assess *for* learning, teachers check more frequently to see where students are in their learning journey—and check with broader goals in mind. Teachers preassess before they launch a unit of study to determine students’ starting points and readiness. They assess as they teach to chart student progress (Tomlinson, 1999, 2003). Insights from these assessments help teachers understand and adjust instruction so that key curricular goals are accessible to each learner. The teacher is the chief learner, whose purpose is to make learning a better fit for all.

Assessment *as* learning suggests something even richer: Teachers create and use assessments as teaching tools as well as measurements. For example, in a math unit on measurement, Mr. Tyler had students work in teams to propose a plan for a zoo housing elephants, apes, snakes, birds, and tropical fish, using a prescribed area. Students had to take into account the animals’ needs for both space and water. Mr. Tyler observed students as they worked, noting areas in which they misunderstood concepts. Before students finalized their plans, he led the class in a problem-solving session in which he guided students to clarify ideas and skills that they had not fully grasped and that were sticking points.

This latter view of assessment evokes jazz. Assessment *as* learning is a teacher-student partnership in the service of learning, a sort of call-and-response. Teacher and student reflect on how the music is evolving, and they improvise and refine it based on what they learn. Assessment becomes a way to increase all players’ awareness and deepen the quality of the expression that follows.

## What It Sounds Like

So what does it sound like when a teacher makes jazz in the classroom—when he or she calls on the elements of quality teaching while playing off students' unique rhythms and improvising as needed? To make the abstract analogy of teaching as jazz accessible, let's look at how a 9th grade biology teacher we have worked with makes a potentially dry unit on cells into an engaging exploration worthy of comparison with the hottest jazz.

Ms. Cortina previously taught her unit on cells conventionally, through a lecture on the major cell parts and their functions. As a follow-up, students labeled models of plant and animal cells and answered questions from a textbook. Although the majority of students usually performed satisfactorily on the accompanying quiz, they had trouble retaining the information over time and saw little meaning in the content.

Over time, Ms. Cortina's approach to teaching and curriculum has changed. In all classes, she now helps students look for big ideas behind the content, making it easier for students to grasp the material. She helps students see connections between the big ideas and their own lives, and she finds satisfaction in knowing her students so well that she understands their interests and can make such connections spontaneously. She uses assessment to gauge student progress, which enables her to adapt instruction to suit their varied needs. Ms. Cortina's unit on cells, therefore, has taken on a different quality.

In designing revised curriculum for her unit, Ms. Cortina used the concepts of structure, function, and systems as lenses through which students can view the content. Not only are these concepts central to the field of biology—so that she can return to them throughout the year—but they also serve as organizing themes. Students arrange and make sense of factual information about cells according to these themes, just as jazz musicians arrange improvisations against background themes. Ms. Cortina wants students to understand the cell as a

system with interdependent parts and to arrive at big ideas about the relationship between structure and function and the role of integrated parts in a living system.

Ms. Cortina now begins the cell unit with a pre-assessment to determine students' prior knowledge of the structure of organelles (specialized parts of a cell) and the function of organelles within a biological system. Information from this assessment generally shows that students have a wide range of understanding related to the factual information, but that students can't yet make powerful connections between key concepts.

Ms. Cortina uses this information and knowledge of her students' interests to design learning activities. She begins the unit with a whole-group discussion of the terms *structure*, *function*, and *system*. She asks students to propose scientific meanings for these concepts but also to consider what the concepts mean in everyday life. Students meet briefly in student-selected groups centered on shared interests. They discuss how structure, function, and systems operate within such areas of interest as school, musical groups, or sports, guided by a discussion protocol to ensure that they focus on the essential concepts. While the groups talk, Ms. Cortina moves among them and jots down notes about what she hears—the rhythms and melodies sounding through student discussion—which she can draw on later in class to link content to student experiences.

Next, she presents an overview of the major cellular organelles in both plant and animal cells to ensure foundational knowledge. Throughout the presentation, she poses questions that encourage students to generalize about the relationships between structure, function, and systems in various real-world situations and in cells. For example, she asks students to consider the structure and function of Hogwarts (the school in the Harry Potter books) and to make comparisons with the structure and functions of a cell.

Ms. Cortina heterogeneously groups the students and gives them electron microscopy images of cellular organelles. Each group is given

the task of examining the structure behind the function of each organelle and constructing and justifying a classification system for each organelle based on its structure and function. To assess understanding, each student constructs a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting the cellular organelles of plant and animal cells and explaining why each type of cell requires a different arrangement of organelles to function.

In another lesson, Ms. Cortina groups students by the level of understanding of the material they show. All groups examine cellular organelles as integrated parts of a living system using activities matched with their learning needs. Students who are not yet showing mastery of essential information and concepts reinforce their understanding by constructing a three-dimensional model or diagram that specifically shows how individual organelles work together as a system. Students with more advanced understanding add to this assignment the task of looking at differences in system function across different types of cells, such as muscle or bone cells.

The music arranged and played by Ms. Cortina—and teachers like her—is neither the brash sound of a marching band nor the splash of an orchestra. It’s the sound of a teacher working in a setting attuned both to individuals and ideas. Curriculum centers on a search for meaning. Knowing students as individuals motivates both teacher and students to do the hard work of making meaning. Instruction becomes a vehicle for ensuring learning among diverse individuals. Assessment informs the process. It sounds a lot like jazz.

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# Engaging Students Around the Globe

Reva Klein

*Small pockets of inspired practice in Europe, Africa, Australia, and the United States provide effective models for engaging young people in school.*

School disengagement is endemic. It's found in virtually every country in the world, wherever the proverbial square pegs just can't—or won't—be pushed into the equally proverbial round holes.

The picture of disengagement around the globe is varied and sometimes confounds assumptions. In Hong Kong, whose top schools are now experiencing the previously rare phenomenon of students dropping out, the problem often stems from the unremitting pressure on students to outperform their peers (Lau, Tsang, & Kwok, 2007). Pakistan, which has a literacy rate below 50 percent, is, according to its education minister, “a nation of dropouts” (“Pakistan,” 2006).

In the new South Africa, old social conditions still prevail. The massive disparities between rich and poor, the violent crime threatening students on their way to and from school, and the ravages that AIDS has visited on two generations have combined to engender a negativity among many young people that keeps them out of school, at home, or on the streets.

Although substantial cultural, social, political, and economic differences exist among countries, young peoples' attitudes toward school—their expressed desires, grievances, and reasons for staying away—are often eerily resonant of one another. What young people

say they want—and what so many aren't getting—are what I call the alternative three *Rs* of school success: relevance, respect, and reward. Resourcing is the silent fourth *R*, which helps deliver the previous three. It's possible to ensure that the three *Rs* are present even when funding is scarce, however, as several of the following examples from across the world show.<sup>1</sup>

## Finland

Finland is an example of a country getting it right, albeit a *rich* country getting it right. But it's also an example of how resources other than money are required to deliver an education system that is inclusive, creative, and supportive.

A mere 30 years ago, compulsory education in Finland ended after elementary school (Coughlin, 2004). Little more than a picturesque backwater then, the country was eclipsed, if not paralyzed, by Russia, its great bear of a neighbor to the east. Today, Finland has the distinction not only of being the birthplace of the cell phone industry but also of ranking at the top of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which provides comparative test results of 15-year-olds in the Western industrialized nations of the world.

Finland offers free education from nursery school through university and boasts some of the best-educated teachers in the world. With such a profile, it isn't surprising that its school dropout rate is negligible. Although the considerable economic wealth of the country is certainly a major factor in its successful education system, it's the focus on human capital that makes Finland a beacon of good practice.

Teachers are well paid and carry a social status that is the envy of their counterparts across the world. Educated at least to the level of a master's degree (Curtis, 2004), teachers are committed, as a matter of pride, to drawing on their creative and intellectual energies in their work. They treat students as individuals, addressing students' strengths

and weaknesses with equal weight. Most interesting, there is no high-stakes testing.

## The United Kingdom

Set this picture against that of the United Kingdom. You could be forgiven for assuming that the education system of this country, which has one of the strongest economies in Europe, is a success story. It isn't. A 2007 UNICEF report titled *Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-Being in Rich Countries* identified British children as being, after U.S. children, the most unhappy among their peers in the developed world. (For a summary, see the Special Report "The Whole Child: An International Perspective," *Educational Leadership*, May 2007.) Nearly one-third of young people in the United Kingdom drop out or fail their studies (Dearden, Emmerson, Frayne, & Meghir, 2005). In both the United States and the United Kingdom, the ever-widening gulf between rich and poor and the attendant social factors that accompany that chasm—low expectations on the part of educators, lack of motivation on the part of pupils, disparities in school standards and resources, and the belief in testing as a means of bridging those disparities—are glaring.

## France

The good news is that some programs are proving to be particularly successful at keeping students engaged and in school. Take the groundbreaking Cycle d'Insertion Professionnelle Par Alternance (CIPPA) project in Rheims, in northeastern France. Established in 1984 to equip school dropouts with marketable skills, this "sandwich course" combines vocational education with booster classes in academic subjects to enable students to pass the Baccalaureate, the French exams that precede entrance into higher education. In a radical departure from most other programs of its kind, the system meets students' individual

needs rather than expecting students to adapt to structures and content that are set in stone. For example, teaching is crosscurricular and heavily based on aural and visual stimuli, accommodating those with different learning styles and those whose native language isn't French. Students take filmmaking and radio production, reporting in those media on topics covered in the classroom. The program brings philosophy, journalism, and literature to life by linking students with professionals in those fields who come to the school for interviews or to give talks. Teachers and older peers provide instruction.

It's a true success story: 99 percent of graduates go into the workforce or continue their academic education (Sopova, 1998). CIPPA is looking forward to sharing its approach and methodology with schools in other countries.

## South Africa

The problems of disengaged youth in France seem a world away from the illness and death daily affecting their peers in South Africa, where the HIV/AIDS pandemic has engendered a dangerous nihilism among the young. As a result of seeing so much death and illness around them, many young people aren't concerned about school, breaking the law, or getting involved in self-destructive activities. As one 20-year-old "over-age" student put it, "What's the use of being good and getting an education when everybody's dying young?"

The peer education program Better Life Options is answering that question. Sponsored by YCare International, the international relief and development agency of the YMCA in the United Kingdom, the program focuses on developing self-esteem, self-understanding, and goal-setting skills among young people ages 14–19, in Umlaziin, one of the most impoverished and violent townships in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal. With minimal resources at its disposal beyond participants' sheer determination and commitment, the program serves as

an example for educators around the world who battle young people's disaffection with school and life in general.

Student volunteers are rigorously trained to run school-based sessions with their peers that go far beyond the standard safe sex and abstinence messages that have had so little effect in Africa and elsewhere. At the outset, students participate in guided introspection exercises, in which they try to understand why they engage in high-risk activities, such as gang membership, carjackings, and prostitution. Group discussions, led by peers who understand these experiences, have a therapeutic effect because they enable participants to express bottled-up grief, anger, and fear in ways that are otherwise culturally frowned on.

One 18-year-old boy in the group reflected on why he was so angry and cruel toward his mother who had AIDS and who depended on him to do the household chores. He came to understand that he was afraid of her dying. This new awareness brought about a shift in his attitude; he became more compassionate.

As participants hear other group members echo their own feelings, they begin to reflect on how they might redirect their behaviors and attitudes. They begin to think about the future in ways they haven't dared to before. Many participants undertake training to become peer educators and come to see themselves as leaders in their own right. The program has already reached out to thousands of young people in the province.

Better Life Options is not rocket science, but it is a clever synthesis of different tried and tested approaches—such as peer mentoring, social and emotional development, and experiential learning—that bring relevance and immediacy to young people in dire need of help. It is surprising that other societies experiencing widespread student disengagement—especially those in which funding may be far more available—are not following this simple formula.

The success of this program illuminates the fact that a fundamental starting point for addressing young people's disaffection with school

is helping them gain self-awareness of where they are and of what they need to do to get where they want to be. For many years, the Coca-Cola Valued Youth program has used a version of this approach in the United States and Latin America to great effect.

## Australia

The arts are another powerful vehicle for engaging young people at risk of leaving school. Integrating the arts into the curriculum gives students a framework from which to look at the world.

A drama project in Melbourne, Australia, involving students at risk of dropping out illustrates how young people can develop empathy and a sense of connectedness with others and how this can lead to reengagement with school. Students ages 14–16 from three schools in a low-income suburban area worked with professional dramatists to create and perform a play. The artists chose a story and structure that the students were free to adapt to reflect their experiences; the play was about the unpredictable outcomes that can result from making what appears to be the right choice.

The artists helped integrate theatrical approaches into the process, using the empty chair technique (in which actors speak to an imagined person sitting in an empty chair) and forum theater (in which actors and audience tackle thorny social issues) to explore characters' motivations and relationships. Students developed empathy for one another and experienced a sense of connectedness as they collaborated, many of them for the first time, with their peers.

Although fun, it was hardly a picnic. The artists had to factor in and accommodate low levels of literacy among the students. Anger and anxiety flare-ups—the result of working closely together and of having to negotiate and compromise—were recurring issues that the artists had to deal with in a way that enabled them to maintain their roles as artists rather than as disciplining teachers.

After months of work, the performance before an invited audience of family and friends left the young actors exhilarated. However, the greatest gains occurred as a result of the process rather than the product. The liaison teacher, who served as a link between the drama project and the school, became a positive presence in the students' lives. The empathy and connectedness the students felt for one another—and the confidence that accompanied those feelings—helped the students feel better about themselves and the school. They didn't suddenly become angels, but they reconnected with school on several important levels. Their attendance, relationships with teachers, and levels of social competence all improved as a result.

## South Carolina

The United States can take credit for being the birthplace of one of the most powerful dropout prevention tools anywhere. Service learning is a well-evaluated methodology that can draw the most disengaged young people back from the brink into meaningful school experiences. Although this approach is only slowly catching on outside the United States, a few good models exist in Europe and beyond.

One of the best examples I've seen comes from South Carolina, a state that is in the vanguard of service learning. In one school, vocational education students whose grip on education was tenuous at best went out into their rural community and spoke with residents about the community's needs. Residents said they were concerned about the lack of a fire station. Under the supervision of the service learning coordinator, the students drew up plans in collaboration with professional architects and raised funds to build the station. In math, students took measurements of a plot of land that the school acquired for the project. In science, they took soil samples to discover what kind of foundation would be required. In English, they learned how to write funding request letters. In vocational education, they learned the technical ins

and outs of building a fire station, which involved acquiring skills in such areas as bricklaying and electrical system design.

Besides a brand-new fire station complete with a glimmering fire engine, the end result was a group of students who saw, in the course of 18 months, the practical application of their learning in ways that are often denied students in conventional education. As well as staying in school to graduate, most of the students went on to become volunteer firefighters. The project represented a synthesis of the alternative three *Rs* of school success: relevance to the community; respect for students' abilities to create something worthwhile; and reward, a feeling of pride in what students accomplished.

## Safeguarding an Opportunity

There are 120 million children worldwide who don't attend school (Bella & Mputu, 2004). Many would like an education, but external factors—such as poverty, civil unrest, and war—often consign them to illiteracy and the consequent lack of prospects.

For students who have the opportunity to go to school, one of the biggest challenges facing educators the world over is keeping those students engaged in school. Although money helps, effective dropout prevention requires creative energy, determination, and a pinch of risk taking. The right attitude and the right programs can turn lives around for the benefit of the young people themselves, their schools, and their communities.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Readers can find a more complete description of the projects mentioned in this article in the *International Journal on School Disaffection*, which discusses approaches and strategies that have proven successful around the world for keeping students from dropping out of school. The journal is published twice yearly by the National Dropout Prevention Center of Clemson University, the National Dropout Prevention Network, and Trentham Books of Stoke-on-Trent, England.

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# Part 2

Inspiring Trust and  
Confidence



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# Cultivating Optimism in the Classroom

Richard Sagor

*Students are motivated to put forth their best effort when they have faith in the future and themselves.*

There's a proverb, "The best predictor of the future is the past." This notion isn't lost on Hollywood and helps explain the attractiveness of such movies as *Stand and Deliver* and *Freedom Writers*, which turn it on its head. *Stand and Deliver* tells the story of math teacher Jaime Escalante, whose previously underachieving students went on in great numbers to pass the advanced placement (AP) test in calculus; and *Freedom Writers* tells the story of Erin Gruwell, who inspired her inner-city students to transform their lives through journal writing. Audiences are captivated by seeing poor, alienated teenagers who are well behind their peers in basic skills and have a near total disdain for the education process unexpectedly emerge a few years later with top AP scores, published books, and a desire for a college education.

Unfortunately, what makes this storyline so compelling is that it's so rare. A more familiar scene is this: angry, low-income teenagers with a history of school failure wandering the school hallways with little apparent interest in academics, the curriculum, or their teachers. For too many of them, gangs are more attractive than school activities, drugs are more valuable than learning, and the streets are more appealing than school.

We know the facts. Nearly 50 percent of Latino, black, and American Indian youth leave school before graduating (Orfield, Losen, Wald,

& Swanson, 2004). The academic performance of students in low-income communities lags well behind that of students living in more privileged enclaves. The message most often taken from movies like *Stand and Deliver* is that these students' success was the result of the magical powers of a few special, charismatic teachers.

Hollywood wants us to think that Escalante and Gruwell are superheroes, but I'd rather think of them as colleagues who have demonstrated an important lesson regarding what it takes to motivate all our diverse students to strive for the best.

## Building Optimism

Whenever we face a choice, we intuitively make a calculation. Typically, we assess the potential costs and benefits—both short- and long-term—of doing one thing instead of another. On the basis of that assessment, we act.

As parents, we are delighted when we see our children defer immediate gratification to achieve a more important long-range goal. At school, we often deliberately teach the merit of investing now for returns in the future. For example, teenage athletes learn the relationship between hard work at practices and success at the game on Friday night. Other students elect to do well in school out of a firm belief that getting good grades will lead to admission to a selective college, which will lead to a happy adult life.

We might wonder why this calculation isn't convincing for all students. Why aren't they buying in? The reason is simple: Investing today for a payoff tomorrow requires believing in your future. Put succinctly, motivation requires optimism.

Sometimes it appears that optimism—a positive belief in the future—is a genetic trait. This is one explanation for why children of successful people tend to be successful themselves. And, conversely, it helps explain why children from families that must continually struggle

to just get by often find themselves engaged in similar struggles on reaching adulthood.

But the good news, dramatically demonstrated by teachers like Jaime Escalante and Erin Gruwell, is that optimism can be taught and learned. Two key variables are the building blocks of optimism: faith and efficacy.

### Building Block 1: Faith in the Future

For me to invest time and energy today for a benefit I won't realize until tomorrow, I need to have a good reason to believe that my investment will pay off. Clearly, it's much easier to acquire that faith when one's immediate environment regularly shows concrete evidence of return on investment. John Ogbu (1991) has written extensively about how children tend to look to the experience of adults in their communities and extended families to predict what lies ahead for them.

If children see despair around them, it's likely that they will fear that this represents their destiny. Many children simply have no good reason to expect tomorrow to be any better than today. There are many legitimate reasons for despair: the impact of poverty, chemical dependency, bigotry, family break-ups, and so on.

If the picture is rosier, however, children have a better chance of being optimistic about their futures. One powerful demonstration of the positive influence of faith in the future was the experience of philanthropist Eugene Lang (White, 1987), the founder of the "I Have a Dream" Foundation. In an impromptu speech, Lang promised a free college education to 61 6th graders at a New York public school if they stayed in school and graduated. Although statistics showed that 75 percent of the students wouldn't go on to graduate from high school, more than 90 percent of Lang's dreamers graduated, with more than two-thirds attending college. What these students had lacked was sufficient reason to believe in their futures. Once they had a justification for faith, they did what it took to realize success.

## Building Block 2: Personal Efficacy

In general, it takes more than faith to commit to a difficult pursuit. Optimistic people have the fortitude to persevere with complex tasks because they are confident that if they work long and hard enough and apply enough creativity, they will, in fact, succeed.

Efficacy is a deep-seated belief in our own capabilities. It explains the phenomenon of success breeding success. Every time people attack a problem and succeed, they have authentic evidence of their capability. The more data I have about my capabilities, the more confident I will be of my potential to achieve future success.

Early in my teaching career, I decided to expect every student to produce work deserving of an *A* or *B*; otherwise, his or her grade would be *NYE*—not yet excellent. Occasionally it took extra time, but every student was ultimately able to leave my class with evidence of his or her capability.

There's a reason why so many parents love the story of *The Little Engine That Could*. We all know that if someone keeps hearing a credible inner voice repeating, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can," that person will start believing it.

## Building Faith and Efficacy in School

### Empowered Preschoolers

My daughters went to the Montessori preschool in the local Catholic church. They loved it, as did all their classmates, and they happily got up each morning to go to school. Donna Hargraeves was their teacher, and in her classroom, the children had continual opportunities to explore and learn. She directed the students to activities at a level at which, with effort, they could achieve success.

I can still vividly recall the first open house we attended. I was expecting to hear a teacher presentation, receive handouts, or engage in a conference with the teacher. It was nothing like that. As I entered

the room, it looked no different from when I dropped Ellisa off each morning. An aide greeted my daughter and handed her a  $3 \times 5$  index card that listed all the lessons she had mastered. She was then invited to show us what she could do.

For the next 40 minutes, Ellisa led us around the room and treated us to demonstrations of things she had learned. Her pride in her accomplishments was palpable, and as I looked around, I saw the same scene repeated child after child. It was clear to me that the teacher was developing optimism in that room every day with every child.

This was my first experience with student-led parent-teacher conferences, this one brilliantly directed by a 4-year-old. In 40 minutes, I learned more about what my daughter could do, what she had accomplished, and what she was still working on than I ever could have gotten from a traditional conference. But, most important, I witnessed the development of a powerful sense of efficacy on Ellisa's part. She was sharing *her* accomplishments, which were the result of *her* efforts, and she was deservedly beaming with pride and confidence.

Now a junior in college, Ellisa takes on any challenge placed in front of her. There is no doubt in my mind that those crucial early experiences in Donna Hargraeves's classroom empowered her with the conviction that when she sets her mind to something, she can do it.

## Sixth Grade Astronauts

Every May at Liberty Middle School in Camas, Washington, approximately 125 6th graders spend a long 10-hour day in space. This extraordinary simulation is a collaborative project that has evolved over several years.

Each space station crew includes five specialists—a mission commander, a life sciences specialist, a health and nutrition specialist, a robotics specialist, and a communications officer. Immediately after spring break, students must prepare written applications for at least two different positions. The teachers then select students for the five

crews, and over the next 10 weeks, the students prepare for the mission. At times, all the students who have the same position work with one another in a group—all the mission commanders meet, all the life sciences specialists meet, and so on. At other times, students work with their crewmates, training for the work required during their day in space.

When parents bring their kids to school on the morning of the mission, the gymnasium is a sight to behold. In one corner is mission control, a bank of computers, monitors, and microphones from which the teachers and mission control officers (older students who have been through the program) monitor the astronauts' work. Most of the gym is filled with the space station, which is made up of six connected modules. Soon the students don their spacesuits and gather for the preflight briefing from their teacher. Then, like clockwork, every five minutes another crew enters the space shuttle for the short flight to the International Space Station. For the next 10 hours, the only people each crew will interact with are fellow crew members and mission control.

The five crews rotate through the different modules and carry out their work without ever seeing or interacting with one another. They prepare and eat food in the galley, manipulate objects outside the spacecraft with robotic equipment, conduct experiments on plants and animals, observe rest periods, and even follow exercise routines to keep fit.

The day in space ends with a press conference conducted from the space station. Parents and guests get to see their children on the monitors and listen as the "astronauts" describe what transpired and what they learned on their long and grueling mission. After the press conference, the astronauts board the shuttle and return to earth.

The teachers have structured this 10-week experience in a manner that enhances the academic program rather than detracts from it. Each crew member must do a great deal of reading, writing, math, science, and social studies to prepare for the mission; and this intensive training pays off. Invariably, the mission succeeds, and the crews do their work

well. Most important, each crew member possesses concrete evidence of his or her success as a leader, learner, and teacher, engendering a powerful sense of optimism. This optimism lasts quite a while; several former 6th grade astronauts are now in college studying aerospace.

## Middle School Reformers

At a large middle school in Southern California that serves a racially, economically, and ethnically diverse community, an English teacher and a doctoral student invited interested students to join them as coresearchers in an investigation of the obstacles to learning at their school (SooHoo, 1993). Twelve students agreed to meet for regular lunchtime discussions. The student researchers were mostly a diverse group of immigrant and minority students, with several English language learners among them. These students weren't particularly comfortable with their place in society or school. Armed with cameras and sketch pads, the students set out to record areas of concern and discuss them at their lunch meetings.

After a few months of deliberation, the student researchers began to see a pattern in their data. Some aspects of the school program weren't working as well as they should. Students had ideas about changing the school's discipline and reward policy as well as the physical education program. They began developing ideas for program improvement.

They soon realized that they lacked power to bring about the desired changes. Together with their adult mentors, the students requested the opportunity to present their research to the faculty. In a faculty meeting at which they served cookies, cupcakes, and soft drinks, the students presented their research. Later that spring on a scheduled professional development day, the 12 students were invited to work side by side with their teachers in making plans for the new school year. On the basis of the students' input, the school revised the discipline and reward process and redesigned the physical education program.

I met these students a few years later when they presented their research to an audience of university professors at the annual American Educational Research Association conference. The students—now high school sophomores—were articulate, confident, and absolutely certain they were headed to college and professional careers. After they learned as middle school students that they had powerful voices and were capable of persuading adult professionals with their arguments, nothing could stop them from achieving their goals.

### An Environmental Advocate

A high school student named Sam recently became interested in the movement to design and build environmentally sound “green” buildings. He was not a good student academically, had few friends and little status, and didn’t fit in with or have much respect for the social activities that defined the traditional high school experience.

But he didn’t lack confidence. He went to the high school administrators with an elaborate written proposal describing an independent study he wanted to do on the potential conversion of a recently built public building to meet green building standards. He worked hard on his proposal and was excited about pursuing this work. Unfortunately, the school didn’t see it the same way. As a result, Sam decided to leave to attend a nearby alternative school in the hope that its community-based learning model might be a better fit.

The teachers’ reaction to his proposal at the alternative school was markedly different. The school made arrangements for Sam to intern at one of the largest and most prestigious architectural firms in the region. One day in a meeting with several of the firm’s top architects, a lead architect commented that the constraints of school construction limited possible energy efficiencies.

Sam spoke up. His research had revealed that six buildings recently built in Los Angeles now operated completely off the grid. Impressed, the architects asked Sam to do more research. The next

day Sam presented this “new information” to some of the leaders in the field.

Sam has now graduated and is making plans to attend college. Although he readily admits that he is the proverbial square peg that people try to push through a round hole, he has no doubt about his ability to accomplish whatever he sets his mind to.

## Great Expectations

It is naïve to think there could be an easy answer to all our student motivation problems. But one thing is clear: Young people are more likely to invest their energy in pursuit of what they view to be an achievable dream than in what they sense is futility.

That’s why students need continuous encouragement and hope from schools—so they can believe in their futures and themselves. Every day as students leave our classrooms we need to ask ourselves two questions: As a result of today’s experience, will these students be more or less confident that their futures are bright? Will students walk out of the classroom feeling more more capable than when they walked in?

Every morning an alarm clock goes off, a student awakes, and thoughts begin to form. What should the student expect from the upcoming day? If he or she were lucky enough to have had a teacher like Jaime Escalante or Erin Gruwell, or had been promised a college education by Eugene Lang, that student may well be looking forward to a bright future. But optimism shouldn’t depend on having a superhero as a teacher or on receiving help from a philanthropist. We teachers can nurture optimism in all our students by creating routine education experiences in which hard work leads to success and a world of possibilities.

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# The Teacher as Warm Demander

Elizabeth Bondy and Dorene D. Ross

*How can you create an engaging classroom? Convince students  
first that you care—and then that you'll never let up.*

Consider this comment that a beginning teacher in an urban school recently made to us:

They are calling one another names and being really catty, and it wears me out. I mean, as soon as they walk in the door, someone is pushing . . . or calling someone a name. So it's 8:00 in the morning, and I am already flustered.

Many teachers in high-poverty schools struggle to establish a positive classroom environment. These teachers know a great deal about their students, feel affection for them, and empathize with their struggles. Unfortunately, the way these teachers act on their caring is often not comprehensive enough to make a difference. The teachers work hard to design interesting lessons, but if students are disengaged, the quality of the lessons will be irrelevant and misbehavior will reveal students' underlying resistance.

What is missing is not skill in lesson planning, but a teacher stance that communicates both warmth and a nonnegotiable demand for student effort and mutual respect. This stance—often called the *warm demander*—is central to sustaining academic engagement in high-poverty schools.

The stakes are high when it comes to engagement. Studies have amply demonstrated a link between achievement and academic engagement, defined by Furrer and Skinner (2003) as “active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, and focused interactions” with academic tasks (p. 149). The consequences of disengagement are more serious for low-income students:

When students from advantaged backgrounds become disengaged, they may learn less than they could, but they usually get by or they get second chances. . . . In contrast, when students . . . in high-poverty, urban high schools become disengaged, they are less likely to graduate and consequently face severely limited opportunities . . . [including] unemployment, poverty, poor health, and involvement in the criminal justice system. (National Research Council, 2004, p. 1)

The good news is that although engagement is affected by students’ economic and social conditions, teachers can organize the classroom in ways that dramatically increase student engagement.

## What Is a Warm Demander?

Kleinfeld (1975) coined the phrase *warm demander* to describe the type of teacher who was effective in teaching Athabaskan Indian and Eskimo 9th graders in Alaskan schools. These teachers communicated personal warmth and used an instructional style Kleinfeld called “active demandingness.” They insisted that students perform to a high level. Irvine and Fraser (1998, p. 56) provide an example of how a teacher using this style might speak to a student who is slacking off: “That’s enough of your nonsense, Darius. Your story does not make sense. I told you time and time again that you must stick to the theme I gave you. Now sit down.”

This kind of communication is seldom described in the effective-teaching literature. Scholars who have investigated the warm demander

stance have concluded that it is often an effective teaching style with many students, although it may appear harsh to the uninformed observer (Bondy, Ross, Galligane, & Hambacher, 2007; Irvine & Fraser, 1998; Ware, 2006). Let's look at what makes this approach effective and how more teachers might adopt it.

## Becoming a Warm Demander

Becoming a warm demander begins with establishing a caring relationship that convinces students that you believe in them. The saying goes, "It's not what you say that matters; it's how you say it." In acting as a warm demander, "how you say it" matters, but who you are and what students believe about your intentions matter more. When students know that you believe in them, they will interpret even harsh-sounding comments as statements of care from someone with their best interests at heart. As one student commented, "She's mean out of the kindness of her heart" (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 91).

This quote, pulled from interviews with 200 students in high-poverty middle schools in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, highlights the second part of being a warm demander. Warm demanders care enough to relentlessly insist on two things: that students treat the teacher and one another respectfully and that they complete the academic tasks necessary for successful futures. These teachers adopt what Wilson and Corbett (2001) call a "no excuses" philosophy.

Warm demanders approach students, particularly those whose behavior causes trouble in the classroom, with *unconditional positive regard*, a genuine caring in spite of what that student might do or say (Rogers, 1957). At the heart of unconditional positive regard is a belief in the individual's capacity to succeed. Teachers convey such an attitude by taking the following three actions.

## Build Relationships Deliberately

Middle school students interviewed by Cushman and Rogers (2008) explained that they wanted teachers to “show us that you like us and find us interesting” (p. 65). One tactic is to give students “getting-to-know-you” questionnaires (see Cushman & Rogers, 2008, for examples), but such questionnaires will only work if students perceive that you are genuinely interested and if you subsequently use the information you gather.

Day-to-day interactions are more important than formal questionnaires. A smile, a hand on the shoulder, the use of a student’s name, or a question that shows you remember something the student has mentioned—these small gestures do much to develop relationships. Don’t underestimate their power.

## Learn About Students’ Cultures

Use your knowledge of culture and learning styles to increase your understanding of individual students. Warm demanders observe students closely to learn more about their idiosyncrasies, interests, experiences, and talents. They watch for clues to learning-style preferences: Does she work well independently? Does he need visual cues to process what he hears? These teachers become students of their students’ cultures, learning about the music they listen to, the television shows they watch, and their after-school activities.

Warm demanders also recognize that their *own* cultural backgrounds guide their values, beliefs, and behaviors. Although it can be difficult to perceive one’s own culture, culture consistently shapes an individual’s behavior and reactions to the behavior of others. Gaining insight into cultural values and habits helps teachers monitor their reactions to student behaviors that they might deem “bad,” but that are considered normal or even valued in the student’s home culture. Without such reflection, a teacher’s implicit assumptions can inadvertently communicate to students a lack of caring.

For example, an Egyptian man told us how a teacher punished his elementary-age son for pushing a classmate. When the man and his wife spoke with this teacher, they realized that playful pushing is not accepted in U.S. culture; in Egypt, it is an acceptable way for boys to communicate affection. Two aspects of this teacher's approach could have harmed the teacher-student relationship. First, she failed to ask either the boy or his parents why he had pushed another boy. Second, she assumed that this student knew—and had chosen to disobey—her behavioral standards. Therefore, her first response was to punish him. Although this teacher is warm and friendly, her lack of deep knowledge of her student or his culture prevented her from conveying to him that she cared.

To gain cultural knowledge and competence, Ross, Kamman, and Coady (2007) recommend that teachers

- Learn about their own cultural beliefs and how those beliefs influence their interactions with students and families.
- Become curious about culture and difference; try to imagine how school experiences might feel different to different groups (such as males and females or native speakers and English language learners).
- Study examples of successful students whose backgrounds differ from the norm (see Corwin, 2001, or Esquith, 2004).
- Question their reactions to students' behavior to identify potential cultural misunderstandings.
- Monitor the tendency to judge differences as abnormal.

### Communicate an Expectation of Success

In our recent study of three novice teachers of black elementary students, we watched teachers attempting to communicate this message on the first day of school (Bondy et al., 2007). The 3rd grade teacher read a story about the inevitability of mistakes and the importance of persistence. She shared her own experience with failure and

her philosophy of optimism and perseverance. The 5th grade teacher repeatedly made encouraging comments such as, “How easy was that?”

A student Cushman (2003) interviewed summarized how teachers can create a culture of success:

Remind us often you expect our best, encourage our efforts even if we are having trouble, give helpful feedback and expect us to review . . . don't compare us to other students, and stick with us. (pp. 64–67)

## Beyond Believing to Insisting

Many teachers use motivational strategies such as these and believe that they have high expectations. What makes warm demanders different is that they insist on students meeting those expectations. They establish supports to ensure that students will learn, and they communicate clearly to students that showing respect to the teacher and to classmates is nonnegotiable. The following strategies help teachers become successful demanders.

### Provide Learning Supports

The students Wilson and Corbett (2001) interviewed were clear that the teachers who helped them most never gave up; they provided a variety of activities to help different kinds of learners and taught until the light bulb went on for every student. These students preferred teachers who explained material thoroughly and in multiple ways; outlined steps for getting to an answer (“They do it step-by-step and they break it down”); moved to new material when they believed students were ready rather than according to an arbitrary timetable; and emphasized multiple ways of approaching a problem.

## Support Positive Behavior

Although warm demanders may become frustrated by student behavior, they accept problems as normal, and they believe in students' ability to improve. When the effective novice teachers we observed confronted recurring behavior issues, they collected data to help them understand the situation before taking action (Bondy et al., 2007). These teachers approached problems reflectively, asking such questions as, What factors might influence this problem? or When does this behavior occur? They searched for solutions rather than blaming students or dismissing their concerns.

Warm demanders reach out to students for help in understanding behavior problems, which many well-intentioned teachers neglect to do. For example, when Ravet (2007) asked 10 highly disengaged students why they had disengaged, most of them explained that they were bored with the curriculum. When Ravet asked these students' teachers the same question, teachers blamed perceived deficits in students' attitude, ability, personality, and family background. If instead of blaming, these teachers had respectfully listened to students, they would have gained insight into how to intervene.

## Be Clear and Consistent with Expectations

Warm demanders must "provide a tough-minded, no-nonsense, structured and disciplined classroom environment" (Irvine & Fraser, 1998, p. 56). In our study of effective teachers, we found that teachers used two main strategies to hold student behavior to a high standard. First, teachers respectfully but insistently repeated their requests and reminded students of their expectations. If students did not comply, teachers calmly delivered consequences. We concluded that

the teachers' assertive communication style, combined with their strategies for insisting that students follow through, created a climate in which teachers were taken seriously.

Although teachers were warm and often funny, there was no question that they meant what they said. (Bondy et al., p. 344)

Charney (2002) discussed ways to convey expectations to students clearly: Keep demands simple and short; dignify your words with actions; remind students only twice (the third time, “you’re out”); tell students what the “nonnegotiables” are; and use words that invite cooperation.

Although warm demanders must speak firmly, their tone should remain matter-of-fact; they should never threaten, demean, or create power struggles. Students will perceive such matter-of-fact demanding as evidence of their teacher’s commitment. Many teachers believe they are showing students they care when they continually give “one more chance.” Unfortunately, giving “one more chance” demonstrates that a teacher does not mean what he or she says, and this practice could be interpreted as a lack of caring.

Although classroom teachers have little control over many factors that affect student engagement, they do have the means to create a supportive climate that fosters engagement among high-poverty students. Warm demanders do so by approaching their students with unconditional positive regard, knowing students and their cultures well, and insisting that students perform to a high standard. Students have told researchers that they want teachers who communicate that they are “important enough to be pushed, disciplined, taught, and respected” (Wilson & Corbett, 2001, p. 88). Such is the stance of the warm demander.

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# Conversations That Matter

Stephen Myers

*Through intentional, structured conversations, this teacher creates and maintains trusting classroom relationships.*

When it comes to creating a positive learning community, building trusting relationships is 90 percent of the job. Relationships are like breathing: They aren't the whole story, but without them, nothing else matters.

Authentic learning requires intellectual and emotional risk. But when students discover that meaningful learning entails discomfort, they may respond by resisting, either actively or passively. Many classroom-management problems are simply calculated distractions by students who want to avoid looking foolish or feeling powerless—to protect the status quo of an academically challenging classroom and thus maintain the illusion of safety. If we expect our students to break out of their terminal normality and achieve the extraordinary, we must implement a focused curriculum for generating relationships.

One way to create trusting two-way relationships is to use specific structures and set aside regular times to engage in intentional conversations. The following are three structures that I've used to model and practice such conversations in my 6th–12th grade English and social studies classes.

## From Day One

When students enter my class on the first day, I ask them to answer three questions:

**1. What hasn't worked for you in the past?** When I ask students to list what hasn't worked for them in past classrooms with other teachers and classmates, the result is often a delightful or rancorous gripe session. Listing these old complaints allows us to address and resolve past issues. If a student has a gripe with last year's teacher—for example, if he was falsely accused of cheating—he may lug that baggage into my classroom. By unburdening himself of this grievance, he can become a more proactive, forward-looking class participant. In addition, this discussion generates ideas for students to use when they answer the next two questions.

**2. What have you come to this class for?** When I ask students what they are in this class for, they offer such responses as “to earn credits for graduation,” “to get a good grade,” “to learn,” and “to write better.” I list whatever students say without comment, including responses like “because I have to be here,” “to have fun,” and “I don't know.” When the students run out of ideas, I ask them to clarify some of their answers, for example, “To write better than what?” “What is a good grade?” “If you *did* know what you are here for, what might it be?”

I also answer the question myself: “I'm here to earn my paycheck.” “I'm here to teach English.” “I'm here to have fun.” “I'm here to make a difference, if I can, in your lives.” “I'm here to grow and learn.”

Then I point out that no one answered the question by saying, “I'm here to fail.” This observation leads to the third question.

**3. What conditions are necessary for you to get what you came for?** Since we (note the shift to first-person plural) all came to succeed in something, what are the conditions necessary for us to get what we came for? I start by asking students what they want from me. Their answers often include “Be fair,” “Don't give busy work,” “Make it

fun,” “Do group work,” and “Explain things well.” Next, I ask students what they want from one another. Typical responses include “respect,” “cooperation,” “listen to each other,” and “no put downs.”

Then, I ask them what conditions they must individually create. They usually reply, “coming prepared,” “arriving on time,” “showing respect for others,” and so on. Next, of course, I add my input under each category. Students seldom list “taking risks” as a condition for success, so I add that to the list and explain why. The same goes for “trusting me and one another,” “participating fully,” and “being willing to learn from mistakes and failure.” After listing all the responses, I ask students to word each item in terms of what they do want, rather than what they don’t want. Thus, “Don’t give busy work” becomes “Give meaningful work.” “No put downs” becomes “Talk to one another respectfully.” Then I ask them to identify any item they are unwilling to support. I do the same. We work on the wording of each item until everyone reaches agreement.

This list becomes our Conditions for Success chart, which provides the foundation for relationships in the classroom. We all sign the chart and post it for future reference—and there are always plenty of occasions for that.

## Envisioning Possibilities

Knowing that the voice of fear, the ultimate saboteur, lies in wait to destroy my fine, progressive work, I follow up on this activity by showing students how to develop a powerful alternative: the voice of possibility. I ask, “If we consistently uphold these Conditions for Success, what might be possible?” I sometimes need to start students off by reframing the question: “Can you imagine what this class might be like if you came here every day feeling safe, excited, and interested?” or “If everyone in here treated one another with kindness, understanding, and generosity, what kind of learning might occur?” Out of the conver-

sation about possibility, we generate passion, enthusiasm, and a strong commitment to build trusting, compassionate relationships.

Like any fine-tuned stringed instrument, relationships easily slip out of tune. Thus, I immediately begin a program of preventive maintenance.

## Throughout the Year

Of all the activities I do, the perspective check has the most powerful effects. The purpose of the perspective check, which can be conducted weekly or bimonthly, is to have both the students and the teacher maintain honest, forgiving, and respectful relationships.

I devote 30 minutes to this process each Friday. We push the desks aside and sit in a circle. To introduce the activity the first time, I tell the students that we are going to have a structured conversation that will help us know one another better. This conversation will also help them feel safer in the classroom so they will feel more comfortable being themselves and trying out new ideas.

“You may wonder what this has to do with English (or social sciences),” I continue. “We are in this class together, as a community, and only if we have healthy relationships with one another can I be a good teacher and can you succeed as students. So, let’s try this for a couple of weeks and then we’ll see if you want to continue.”

Each perspective check includes the first and last category on the following list and some or all of the others:

- *Excitement.* What are you excited about?
- *Amazements.* What amazes you?
- *Inspirations.* Who inspires you?
- *Concerns.* What are you concerned, worried, stressed about? (No one comments on a student’s concern unless the student asks for advice.)

- *Apologies.* To whom in this room do you owe an apology, and for what?
- *Resentments, irritations, and requests:* Who in this room do you resent or feel irritated with? For what? And what request do you have of this person? The intent of this category is to allow students to work through negative feelings safely. Students must own their own feelings, so “You make me feel . . .” needs to be replaced with “When you (state the behavior), I feel (one word describing emotions).” Example: *When you interrupt me, I feel angry. I request that you wait until I finish talking.* The facilitator must make sure that students are not attacked or judged. After the request, ask whether the student agrees. A reply of “No” must be acceptable.
- *Gratitudes:* For what or to whom are you grateful?
- *Questions:* What question do you have for anyone in the room? (The person may choose not to answer the question.)
- *Appreciations and acknowledgments:* Who in this room do you appreciate, admire or respect, and for what? (Always end the Perspective Check with this category.)

Other possible categories include, What are you proud of? What do you want advice about, and from whom? What opportunity did you take advantage of or miss? What risk did you take this week, and what value did it have? What did you fail at this week, and what did you learn? When are you happiest?

As the discussion facilitator, I begin with the first category (always something positive). Students who want a turn to talk raise their hands and are give a number. They talk only when their number is called. Students are not allowed to make any comments about what others say or to have private conversations with the people around them.

Perspective checks take practice. Your students are likely to greet the first one with silence and strange looks. Don’t allow sarcasm, jokes, or comments. Don’t force anyone to participate.

After I conduct the first two perspective checks, I always ask the students whether they want to continue next week. Don't worry: If you have followed the guidelines, students will want more. Eventually, they will expect and then demand this activity.

Perspective checks enable students to know their teacher and one another as human beings, making it safer for students to take risks and express themselves. I've seen difficult classes evolve into healthy communities as a result of this one activity. One new science teacher who had been put on probation for lack of control in his class reported that after six weeks of doing perspective checks every Friday, discipline problems vanished.

As I mentioned before, relationships can disappear in an instant. In the world of adolescents, a word, a look, or a gesture can be misinterpreted. Because young people generally view themselves as the center of the universe, they take everything personally. Thus, breakdowns are guaranteed.

## Resolving Breakdowns and Restoring Trust

When a problem shows up, welcome it as an opportunity. Our most profound learning can occur through mistakes or failure. The teacher's response is crucial.

"The first opportunity in every breakdown," I tell the class, "is choosing the path to take to resolve it. You can take the scenic path, or you can take the psycho path. On the psycho path we lay blame, engage in drama, and often give up. The psycho path leads to more problems, hurt feelings, and loss of opportunity." I invite them to join me on the scenic path. Before attempting to solve the problem, I ask students to acknowledge what has been working and to recognize the progress they've made so far. In any relationship, when a breakdown occurs, speaking positively by recognizing someone's accomplishments makes it easier to forgive that person's faults.

We start by acknowledging and describing the problem. What (not who) is not working? Which of our Conditions for Success did we forget about? For example, when two boys of different races argued over one interrupting the other—an argument that escalated to chest bumping and racial epithets, rather than engaging in a debate about blame, we followed the following protocol for a conversation:

Without drama, I ask students to talk about their feelings, again without blaming anyone else for how they feel. I acknowledge that our tendency is to place blame, and I point out that this choice would put us back on the psycho path.

I ask students to review the Conditions for Success and reaffirm their commitment to them. This conversation may take some time. To continue to move forward, it's essential to restore trust. If an individual has made a mistake, or if feelings have been hurt, students need to acknowledge the damage done, seek forgiveness, and reaffirm their commitment to the Conditions for Success. If I get stuck here, I go on to another conversation: "What might be possible if we were to work through this problem together?" "What is possible when you adhere to the Conditions for Success?" This discussion shifts gears from reverse to forward.

We end by talking about how this problem allowed us to learn and grow. We identify the new behaviors and ways of thinking, listening and speaking that came through the process, and acknowledge one another for taking the scenic path.

## The Outcome: Joy in Learning

Within every student is an indestructible kernel of enthusiasm for learning. By nurturing and maintaining strong, trusting relationships in the

classroom, we can help those seeds bloom into joy as students discover who they are and how much they matter in the world.

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# Help Us Care Enough to Learn

Kathleen Cushman

*Urban high school students speak out about their need  
for a meaningful curriculum.*

Bernice was in 11th grade at her large urban high school when she began to talk with her friends—few of them white, all of them poor—about why such a small percentage of their classmates went on to college. “Are we just dumber than kids at other schools?” she asked in a discussion that took place in their leadership class.

Nobody was willing to say yes. But if the reason wasn’t intellectual ability, what was it? In the student action research project that followed, these students uncovered one significant difference: Compared with their friends in nearby suburbs, they had far fewer opportunities to participate in challenging and interesting courses and extracurricular activities. “Even if we could qualify for the best classes, there wasn’t enough room for us,” Bernice said. “For us, it was normal for school to be boring. We didn’t have good reasons to keep caring about it.”

Bernice was one of 65 high school students from across the United States who spoke with me last year as part of a six-month study of school leadership. My inquiry, which took place in intensive small-group interviews held over the course of several days, elicited students’ perspectives on high school culture and climate and especially on the role of principals. Sixty percent of the students I worked with were students of color, and almost none came from privileged backgrounds.<sup>1</sup>

Filled with concerns, curiosity, interests, and ambitions, these teenagers mirror many others who are not thriving academically in high school. Like their peers around the country, they chafe against a system that shuts them out rather than recognizing and developing their potential. They know that all students must learn basic skills and content knowledge, but they see that some students have far greater opportunities to learn. And when classes offer only a steady diet of tedium, these students would just as soon forget about school and look to the media, the streets, or peer relationships for interest and stimulation.

Students like Bernice are clear about what would get them interested again: a voice in determining course offerings, academic courses that relate to things they care about, respect for their nonacademic interests, inspiring role models, and opportunities to connect with the community. Creating a school that truly engages young people takes effort, imagination, and strong leadership. But when adults show that they believe teenagers' interests matter, they reap a payoff in terms of higher student attendance and achievement.

## Light the Fire

To help teenagers achieve, we need to integrate their concerns into their schoolwork. To learn more about those concerns, one California high school starts off the year by gathering new 9th graders in small groups in which they think and write about their personal goals and values. Amber commented,

At first I hated it, and I would complain. But ever since then, I started thinking, What do I want to do, and what do I want to be? I love math and science, even though I'm not that good at it. I have questions, and I like thinking of new ways to answer them. So I've been researching different careers in chemical engineering.

In school and out, adolescents are always working on building an identity. In everything they do, they are asking themselves, Who am I? Who do I want to be? Where am I going? They care tremendously what others—both peers and adults—think of them and expect of them. They feel a powerful drive to reflect on these questions of identity, and that energy can contribute greatly to a culture of engagement in school. Daria commented,

We need a class for discussion, because I have opinions about things. I know my classmates have opinions, too. We tried to start a discussion about human rights in history class this year, and the teacher shot us down and wouldn't let us finish. He said, "We have to keep to the curriculum." And we're like, "Well, this is the curriculum! This is what I'm thinking about!"

Students are not trying to avoid academic challenge when they ask for more interesting classes. They want work that will build on what they know and care about, in exciting ways that stretch their thinking and leave them wanting more. And when they get engaged in exploring something actively, they retain what they learn. As Monica pointed out,

If you just have lectures, after two weeks of break you totally forget everything. Maybe if there were more hands-on experiences, kids wouldn't be forgetting what they learned.

Hands-on projects often combine high-interest topics with important practice in academic competencies. In their physics class, Charles and his classmates built a sail-powered car. He reported,

When I learned the traditional formulas, it got kind of boring. But doing the project at the same time, I began to link the formulas with the actual construction. It inspired me to get deeper and deeper into the book. I was craving more, because I saw how some of these formulas could really boost the performance of the car.

Many educators worry about whether their students will do well on standardized city and state tests if coursework focuses on things that interest them. But kids point out that the risk can work the other way around—that they will tune out completely if the material does not connect to their interests.

Elective courses are particularly important in holding students' interest and keeping them learning. The courses that most attract students are often those that use a theme to explore a range of subjects. For instance, José wrote,

Here's how a hip-hop class would help us: With the rap, it would help us in literature and writing. Dancing, it would be a health class. Drawing, it's an art class. And all that put together will ease our mind and make us better at learning, instead of spending our time in class drawing sketches or something while we're supposed to be doing our work.

Another way to give a class a sense of excitement and purpose is to recognize that adults, too, have something to learn—and that young people may be able to help them. As Anders said,

They're not always experts. One of our teachers started a robotics course because he also wanted to learn about robotics. He learned with us. He would go to extra classes so he could teach us new stuff. We could learn off of him and he could learn off of us.

Teenagers know that they can't control all the decisions about which courses the school offers and how they are taught. But if educators would listen seriously to their thoughts, students would feel more like partners in their schooling. José urged,

Talk to us about the classes that we want to take, not just the ones you want to give. We know what we need to take, so respect us by asking us what is on our mind or how we feel. Don't just give us orders; listen to what we have to say.

## Treat Students as People

Adult attitudes about what goes on in the classroom also determine whether students feel like partners or prisoners there. Teachers who know their students well can make powerful connections between academic subjects and the things kids worry and care about. Said Vance,

The smart teachers find the smallest reason why you might need math, or why you might need science. If you have asthma, you're worrying about your lungs. That's something you know—you're having trouble with your breathing. Maybe your mom has diabetes, or your dad has a bad heart. And so we listen, even begrudgingly, because it makes sense.

Introducing students to inspiring role models is another way to foster their interest in academics and show them the value of school. Tisha suggested,

Have college alumni who are very successful come and talk to students. Like, "Hey, you don't have to stay on the streets so you can get a nice car." Some kids want to be rappers or producers, so get a college alumnus who is a producer. Show what he did to stay away from drugs and violence, and how he has prospered because of his education and his knowledge.

Extracurricular activities provide another way to acknowledge the importance of students' passions and feelings of competence. As Marisol pointed out,

It's for the extracurriculars, like sports, that some kids come to school at all. Sometimes it's the only place we get to feel like we are good at something.

Adit gave another example:

Our student store brings in thousands of dollars year after year! It really is beautiful that students are having fiscal responsibility, and more students should be brought into that.

Clubs and activities—especially those that do not involve competition—can foster a tone of inclusion that often comes as a relief to students. Tracy related that one club is “a small place where kids feel equal to each other, where people know your name, where no one is advanced or not advanced.”

But it’s not always easy for students to get an activity off the ground. An adult’s response can make all the difference, they said:

I was trying to plan an end-of-the-year trip for the 8th graders last year, and I needed help from the principal for busing and stuff. I went to his office so many times, and every time I heard, “He’s in a meeting, he’s not here right now,” and I couldn’t set a date to see him. It made me feel like he didn’t really care. (Asiya)

A lot of the kids in my school wanted to open a stepping program after school, and two senior girls were going to teach it. We went to the principal and as soon as possible he helped us open it, and a lot of students were going and it was a great activity. That made me have more respect for the principal, because he cared and listened to us, and he took it very seriously. (Enka)

Whether adult support is psychological, financial, or logistical, it pays off in the increased investment that students feel in their school. Adit said,

Unlike a history class, extracurriculars are things that students demonstrate a voluntary interest in. And if you make that in-

terest a piece of the school's community, you've given those students a vested interest in the affairs of your school.

## Use the Community as Teacher

When students have the chance to work directly with people in the community, their interest and engagement increase markedly. At Katie's school,

Every Wednesday, we go out for the entire day and do community service, and it's really made a big difference to me. In our building we have Early Head Start, where moms drop their babies off, and I go down there and help. That's really made me want to go to school on Wednesdays, getting to loosen up and have a little bit of fun, not be so severe all the time.

Here too, students are acquiring important habits of mind. Through an internship program at her high school, Monica helped a local community center set up a teen center, assisting with payroll, filing, making phone calls, and performing other tasks. She discovered that

A lot of skills I learned at school I had to use—like collaboration, communication, how to see stuff through other people's perspectives.

Quan and a classmate had an internship at a nearby science park, surveying the public about a virtual reality game that showed the effects of smoking cigarettes. Their project benefited the park's management, but it also stretched Quan personally:

My friend and I would ask what they think, gather the data and put it into the computer, then analyze the data and see the trend. I learned how to be more outgoing, and my communi-

cation skills really boosted up. It's important to know how to work with others in the field.

## Meaning Sparks Motivation

In thinking about how to make school more interesting for students, adults should remember what motivates us at work every day. Like adults, high school students don't expect their workday to include only experiences they enjoy. But their comments show that they do need a sense of agency, purpose, and meaning in what they do with their time and energy. And whenever we link a school's goals with that need for meaning, a stronger school culture will result.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Readers can find the full report of this collaborative exploration of school leadership in the book *Sent to the Principal: Students Talk About Making High Schools Better* (Next Generation Press, 2005).

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# The Wounded Student

Kirsten Olson

*Schools sometimes undermine students'  
confidence in their ability to learn.*

Marie, an ordinarily outgoing 8th grader, shuts down in math class. She dislikes word problems and avoids games like Tic Tac Toe Squares, which involves finding the square root of numbers less than 1,000. Once an engaged math student, Marie now sits silently in large-group math instruction, hoping not to be noticed. She is relieved when her teacher does not call on her. She participates tentatively in small-group work and never volunteers to do problems at the board.

After being moved from advanced math to regular math last year, Marie believes she is no longer a competent math student. Her math teacher told her that she “wasn’t well equipped” and couldn’t keep up with her peers in advanced math. Marie now dreads the many years of math classes ahead of her and rushes through her nightly math homework, which she finds boring and difficult. Once curious about math concepts, she now rarely thinks about the world mathematically because she has come to regard herself as “not good at that kind of stuff.”

## A Vicious Cycle

Reluctant learners are reluctant for a reason. They often have been wounded by comments from school personnel about their perceived abilities or by specific school practices. Many suffer from lacerations

that go unnoticed in school cultures that encourage a stiff upper lip, compliance with group norms, and an uncomplaining acceptance of one's placement in ability groups. Marie has simply assumed that her failures in math are her fault because she didn't "get it fast enough."

I have spent several years interviewing more than 100 individuals about learning reluctance caused by negative school interactions, beginning in graduate school when I became fascinated by highly accomplished learners who nevertheless failed in school. On the basis of what I learned from these one-on-one interviews, I know that Marie's feelings about being poor in math may never go away unless the school specifically addresses them. Given her hesitancy to engage with math, the school may systematically deny her access to higher-level math content, making her a poorer and less competent math learner than she was before. Schools rarely address this vicious cycle.

Reluctant learning caused by school wounding comes in many forms. For example, schools sometimes discourage learners' divergent thinking because it appears discordant with mainstream class norms. I observed a 9th grade social studies class in which the teacher asked students to interview their parents about their reactions to the events of September 11, 2001. One student said that his parents believed that Americans' reaction to this event was greatly exaggerated and self-absorbed. His teacher replied, "Yes, but it was *our* people who died." The student made no reply and did not speak for the rest of the class.

Some learners come to feel that "not learning" (Kohl, 1994) is an expression of positive resistance in a system that does not seem to value them or have high expectations for them. Marques, an academically promising student who attends a school I consult for, is parentless and has been a gang member since he was 13. In 9th grade, his large comprehensive high school suspended him repeatedly for tardiness, poor attendance, and hostile interactions with school personnel, especially men. He eventually dropped out. Two years later, Marques voluntarily enrolled himself in a small, academically rigorous school designed for students who need specific instruction in "code switching"

into appropriate school behaviors as well as intensive personal and academic intervention. The staff's work with Marques also involves exploring, understanding, and acknowledging the ways in which school interactions have wounded him and helping him become responsible for ensuring that harmful interactions don't occur again.

## Self-Image at Stake

My work suggests how deeply personal, internalized, and often hidden school lacerations are and how directly they relate to reluctance in learning. Education environments have the power to shape self-concept and determine what we think of ourselves and our abilities in ways that are unrivaled and often undeserved.

For instance, although IQ scores are unstable until late adolescence and have been largely discredited for determining a single, generalized ability quotient (Murdoch, 2007), many schools still use these tests to sort students as early as 1st grade and determine performance “expectations” from that point forward. I commonly hear stories from students who were told that they had only average or substandard abilities. Many went on to live their lives and make career choices on the basis of the results of a single test, all the while unaware that the results might have been misunderstood or inappropriately applied. This was brought home to me when I interviewed a man in his 80s who could still recall his aptitude scores on tests he took in 4th grade. On the basis of those scores, he decided to become an accountant, a job he disliked, because he was not—and was led to believe he could never become—a good speller.

Although some theorists have suggested that the point of schools is to mold individual self-concept so students will accept a particular place in society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), most of us who work in schools believe that we are good at seeing talent and potential in students and at using tests judiciously, with only the best interests of our students in mind.

But are we? We often casually and unknowingly wound students when we overfocus on single testing events, track students into fixed ability groups, or decide “what kind of kid” someone is and insist on creating environments that reinforce this concept. Wounding a student’s creativity involves not honoring unusual or nonstandard ways of thinking. Wounds of underestimation involve tracking a student into underperformance for an entire school career on the basis of a string of bad test scores, poor grades, a lack of proficiency in academic English, or a lack of understanding of the codes of school behavior. Wounds of perfectionism make students unwilling to take risks in learning because they have cracked the code of school too well and are overly reliant on external approval for motivation and drive.

## Helping Students Heal

How do we work effectively with a reluctant learner like Marie, who is rapidly becoming a poor math student because someone told her she is, or with a student like Marques, who has been labeled a “bad kid” and who must exert great fortitude to return to school? How can we attend to our students’ school wounds? How can we avoid wounding students altogether?

- *Acknowledge school wounds.* We must first acknowledge that reluctance to learn is often based on the student’s experiences in school. To get beneath the surface of learning reluctance, teachers may need to gently probe a learner’s biography in one-on-one conversations.

The first step in healing is listening to the student, acknowledging that his or her feelings are real, and giving the student space to talk about and reflect on those feelings. For example, noting Marie’s declining interest and self-confidence, her current math teacher might ask to have a conversation with her concerning her feelings about math. She might initiate such a

conversation by saying, “From past school reports, it looks like you used to be really enthusiastic about math. What specific incidents happened to make you doubt your abilities in math? How did they make you feel?”

Marques has good reason for being cautious with school personnel. His teacher might broach some of his concerns by saying, “I really admire the way you come to school every day. I know you’ve gotten a lot of negative feedback from lots of adults in school. What makes you brave enough to come here every day?”

- *Question labels.* We need to question many of the ways in which schools judge, sort, and classify students and help students understand that these labels need not be with them for life. Whenever a student receives a test score or a class placement, teachers should remind both students and parents of the plasticity of ability and the power of individuals to change their academic paths through effort (Dweck, 2006).

For instance, when handing back a test, the teacher might remind the class, “You may not have done as well as you’d like on this test, and it’s important for you to analyze why. Did you study enough? Are there parts of the material you still don’t understand and need extra help with?” The teacher might also ask students individually, “Did you understand the directions for this test?” because many reluctant learners have difficulty deciphering the directions on a test or assignment. By coming to understand their own habits as learners, students discover that they can improve their grades on tests and that they are in control of their understanding.

- *Remind students of their own contributions to school success or failure.* Most researchers find that self-discipline, persistence, and ambition are at least as significant to academic success as innate ability (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, &

Kelly, 2007). Students need to focus on working hard, establishing good work habits, and setting high goals. If students have received negative evaluations, teachers should both encourage them to question the kinds of judgments school authorities make and support the students in their efforts at self-definition and redefinition.

I sometimes tell struggling elementary and high school students about a memorable college student I taught. Jake, who had serious learning differences, was told point-blank by his 3rd grade teacher that he would be lucky to graduate from high school. Rejecting that teacher's judgment, he developed a healthy skepticism about teachers' evaluations of his abilities and relied on his parents and his athletic abilities for support and self-esteem. He also developed a strong work ethic; in his words, he was "the hardest, most persistent" worker in each of his classes. He graduated from high school and now attends a highly selective liberal arts institution from which he will graduate this spring.

- *Seek out professional development.* Educators need to become more skilled at identifying the kinds of learning experiences and challenges that students encounter. This knowledge can help prevent teachers from labeling students and tracking them into situations that provoke learning reluctance.

For instance, does a student who seems cautious about writing in class but is an effusive and expressive talker have a graphomotor function issue that needs to be addressed? Might such a student have trouble with "output" and long-term memory of the rules of written expression? Does another student have difficulty following directions step by step? The teacher could strengthen weak sequential awareness and sequential memory functions using specific interventions. A student may have trouble remaining mentally present in the classroom or be

inconsistent in the ways in which she pays attention and exerts mental effort. Rather than regarding these students as sloppy, disorganized, or lazy, teachers need to dig deeper and increase their own professional knowledge of common neurodevelopmental difficulties.

The Schools Attuned Program, designed by Mel Levine and his associates (2002), offers professional development programs that help education practitioners understand and effectively work with students who encounter learning difficulties.

- *Reflect on how you speak with students.* In the crush of the school day and the pressures of accountability, school personnel often cease to hear how they sound to students. In some cases, video analysis of teacher-student or administrator-student interactions can uncover wounding talk about student ability, such as, “you are this type of kid,” or unconscious attitudes that slip into conversations with students or conversations among teachers about students.

In *Talk Matters*, Beatrice Fennimore (2000) described schools as linguistic communities that embody powerful moral and democratic (or anti-democratic) assumptions. However, the assumptions and value judgments embedded in common school talk may be invisible to many teachers. For some educators, simply becoming aware of how they classify and label students in casual language is a first step in ending a cycle of wounding. A teacher might keep a journal of school talk, noting the ways in which students are described in school meetings or among administrators and whether these descriptions allow for the possibility of growth, transformation, and surprise. Beware of characterizations such as “those kinds of kids” or “children from poor backgrounds.” Attitudes like these end up eroding

the potential for growth—not just in students, but in adults in school as well.

## Don't Label—Listen

As schools move away from 19th-century models of schooling, with their rigid classifications of students by ability and their passive, adult-centered teaching and learning patterns, we must acknowledge that some students have been wounded along the way. Nevertheless, all students have the capacity to heal from these wounds. By listening to our students attentively and without judgment, we can help them heal.

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# Part 3

Deepening  
Students' Thinking



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# All Our Students Thinking

Nel Noddings

*Any subject—be it physics, art, or auto repair—can promote critical thinking as long as teachers teach in intellectually challenging ways.*

One stated aim of almost all schools today is to promote critical thinking. But how do we teach critical thinking? What do we mean by *thinking*?

In an earlier issue on the whole child (September 2005), *Educational Leadership* made it clear that education is rightly considered a multipurpose enterprise. Schools should encourage the development of all aspects of whole persons: their intellectual, moral, social, aesthetic, emotional, physical, and spiritual capacities. In this issue, I am primarily concerned with intellectual development, in particular, with teaching students to think. However, as we address this important aim, we need to ask how it fits with other important aims, how our choice of specific goals and objectives may affect the aim of thinking, and whether current practices enhance or impede this aim.

## Thinking and Intellect

Writers often distinguish among such thinking categories as critical thinking, reflective thinking, creative thinking, and higher-order thinking. Here, I consider thinking as the sort of mental activity that uses facts to plan, order, and work toward an end; seeks meaning or an explanation; is self-reflective; and uses reason to question claims and

make judgments. This seems to be what most teachers have in mind when they talk about thinking.

For centuries, many people have assumed that the study of certain subjects—such as algebra, Latin, and physics—has a desirable effect on the development of intellect. These subjects, it was thought, develop the mind, much as physical activity develops the muscles. John Dewey (1933/1971) rejected this view, writing, “It is desirable to expel . . . the notion that some subjects are inherently ‘intellectual,’ and hence possessed of an almost magical power to train the faculty of thought” (p. 46). Dewey argued, on the contrary, that

any subject, from Greek to cooking, and from drawing to mathematics, is intellectual, if intellectual at all, not in its fixed inner structure, but in its function—in its power to start and direct significant inquiry and reflection. What geometry does for one, the manipulation of laboratory apparatus, the mastery of a musical composition, or the conduct of a business affair, may do for another. (pp. 46–47)

More recently, Mike Rose has shown convincingly not only that thinking is required in physical work (2005), but also that nonacademic subjects can be taught in intellectually challenging ways (1995). We do our students and society a disservice when we suppose that there is no intellectual worth in such subjects as homemaking, parenting, getting along with others, living with plants and animals, and understanding advertising and propaganda (Noddings, 2005, 2006). The point is to appreciate the topics that matter in real life and encourage thinking in each area. This is not accomplished by first teaching everyone algebra—thus developing mental muscle—and *then* applying that muscle to everyday matters.

Nor is it accomplished by simply adding thinking to the set of objectives for each disciplinary course. More than 20 years ago, educators and policymakers advocated greater emphasis on thinking as an aim of education. Commenting on this popular demand, Matthew

Lipman (1991), one of the founders of the modern Philosophy for Children movement, remarked,

School administrators are calling for ways of “infusing thinking into the curriculum,” apparently on the understanding that thinking can be added to the existing courses of studies as easily as we add vitamins to our diet. (p. 2)

But thinking cannot be formulated as a lesson objective—as something to teach, learn, and evaluate on Thursday morning. How, then, do we go about it?

## Learning as Exploration

A few years ago, I watched a teenager whom I’ll call Margie struggle with courses that discouraged thinking. In her U.S. history course, students were required to learn a list of facts for each unit of study. Margie had to memorize a set of 40 responses (names, places, and dates) for the unit on the American Revolutionary War and the postwar period. Conscientiously, she memorized the material and got a good grade on the test. When I talked with her, however, it was clear that she had not been asked to think and would soon forget the memorized facts. None of it meant anything to her; passing the test was her only objective.

Suppose, instead, that the teacher had asked students to consider such questions as these:

- What happened to the Tories during and after the war?
- Why was Thomas Paine honored as a hero for his tract *Common Sense* but reviled for his book *The Age of Reason*?
- Why might we be surprised (and dismayed) that John Adams signed the Alien and Sedition Acts?

Such questions would encourage students to read, write, argue, and consider the implications for current political life—all important aims of education. How many Tories left the United States? Where

did they go? Where do refugees go today? Discussing the question on Thomas Paine could lead to a critical discussion of both nationalism and religion centered on Paine's statement, "My country is the world; my religion is to do good." Who reviled Paine and why? After reading biographical material on John Adams, students might indeed be amazed that he signed the Alien and Sedition Acts. What lesson might we take from this story about the effects of fear and distrust on even highly intelligent people?

## Algebra for Some

When I first met with Margie, she was taking algebra. Looking through her textbook, I thought the course would be wonderful. The textbook was loaded with real-world applications and exercises that invited genuine thinking. But the teacher did not assign even one of these exercises. Not one! The following year, in geometry, Margie was never asked to do a proof. These algebra and geometry classes were composed of kids who, had they had a choice in the matter, would not have chosen courses in academic mathematics. Today, in the name of equality of opportunity, we force nearly all students into courses called Algebra and Geometry, but the courses often do not deserve their names because they lack genuine intellectual content. This practice is little short of pedagogical fraud. Many of Margie's classmates (and Margie, too) would have been better served by good career and technical education courses that would challenge them to think about the world of work for which they were preparing.

I am not suggesting that we go back to a system in which students are tested, sorted, and assigned either to academic courses or dead-end tracks in which they are treated with neglect, sometimes even with contempt. But the present practice of forcing everyone into academic courses is not working well. We would do better to design excellent career and technical education courses—very like the job-oriented programs provided in two-year colleges—and allow students

to choose their own course of study. Students should not be forced into or excluded from academic courses, but they should be able to choose a nonacademic program with pride and confidence. Such programs are available in many Western countries, such as Germany and the Scandinavian countries. Programs like these might offer courses to prepare machinists, film technicians, office managers, retail salespersons, food preparation and service workers, mechanics, and other skilled workers. Recent studies have shown that the United States actually has an oversupply of engineers and scientists but badly needs workers with high technical skills (Monastersky, 2007).

We can give students opportunities to think well in any course we offer, provided the students are interested in the subjects discussed. Algebra can be taught thoughtfully or stupidly. So can drafting, cooking, or parenting. The key is to give students opportunities to think and to make an effort to connect one subject area to other subject areas in the curriculum and to everyday life.

Consider the ongoing debate over popular science versus “real science.” Many critics scorn popular science courses (for a powerful criticism of the critics, see Windschitl, 2006). They would prefer to enroll all students in science courses that would prepare them—through emphasis on vocabulary and abstract concepts—for the next science course. According to this view, practical or popular science has little value and should certainly not carry credits toward college preparation. But intelligent, well-educated nonscientists depend on popular (or popularized) science for a lifetime of essential information. Nonscientists like myself cannot run our own experiments and verify everything that comes through the science pipeline. Instead, we read widely and consider the credentials of those making various claims. High school courses should prepare not only future specialists but also all students for membership in this circle of thoughtful readers.

Deference to the formal disciplines sometimes actually impedes student thinking. A few years ago, it was recommended that math courses should teach students how to think like a mathematician. In

science courses, they were to think like a scientist; in history, like a historian, and so on. But aside from the possibility that there may be more than one way to think like a mathematician, education efforts might better be aimed at showing students how to use mathematics to think about their own purposes. For example, carpenters don't need to think like mathematicians, but they do need to think about and use mathematics in their work.

## Modeling Open-Ended Thinking

It may be useful, however, for students to see and hear their teachers thinking as mathematicians, historians, or artists. When I was studying for my master's degree in mathematics, I had one professor who frequently came to class unprepared. His fumbling about was often annoying; he wasted time. But sometimes his lack of preparedness led to eye-opening episodes. He would share aloud his thinking, working his way through a problem. Sometimes he would stop short and say, "This isn't going to work," and he'd explain why it wouldn't work. At other times, he'd say, "Ah, look, we're going great! What should we do next?" He modeled mathematical thinking for us, and I found it quite wonderful. The process was messy, uneven, time-consuming, and thrilling. That's the way real thinking is.

I am not recommending that teachers come to class unprepared, but we should at least occasionally tackle problems or ideas that we have not worked out beforehand. In doing so, we model thinking and demonstrate both the obstacles that we encounter and our successes.

Too often, we state beforehand exactly what we will teach and exactly what our students should know or do as a result. This is the right approach for some objectives. There is a place for automatic response in student learning; we do want students to carry out some operations automatically, without thinking. That sort of skill frees us to think about the real problems on which we should concentrate.

In today's schools, however, too much of what we teach is cast in terms of specific objectives or standards. Margie was told the 40 things she was expected to know about the American Revolutionary War. Some educators even argue that it is only fair to tell students exactly what they must know or do. But such full disclosure may foreclose learning to think. Thinking involves planning, ordering, creating structural outlines, deciding what is important, and reflecting on one's own activity. If all this is done for students—Cliffs Notes for everything—they may pass tests on material they have memorized, but they will not learn to think, and they will quickly forget most of the memorized material.

## Encouraging Teachers to Think

Our focus thus far has been on students. But what about teachers? Are they encouraged to think? Unfortunately, many teachers are told what topics to teach and how to teach them. In too many cases, they are even compelled to use scripted lessons. Ready-made lessons should be available for teachers who want to use them or for special purposes, but professional teachers should be allowed—even encouraged—to use their professional judgment in planning lessons and sequences of lessons.

If teachers want to teach students to think, they must think about what they themselves are doing. Critics both inside and outside the United States have characterized the U.S. curriculum as “a mile wide and an inch deep.” The pressure to cover mandated material can lead to hasty and superficial instruction that favors correct responses to multiple-choice questions over thinking. Countless teachers have told me that they can't spend time on real-life applications of mathematics or the kinds of questions I suggested for Margie's history class. If they were to do so, they tell me, they wouldn't get through the required curriculum. But what is the point of getting through a huge body of material if students will soon forget it? How can we claim to educate

our students if they do not acquire the intellectual habits of mind associated with thinking?

Teachers should also be willing to think critically about education theory and about what we might call education propaganda. Slogans are mouthed freely in education circles, and too few teachers challenge them (Noddings, 2007). For example, it is easy and politically correct to say, “All children can learn,” but what does that mean? Can all children learn, say, algebra? If we answer a qualified *no* to this, are we demeaning the ability of some children (perhaps many), or might our answer be a respectful recognition that children differ and exhibit a wide range of talents and needs?

## What Competing Really Means

Even if we believe that all children can learn algebra, we too seldom ask the question, Why should they? When we do ask it, the answer is usually that we live in an information age and that if students (and the United States) are to compete in a worldwide economy, they must know far more mathematics than previous generations did. We need, they say, more college-educated citizens.

Is this true? The information world is certainly growing, but in addition to its own growth, it has generated an enormous service world, and people in this world should also learn to think. The Bureau of Labor Statistics provides charts showing that, of the 10 occupations with the most openings in the next decade, only one or two require a college education. Occupations such as food preparation and service worker, retail salesperson, customer service representative, cashier, office clerk, and laborer and material mover will employ about five times more people than the computer/high-tech fields requiring a college education (see [www.bls.gov/emp/home.htm](http://www.bls.gov/emp/home.htm) for employment projections). No matter what we do in schools, most of our high school graduates will work at such jobs.

We live in an interdependent society, and one of our education aims is to prepare students for democratic citizenship. As part of that task, we should help students develop an appreciation for the wide range of essential work that must be done in our complex society. In the future, not everyone will need to have a traditional college education to experience occupational success, although postsecondary education or training will frequently enhance that success. Rather, occupational success will require flexibility, a willingness to continue learning, an ability to work in teams, patience and skill in problem solving, intellectual and personal honesty, and a well-developed capacity to think. Success in personal life requires many of the same qualities.

Even for those who go on to college and postgraduate education, the intellectual demands of the future are moving away from a narrow disciplinary emphasis. The biologist E. O. Wilson (2006) has commented on the new demands:

The trajectory of world events suggests that educated people should be far better able than before to address the great issues courageously and analytically by undertaking a traverse of disciplines. We are into the age of synthesis, with a real empirical bite to it. Therefore, *sapere aude*. Dare to think on your own. (p. 137)

That's good advice for both teachers and students.

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## Balance in the Balance

Richard Rothstein, Tamara Wilder, and Rebecca Jacobsen

*Schools need accountability systems that focus on more than basic skills to produce the outcomes necessary for success in work and life.*

Americans have long reflected on public education's purposes. Mostly, we've embraced a balanced set of goals that includes more than basic academic skills. In 1749, Benjamin Franklin recommended that public schools emphasize physical fitness because "exercise invigorates the soul as well as the body." As for academics, Franklin thought history particularly important, where "questions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, will naturally arise." He believed students should learn logic and reasoning through debates about historical and current controversies (1749/1931).

Almost 70 years later, Thomas Jefferson (1818/1964) set forth a list of goals for public education:

- To give citizens the information they need.
- To enable citizens to calculate for themselves and to express their ideas and preserve their contracts and accounts in writing.
- To improve, by reading, their morals and their mental faculties.
- To understand their duties to their neighbors and country.
- To know their rights; to choose with discretion their elected representatives and monitor their conduct with diligence, candor, and judgment.

- To observe their social relations with intelligence and faithfulness.

Nineteenth-century educators Horace Mann and John Pierce—the first school superintendents of Massachusetts and Michigan, respectively—proclaimed similarly varied goals. Like Jefferson, they emphasized preparing voters to exercise wise judgment (Mann, 1848; Tyack & James, 1987). Twentieth-century reports—such as those by the Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education (1918), the Committee on Social-Economic Goals of America (1937), and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (1958)—likewise rejected holding schools accountable for basic skills alone. More recently, scholars like John Goodlad (1979) concluded that public education should educate the whole child and avoid rote teaching that may raise test scores but fail to produce healthy, fulfilled, and participating citizens.

We have synthesized the goals that have persisted throughout nearly 300 years of U.S. education policymaking into eight broad categories:

- *Basic academic skills*: in reading, writing, math, science, history, civics, geography, and a foreign language.
- *Critical thinking and problem solving*: analyzing information, applying ideas to new situations, and developing knowledge using computers.
- *Social skills and work ethic*: communication skills, personal responsibility, and getting along with others from varied backgrounds.
- *Citizenship*: public ethics; knowing how government works; and participating by voting, volunteering, and becoming active in community life.
- *Physical health*: good habits of exercise and nutrition.

- *Emotional health*: self-confidence, respect for others, and the ability to resist peer pressure to engage in irresponsible personal behavior.
- *The arts and literature*: participation in and appreciation of musical, visual, and performing arts as well as a love of literature.
- *Preparation for skilled employment*: qualification for skilled employment for students not pursuing college education.

We recently surveyed a random sample of adults (1,297), school board members (377), and state legislators (191), asking respondents to weight each of the eight goals by the relative importance each should have in a comprehensive accountability system (see fig. 1). Although

**Figure 1. Which Education Goals Are Important?**

Goal	General public	School board members	State legislators
Basic academic skills	19	22	23
Critical thinking	15	18	18
Social skills and work ethic	14	12	11
Citizenship	10	11	12
Physical health	12	9	9
Emotional health	11	8	7
The arts and literature	8	9	9
Preparation for skilled employment	11	11	11
	100%	100%	100%

*Note:* A random sample of three groups weighted these eight goals by the importance each should carry in school accountability measures.

respondents considered basic skills more important than any other single goal, they didn't consider them more important than all other goals combined. If we combine the two academic categories—basic skills and critical thinking—these still have more importance (in combined percentage) than any other goal but not more importance than all other goals. So an accountability system that creates incentives that give too much importance to academic skills is not faithful to the education goals of Americans either today or in the past.

This is the tragedy of contemporary education policy. Schools—especially those serving disadvantaged students—are creating more time for score-boosting drills in math and reading by reducing time in social studies, physical education, and the arts. The same accountability pressures lead schools to focus on easily tested basic skills in math and reading to the detriment of equally important critical-thinking skills.

Some defenders of current accountability systems argue that basic skills are fundamental and that unless students acquire these, they will be unable to reach any other goal. But with respect to some goals, this theory makes no sense. For example, if a decline in physical education contributes to an epidemic of diabetes among low-income minority graduates by raising the incidence of obesity, then surely schools should be held accountable for both academics and physical fitness. Schools should not have incentives to cut physical education to make room for more remedial work in math.

If we want students to develop specific habits—of democratic citizenship, for example—we should hold schools directly accountable for teaching these habits. Likewise, if we want students to become good critical thinkers, we need to teach critical-thinking skills rather than assume that students need to learn basic skills *before* they can engage in higher-order thinking. Success in basic academics does not necessarily lead to success in more complex skills, as evidenced by the fact that scores are now rising faster on state tests, which tend to emphasize

basic skills, than on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which includes some items requiring more analytic thinking (Lee, 2006). This disparity suggests that schools should be held accountable for teaching both kinds of skills simultaneously.

## Promoting a Balanced Curriculum

Holding schools accountable for each of the eight goal areas would create incentives for teaching a balanced curriculum. As part of the academic curriculum in reading, math, science, and history, schools should teach critical thinking, social skills, a work ethic, and civic responsibility. A balanced curriculum should be concerned not only with *what* subjects schools teach, but also with *how* schools teach them. Integrated project-based teaching should replace drill-and-practice techniques that aim to cover basic skills but leave students bored and without motivation to apply these skills to the lifelong tasks that really matter.

This is not a new idea. Reporting to the Massachusetts legislature, Horace Mann (1838) denounced the phonics-based approach (with “letters, taken separately . . . taught before words”), insisting that reading depends more on motivation than mechanics. He concluded that “knowledge cannot be poured into a child’s mind. The pupil . . . is not a passive recipient, but an active, voluntary agent.” Mann noted that his observations would likely surprise those readers who, like many policymakers today, falsely assumed that learning is a linear process in which the mechanical precedes the mental.

What if schools were held accountable, for example, not for whether students could recite historical facts, but for whether they actually registered and voted as young adults? This would establish incentives for creating a curriculum that balanced history instruction with service learning projects, mock elections, and classroom debates of contemporary and controversial policy—just as Benjamin Franklin urged.

## Data on the Whole Child

Because existing accountability systems distort schooling by holding educators accountable solely for basic skills, few agencies have collected data on other important outcomes. Nevertheless, we can easily develop systems to detect whether the United States is moving toward success on broader education goals. Several surveys—such as the General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center, the Current Population Survey of the Census, the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey of the National Center for Health Statistics, and the National Longitudinal Study of Youth of the National Center for Education Statistics—give us a great deal of good information.

These data show whether adolescents and young adults engage in regular physical exercise, are overweight or obese, attend museums or play musical instruments, read for pleasure, register and vote, participate in community organizations, contribute to charity, are law-abiding, enroll in higher education, or follow safe sexual practices. We could use this information to create incentives for schools to promote positive behaviors in each goal area.

Back in the 1960s, when NAEP was first designed, policymakers recognized that it made more sense to measure outcomes *after* schooling was completed—for only then can we know whether schools have been effective. So NAEP originally sampled young adults (at about age 26). In addition, NAEP tested 17-year-olds—even those who had left school—because its creators recognized that adolescent samples need to include more than just those adolescents taking tests in school (Hazlett, 1974; Jones, 1996). Testing only youth still in school, an approach we use today, generates higher scores if struggling students don't take the test and drop out instead. NAEP's original test for citizenship also included behavioral measures. Trained observers recorded and evaluated students' behaviors as they worked in problem-solving teams (Dochterman, 1970).

These crucial characteristics of NAEP—sampling young adults, sampling 17-year-olds both in and out of school, and including behavioral assessments—were dropped in the 1970s to save money. Our current accountability systems distort curriculums by overemphasizing basic skills—not because we don’t know any better, but because we want accountability on the cheap.

## What Schools and States Could Do

Measuring basic skills at a national or state level in core subjects should include assessing a sample of 17-year-olds, both in and out of school, in all academic subjects. Moreover, a balanced assessment system should include tests of critical thinking. Although measuring critical-thinking skills usually requires constructed responses in which students produce original work, multiple-choice questions can also assess such skills—for example, by asking youths to interpret a literary character’s motivation by choosing from several alternatives.

NAEP includes some items like this. The Rainbow Project (Sternberg et al., 2004) has developed a test of analytical, practical, and creative skills to supplement college admissions tests. Examples of test items include determining the meanings of artificial words embedded in a paragraph, picking the correct missing option in a figural matrix, giving the best solution to an everyday problem in the life of an adolescent, and navigating effectively through an area on a map.

Some institutions of higher education currently use the newly developed Collegiate Learning Assessment to assess critical thinking (Council for Aid to Education, n.d.). This assessment engages students in a real-life activity by asking them to prepare a memo or policy recommendation using supplied documents and to support, oppose, or critique a statement through a well-articulated and well-reasoned response. Neither the Rainbow nor Collegiate Learning assessments are now given to representative samples of 17-year-olds or young adults,

but educators could expand and adapt the sampling frames for use with these populations.

Employer surveys often report on whether young workers possess various traits, such as communication skills, personal responsibility, and the ability to work with and get along with others from different backgrounds (National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce, 1994). Assessments that measure workplace readiness typically include hypothetical situational questions that measure respondents' work ethic and social skills (see ACT's *WorkKeys*, 2007). States could expand such surveys to produce data that reflect the characteristics of each state's young adult workforce to see whether schools are effectively preparing students for skilled employment.

NAEP's early designers were correct in their assumption that the effectiveness of schooling could best be measured at the end of that process. Education is cumulative; skills build on prior skills. Thus, whether students leave high school with adequate citizenship skills doesn't just reflect the quality of their classes in the senior year of high school, but rather all school, family, and community effects leading up to and including that senior year. It is true that schools change; practices followed when a graduate was in elementary or middle school may no longer be followed today. Accountability systems must take into account whether practices that produce good or bad long-term outcomes are still in use. As difficult as it might be to develop, an effective accountability system needs to measure this cumulative effect of education.

But is it reasonable to hold schools accountable for skills and behaviors that families and communities also contribute to building? There is no other alternative. Just as families, as well as schools, develop children's literacy, so do they jointly develop children's citizenship. It is as reasonable to hold schools accountable for developing citizenship as it is to hold them accountable for teaching reading.

In recent years, states have rapidly moved to develop student-identifier systems that can help trace youth outcomes back to the

schools and classrooms that educated these young adults (Data Quality Campaign, 2006). Systems like these might clarify why students who took social studies in one middle school, for example, systematically register and vote at higher rates than demographically similar students who took social studies in another.

Even in the absence of permanent student identifiers, some districts have contracted with firms, such as LifeTrack Services, to survey recent high school graduates (see [www.lifetrack-services.com](http://www.lifetrack-services.com) for the Advanced Graduate Survey). Data collected typically reveal students' thoughts about how well their school prepared them for the workforce, how safe their school was, how useful the high school counseling services were, and so on. Surveys also track graduates' current employment status. Districts could expand these contracts to gather data on young adult behaviors that educators need to evaluate their work, such as whether students read for pleasure or exercise regularly.

If we had fully developed ways to measure young adult outcomes, we would still want more contemporaneous evidence of school effectiveness. Parents and policymakers should not have to wait 10–15 years to learn whether particular schools are effectively implementing a balanced curriculum. Balanced accountability requires school inspections that, in addition to examining test scores, evaluate whether schools engage in activities likely to generate balanced outcomes. In designing such inspections for accountability, U.S. policymakers can learn from the experience of the New Zealand inspectorate system (see Fiske & Ladd, 2000) and the British inspectorate system (see Wilson, 1996). Wilson has developed a system partially modeled on the British inspectorate called School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT), which is now used in Rhode Island. SALT was much more nuanced, however, before the advent of NCLB and its pressure on schools to focus more exclusively on math and reading.

School inspections should focus on how well schools are providing a balanced curriculum. For example, are teachers employing cooperative learning strategies, not only to obtain better cognitive

results, but also to develop the interpersonal skills that employers need and democratic society depends on? Are the arts, health, and physical education given their due during the school day? Are students expected to reflect on what they learn? Do teachers provide adequate feedback on students' written work? Until we regularly ask such questions and document how schools perform on those measures, schools will have few incentives to provide an adequate and complete education to future generations.

## A Role for Principals, Too

Although it may be tempting to invest in test preparation materials that might raise proficiency percentages on tests of basic skills, these materials do not promote teaching styles that integrate multiple goal areas. Instead, to achieve a balanced set of outcomes, principals should invest in staff development that enhances teachers' capacity to integrate social skills with academic content. Principals could also promote using report cards that assess student progress in such areas as work ethic and classroom citizenship, making teachers more likely to incorporate the development of these skills into daily classroom activities.

But principals also have a public role. Highly respected in their communities, they can use parent and staff meetings to explain how narrow accountability systems, such as No Child Left Behind, can compromise their professional obligation to develop a balanced set of outcomes in all students. Although principals must continue to work within the framework of today's accountability regime, those who advocate holding schools accountable for a broader set of education goals can be confident that their views are consistent with the historic mission of U.S. public education, as well as with contemporary preferences of the general public, school board members, and state legislators.

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# Energizing Learning

Robert J. Swartz

*A teacher demonstrates how to explicitly teach thinking skills while guiding students to explore science content.*

During the last few decades, teachers have been exposed to a wide variety of instructional techniques aimed at improving students' thinking abilities and practices. More and more, through a process of refinement, combination, and transplantation, researchers and practitioners have developed organized programs of instruction that infuse many of these techniques into standard content instruction.

The most sophisticated of these programs, and the ones that show up in the research as the most effective (Beyer, 2001), combine thinking techniques and strategies within a rich, multi-faceted instructional framework. Teachers explicitly teach thinking strategies and important habits of mind to students; students then use these strategies to think about important elements of curricular content. A metacognitive layer is woven throughout the process. This model has now been refined through considerable instructional practice at almost every level of K–12 education (Swartz, 2001).

In my work on teaching thinking over the last 25 years, I have observed examples of this type of instruction again and again. And I have seen the same result again and again: This process has yielded a coherent set of practices that not only improve students' thinking, but also dramatically enhance students' content understanding and learning. This is what I call *thinking-based learning* (Swartz, Costa,

Beyer, Regan, & Kallick, 2007). The following example comes from the classroom of Rita Hagevik, an urban middle school teacher in Raleigh, North Carolina.

## Introducing Students to Thinking Skills

Rita Hagevik's 7th grade science class has been studying energy use. Their textbooks outline the basics: how dammed up rivers produce water flows that run turbines that produce electricity; how nuclear power plants use heat from controlled nuclear reactions to heat water to produce steam that similarly drives turbines; and how crude oil far beneath the Earth's surface is drawn out in wells, refined, and converted to burnable oil and gasoline.

But Ms. Hagevik is not satisfied with her students merely learning this information. The world faces an energy crisis, and there are intense conflicts about energy sources. Just reading their textbooks does not give these students the understanding they will need to make hard choices in the coming years.

Ms. Hagevik has, at the same time, been embarking on a project that has led her to change the way she carries out instruction in her classroom. By infusing instruction in skillful thinking into the standard curriculum, she has been trying to help her students develop important thinking skills and mental habits that will make them better critical and creative thinkers. She sees the energy unit as a prime opportunity to help them develop a new set of thinking skills and mental habits specifically related to skillful decision making.

She now works with her class to develop a strategy for effective decision making by asking them to reflect on some of their own decisions—those they are satisfied with and those they regret. She uses the results to create the following guide, a heading and sequence of questions that I call a *thinking strategy map* (Swartz, 2001):

**Skillful Decision Making**

1. What makes a decision necessary?
2. What are my options?
3. What are the likely consequences of these options?
4. How important are these consequences?
5. What's the best option in light of the consequences?

Making this strategy explicit at the outset is one of the guiding principles of thinking-based learning.

**Prompting Active Student Thinking About Content**

In the next stage of this lesson, Ms. Hagevik guides her students to apply this thinking strategy to their study of energy sources. She says,

I want you to imagine that you have been appointed by the U.S. government as a member of a special committee to review the nation's energy policy. Your committee has been asked to make a recommendation about what our dominant energy source should be during the next 25 years. Should we continue to rely on oil, or should we shift to some other energy source? As you engage with this issue, I'd like you to use the skillful decision-making strategy we just developed together.

Notice that Ms. Hagevik does not simply ask the students to decide which energy source would be best. This would invite students to make quick, impulsive decisions that may express their opinions and not careful thinking. Rather, after taking the time to work with her students to explicitly develop a decision-making strategy, she sets up a follow-up activity in which she directs them to use the strategy in an organized way. But she realizes that just telling them to apply the strategy is not enough. Old habits don't leave us so easily. So she actively leads the students through the thinking process, scaffolding their learning along the way.

## Guiding Students Through the Process

After some open discussion with the class about the need for sound decisions about energy sources, Ms. Hagevik breaks the class into collaborative thinking groups and asks them to brainstorm a list of possible energy sources. She asks the groups to record their ideas on a simple graphic organizer: a standard T-bar diagram with “Options” on the left and “Factors to Consider” on the right. She gets them started by saying, “Think of as many options as you can, write them on your graphic organizers, and talk together about them.” After they have started, she asks, “How many groups have at least five options? See if you can come up with at least 15, including some really original ones.” Typically, the students groan, but most of them rise to such challenges.

The class produces a list of about 20 options, some more fanciful than others (although all options are treated equally at this stage). Now they face the daunting task of trying to decide which source is “best.” Ms. Hagevik models the next step in the process by saying,

Maybe it will be easier if we approach this in a more organized way. Let’s see if we can think of a small number of factors to consider about an energy source to decide whether it is a viable candidate. For example, we should probably consider cost, don’t you agree? What else should we take into account? Let’s make a list of these factors in the next column.

The list of options and factors to consider that her students create is shown in Figure 1. This product, though, is only a beginning. The students now have an unprocessed list of possible sources of energy, along with a list of things they need to find out about a source of energy to judge its viability. Ms. Hagevik asks, “What should we do next?”

With her guidance, the students focus on the next question on the thinking strategy map: “What are the likely consequences of these options?” They will need to get information about the “factors to consider” for each energy source option. For example, they might figure

out how much it would cost to produce electricity for their city using solar panels by finding out how much it would cost to buy, install, and maintain them and how many would be needed. Then they can compare the energy source options and make an informed choice.

**Figure 1. Options and Factors to Consider in Skillful Decision Making About Energy Sources**

Options	Factors to Consider
Nuclear	Cost to produce the energy
Solar	Availability
Coal	Environmental impact
Oil	Renewability
Tides	Safety
Lightning	Cost to consumers
Geothermal	Ease of production
Wind	Jobs lost or created
Waves	Public acceptability
Burning garbage	Technology needed
Hydroelectric	Accessibility
Animal power	Cost to convert
Wood	
Methane gas	
Human power	
Chemical reaction	
Natural gas	
Ethanol	
Gravity	

Ms. Hagevik now gives the students a graphic organizer—a matrix on which they can record and process the information they come up with. She asks each group to work on a few sources from the list. Later they will combine their results on a larger matrix so that all of the students can reap the benefits of each group’s work.

Figure 2 is an example of how part of the matrix might look when it’s complete. (For an expanded figure, see [www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/el/Swartz%20Matrix.pdf](http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/el/Swartz%20Matrix.pdf).) The matrix represents a week’s work gathering and processing information. The plus and minus marks in the lower right-hand corner of each box indicate the group’s judgment about whether the information it has uncovered counts in favor of the

Figure 2. Decision-Making Matrix

Options	Relevant Consequences				
	Abundance/ Renewability	Accessibility	Cost of Production	Cost to Consumers	Safety
<b>Solar</b>	The sun potentially supplies 500 times more energy than we consume each year, more than we will likely ever need. Solar energy is a renewable resource.  * +	Usable radiant energy also dif-fuses through the clouds. The sun is the most accessible of all energy sources and will remain available regardless of future demand.  +	Sunlight is expensive to harness. Home solar collectors can cost \$5,000. Photovoltaic cells generate electricity only in small amounts. Increased demand would be expensive.  -	Although solar panels are costly, once in place the energy produced is virtually free. For those who live in regions that get little sun, transportation costs for the energy make it more expensive.  * -+	Sunlight is not ordinarily dangerous. It is not flammable and does not explode, leak, or create pollutants. Har-nessing more solar energy poses no unusual risks or dangers.  +
<b>Hydro-electric</b>	Water is a renewable resource. However, availability of new construction sites for dams and hydro-electric plants is limited by environmental concerns.  * -	You need a fast-flowing river, a dam site, and room for a plant. Many end users of elec-tricity are too remote from damnable riv-ers to benefit from them.  -	Enormous initial invest-ment to build the dam and power plant. The water is free. But if demand increased, new dams would need to be built at great expense.  -	Energy from hydroelectric plants is low-cost once the dams and other technol-ogy are in place. How-ever, because sites for dams are limited, the cost to trans- port the energy could be high.  * -+	Modern dams rarely breach. The power is produced cleanly, and maintenance of water tur-bines is routine. There is little danger to operators.  +
Key: * Important + Pro - Con					

Source: From *Infusing Critical and Creative Thinking into Secondary Science* (p. 56), by R. Swartz, S. Fisher, and S. Parks, 1999, Pacific Grove, CA: Critical Thinking Company. Copyright © 1999 The Critical Thinking Company (CriticalThinking.com). Adapted with permission. Note: This figure shows only a portion of the detailed matrix students created to record their research about various energy options. The expanded matrix, which includes additional energy options and consequence categories, is included in the online version of this article at [www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/el/Swartz%20Matrix.pdf](http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/el/Swartz%20Matrix.pdf).

option or against it. The asterisks in some boxes indicate consequences that the group has judged to be particularly important, which addresses the fourth question on the thinking strategy map. Ms. Hagevik prompts the students to discuss the consequences related to each factor and make sure that they can defend their reasons for assigning asterisks to these boxes.

The completed matrix can't fail to impress us. The students have learned a tremendous amount about energy, its sources, and the issues involved—much more than we would expect if they just read their textbooks and prepared for tests on the material. And all in one week!

In addition, the matrix makes it much easier for students to narrow down the field of sources and to settle on one as the best source. You can almost tell at a glance whether an energy source is in the ballpark or not. Finally, the matrix contains the information that students need to defend their judgments about the best source of energy. If challenged, students can go back to the graphic organizer and find material to cite. “Look,” the student might say, “all the important factors are pluses, and there is only one minus, a small matter that we can probably deal with.”

With the information on the matrix processed this way, Ms. Hagevik's students turn to the last question on the thinking strategy map and make their choices. Usually the students do not all agree on what energy option should be our dominant source. Instead of just letting that difference of opinion stand, Ms. Hagevik uses a modified think-pair-share activity in which students of differing views dialogue, explaining why they made the choices they did. She stresses the need to listen to one another with respect and to be open to changing their minds; both of these are important habits of mind (Costa & Kallick, 2000) that the class has discussed and practiced before.

Finally, Ms. Hagevik extends this activity into writing. The students must write their recommendations to a member of the U.S. Congress, explaining their reasons in detail in ways that show that they have thought carefully and skillfully about this issue.

## Helping Students Gather and Evaluate Information

What went on in Ms. Hagevik's classroom between the time the students developed their list of options and factors to consider and the time they completed their matrices so that they could make a decision?

In lessons like these, some teachers ask students to go back to their textbooks and use them to fill in the details. Textbooks generally are not finely grained enough, however, and this may become frustrating and boring for the students. Other teachers bring in supplementary books, articles, material they found on the Internet, and even videotapes or DVDs. This strategy works better, as long as the teacher makes sure that the material is extensive enough for students to be able to find the information they need.

Ms. Hagevik does something different. She treats this task as an opportunity to help her students learn how to gather information. In addition to book-based and online research, she encourages students to make the world a resource. Wherever they think they can get such information is fair game. To find out the price of a solar panel, for example, they might phone or e-mail a company that sells these panels. Ms. Hagevik helps each group develop a plan for getting its information. For example, she guides one group in dividing the labor (one pair of students will search the Internet, another pair go to the school library, and so on).

Ms. Hagevik has already introduced her students to the idea that they can judge the accuracy of information by determining whether the source is likely to be reliable. She has developed a thinking strategy map with them for this kind of critical judgment. The map looks like this:

### **Determining the Reliability of Sources**

1. Identify the source of information.
2. Gather information about the following factors related to the source:

A. Its publication

- Was it published?
- If so, when?
- What is the reputation of the publication?
- What kind of publication is it (for example, a report, fiction)?

B. The author

- Author's expertise?
- The author's bias, if any?
- Special interests of the author?
- Was the author a primary or secondary source? If secondary, how reliable was his or her source; if primary, how was the information obtained?

C. Corroboration or confirmation by other sources.

3. Is the reliability of the source likely, unlikely, or uncertain based on these factors?

Ms. Hagevik cues the students on the need for this strategy map—which they have already used many times—by asking whether they foresee any problems in getting information about controversial energy sources like nuclear power. Some of the students pick up on this immediately, remarking that they have to make sure that the information is reliable. She suggests, then, that they use their thinking strategy map for the reliability of sources to weigh any information they gather and be prepared to defend the reliability of the information.

Of course, Ms. Hagevik could have made these judgments herself. That would have saved class time. She could have given students a list of selected Internet sites that she judged to be reliable and books and articles on energy sources that she thought were fair and objective. Many educators do that. If she had, though, she would have deprived her students of the opportunity to make this selection themselves and thus develop another important critical-thinking skill.

## Prompting Students to Think About Thinking

Ms. Hagevik has still not completed this unit. She knows how important it is to get the students to stand back from the thinking they are doing and to engage in various types of metacognition that enable them to plan how they will apply the same type of thinking to different tasks.

Many teachers approach metacognition by asking students to describe their thinking. Ms. Hagevik goes beyond this. She introduces students to a strategy that my colleagues and I call “going up the ladder of metacognition” (Perkins & Swartz, 1989; Swartz et al., 2007). In a four-step process, students first identify the kind of thinking they just engaged in and then describe how they did it. The teacher then asks the students to evaluate the process: Did this way of thinking serve you well, or does the procedure need modification? If so, how should it be modified? The students use their answers to develop an explicit plan for doing the same sort of thinking again.

In subsequent units of study, Ms. Hagevik will remove some of the scaffolding she has built into this unit and simply say to the students, “Use your strategy for skillful decision making to think through this new issue.” Her students will then be well along the road to internalizing this thinking strategy. More and more, they will guide their own thinking, selecting the strategies and mental habits that will best serve their thinking needs—even when Ms. Hagevik is not around to remind them.

## Thinking-Based Learning for All

Rita Hagevik has blended and used many instructional strategies for teaching thinking skills that she may have learned piecemeal. She uses these within the context of a rich, ongoing, and coordinated learning experience for her students.

My colleagues and I have seen similar results at many different grade levels and in many different subject areas, even among students

whose teachers initially said, “They could never do that!” The instructional model that these teachers use—infusing instruction in important thinking skills and habits of mind into content instruction—is quite accessible to many other teachers. And just think about it: Ms. Hagevik’s students are learning strategies for thinking that will benefit them for the rest of their lives. At the same time, the depth of their content understanding, their interest in the subjects they are learning, and their retention of the material are increasing dramatically.

To me, this is education as it should be, and there is no reason why it can’t be practiced in every classroom and every school.

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# Of Whales and Wonder

Kieran Egan and Gillian Judson

*By using cognitive tools to shape instruction, we can make  
the curriculum more imaginatively engaging.*

Children and adolescents we label “reluctant learners” are often anything but reluctant to learn some things. They commonly expend prodigious intellectual energy on whatever engages them—collecting hockey cards or seashells, deciphering arcane rules in online gaming communities, amassing vast amounts of information about pop stars, maneuvering through the Internet, or manipulating a cell phone with skill that seems close to wizardry. No reluctance evident there: They exhibit all the signs of imaginative engagement. It’s just that their imaginations seem unable to connect with the curriculum they encounter in school.

What accounts for these students’ reluctance to expend effort on school learning? The world we expect them to learn about in school is, after all, wonderful and endlessly varied. Why do they fail to see it as such? And how can we make the curriculum as engaging as the world we want to reveal to students?

## Available to All: Cognitive Tools

One answer for engaging the imaginations of so-called reluctant learners comes from Lev Vygotsky (1962, 1997), who saw human development as a process in which the individual picks up from his or her

sociocultural surroundings certain commonly used *cognitive tools*. What are cognitive tools? Imagine it's 60,000 years ago, on the plains of Africa. A tribal leader is hunting gazelles when a lion emerges from the bush ahead of him. He feels the lion tense, ready to pounce, and he knows his spear will be as useless as a blade of grass to stop it. Just then a gazelle breaks from cover, sees the man and lion, and turns too sharply, slipping in a panic to get away. The lion pauses: The gazelle will taste sweeter than the man; it is hurt and vulnerable; and it doesn't have a sharp stick. The man smells the lion in the rush of air as its powerful legs thrust forward in pursuit of the gazelle.

Later, by the fire, the man tries to tell his friends about the moment when the lion was choosing whether to take him or the gazelle. As he struggles to capture his intense feelings, he makes up language that we translate as, "If I had moved, if I hadn't had my spear, he might have taken me." His friends, puzzled, say, "He didn't take you." The leader repeats forcefully, "He *might* have taken me."

That is, he invents the subjunctive. Well, someone invented it. Someone, under conditions we can only guess, created a new cognitive tool. Our cultural history is made up of such inventions, each of which has now become a potentially powerful tool to enlarge any individual's ability to think, communicate, and understand. One can imagine the tribal leader finding that at first, only a few of his friends began using his new form of language to refer to possibilities. But as an old man, he might have noticed that all the children learned to use the subjunctive early in life as they mastered language.

Vygotsky described an array of such tools, which are related to language, numbering and counting systems, mnemonic techniques, algebraic symbols, works of art, writing, and so on. Elaborating on those tools has been a significant part of the work of the Imaginative Education Research Group ([www.ierg.net](http://www.ierg.net)) based at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia. Drawing on Vygotsky's work, we have described a set of cognitive tools in a form appropriate for use in the everyday classroom (Egan, 1997, 2005).

Any child who has mastered an oral language will have a number of cognitive tools available for learning, including *story structuring*, *metaphor*, *vivid images*, *binary opposites*, *rhyme and rhythm*, *jokes and humor*, and *a sense of mystery*. Later, another set of cognitive tools comes along with the great tool kit of literacy: Among many others, these include *engagement by the limits of reality and the extremes of experience* (a fascination with the exotic and extreme, as, for example, in the *Guinness Book of World Records*); *associations with the heroic* (in which students take on, to some degree, the qualities of the heroes they learn about); and *seeing knowledge in terms of human qualities* (recognizing that all human knowledge is a product of someone's hopes, fears, and passions, an awareness that adds rich meaning to the world opened by literacy). We can see all of these tools energetically at work in the activities that so-called reluctant learners eagerly engage in, such as electronic games, collections, and social activities.

## Three Oral Language Tools

Let's look at just a few of the cognitive tools that humans develop with oral language: *story structuring*, *binary opposites*, and *forming images from words*. How can these tools help us engage students' imaginations in learning?

### Story Structuring

We define *story structuring* in the sense that newspaper editors mean when they ask a reporter to "get the story" on a bridge collapse. The editor doesn't want the reporter to make up a fictional story; rather, she is asking him to describe the facts clearly in a manner that brings their emotional meaning to the fore.

As a cognitive tool, story structuring shapes experience and knowledge into forms that establish their emotional meaning, helping us understand how to feel about events. If we were to tell you about a

generous and skilled doctor, and add, “It was a hot day, and the doctor dived into the water,” you might feel a small pleasure for her. But when we add, “The water was crowded with hungry sharks,” you might feel some distress. The story could continue with the information that the doctor was trying out a new shark repellent or risking her life to save a child who had fallen into the water. Your feelings would change depending on the subsequent events in the story. In this case, your feelings would be significantly shaped by whether the doctor later had lunch or *was* lunch.

We continually use story structuring to shape events—to tell our friends about something that happened in the office or an adventure we had on holiday. Telling such narratives is a central human skill that we all have to a greater or lesser degree. To use this tool systematically in teaching, we begin planning a lesson by asking, What’s the story on the topic? That is, How can I make the factual content clear and bring out its emotional importance?

## Binary Opposites

Bruno Bettelheim (1976) noted that children “bring some order into [their] world by dividing everything into opposites” (p. 74). Binary opposites can provide a first clear orientation to content, as they do in the stories that children find most engaging. Take the Grimm fairy tales (or the evening news!), and you will find under the surface of the story those great opposites of good/bad, brave/cowardly, security/fear, rich/poor, and so on.

Human beings easily divide the world into binary opposites. Such opposites provide our first and clearest grappling tools to grab onto reality; later, we learn to see that these simple opposites are inadequate to describe the complexity of the world. In school, however, we often try to cover topics before providing students with clear grappling hooks to grasp them. We leave the students behind, and they feel resentful that they have no orientation to the content being taught.

## Forming Images from Words

As we write this, we occasionally glance out the window of an ochre teahouse, looking down on a Japanese garden, on whose pond we can see three red water lilies. Across the pond is a moss garden, in which gray rocks are embedded at irregular intervals. A stream brings water through stones to a small waterfall that flows into the pond. Goldfish slowly move just below the surface. Whether you like it or not, you will likely have formed some images in response to the previous four sentences (which, unfortunately, are fictional). If you think of the most powerfully memorable events of your life, you will call them to mind very largely in emotionally charged images.

Such images are immensely effective in engaging our imaginations, communicating important information, and helping us retain events, facts, and ideas in memory. Yet, in teacher education programs we spend much time on matters of content and concepts but hardly any time on showing beginning teachers how to search for emotionally charged images in curriculum topics.

All topics in the curriculum have images embedded in them—mathematics no less than history, science no less than the arts. Often those images involve people who had some role in discovering or inventing the knowledge that is being taught. It is much more engaging to learn how Eratosthenes measured the circumference of the earth by using the theorem that alternate interior angles are congruent and measuring the shadow of a stick in a courtyard in Alexandria 2,000 years ago, than simply to learn the theorem and then use it in lots of calculations. And knowing what Pythagoras was up to poking dots in the sand can vividly, meaningfully, and memorably bring to life what his theorem is about. The task for the teacher who hopes to engage reluctant learners (and any kind of learner) is to locate those images and use them to bring the content vividly to life in the students' minds.

## Using Cognitive Tools

Let's look at two examples showing how we can use these three cognitive tools to make common curriculum topics more engaging to reluctant learners' imaginations.

### Images of Whales

Consider the typical grade 2 or 3 topic of whales, usually taught in a science unit on mammals. Instead of beginning to plan this unit with objectives, we will begin by asking, How can we bring to the mind the vastness and power of these magnificent animals? What's the story about whales? And on what binary opposites can we build our story? The teacher does not need to be explicit, telling the students that they'll be using a story form and binary opposites. These are rather the shaping devices the teacher can use to animate the content.

For example, the teacher might begin by telling students that the heart of a blue whale is the size of a small car. This mighty heart pumps ponds-full of blood through arteries that are big enough for the students to comfortably crawl through. The tongue of a blue whale is the size of an elephant. The teacher then describes how whales might at that moment be moving in deep oceans:

It is night, in a storm, in the middle of the ocean. These mighty beasts are traveling about 15 miles an hour toward a feeding ground off Australia. They rise to the surface, hear the roaring winds and pounding seas, see the lightning flash; then they dive in a pod that communicates through constant clicking that carries great distances, and down they go to calmer waters for 20 minutes, moving steadily onward, after which they emerge into the dark roaring storm to breathe again.

The teacher plays a recording of the beating heart of a blue whale, pumping 10 times a minute, the sound filling the classroom; he or she teaches the students to find their own pulse and feel it as they listen to

the slow, liquid thump of the vast muscular contraction pushing blood into the whale's huge arteries.

Our binary opposites for the unit on whales might be majesty and vulnerability. The teacher describes for students how, despite their majestic size and power, whales remain vulnerable, especially to human activities. Human hunters, from early times, worked out ways to attack and kill whales. As human technology increased in power, the great beasts became more helpless against whalers. Our activities on land are polluting the waters in which they live, and now our influence on global warming is further degrading their habitat.

The “story about whales” that the lesson tells continually ties together the majestic power and wonder of these great beasts with their vulnerability. All the factual material the teacher wants to convey is organized and “plotted” onto the story line—the narrative—structured by these oppositions. And the students’ imaginations are continually drawn to the vivid and powerful images the lesson presents.

Incidentally, there is no “right” answer in choosing binary opposites; we simply look for the set that seems best able to bring out the details in a clear, dramatic way. In teaching about whales, for example, we could choose familiar/mysterious. In that case, we would focus first on the many features of whales’ lives that are familiar to us. Their breathing and eating, their search for food, and their migrations are common to many mammals. Then we would search for what is mysterious about each of these aspects of their lives. Their breathing goes on in vast gulps of air that sustain them under the water for 20 minutes at a time. They are the largest mammal and yet eat tiny krill: How can such microscopic creatures sustain the vast bulk of the whale? We could discuss the mystery of whale “beaching,” in which sometimes dozens of the huge animals run aground and die. Whatever story line we choose, we need not make the binary opposites explicit, although it might often be helpful to draw students’ attention to the opposites to help them clarify how we are structuring the content.

## Stories of Air

Most curriculums in most countries require that 7- or 8-year-olds study the properties of air. What's the story on air? The main story is a kind of mystery: We usually assume that the air is empty, but it is full of varied wonders that we can't see or touch.

We might begin the unit with a radio, turning it on in one part of the classroom, then changing channels while walking around, hearing music and voices and all kinds of sounds. What would the room look like if our eyes worked like radios do? (Many thanks to the hunter and his invention of the subjunctive!) Some student may volunteer what he knows about radio waves. How many waves are there in the classroom?

Then we might block the windows, letting a single beam of sunlight shine through, highlighting the dust in the room. What is dust made of? Sixty percent of dust in the average classroom is made of decayed human skin. Yuck! Who did I just breathe in? If we really want to engage the yuck factor, we can discuss fly feces. And pollens, and viruses, and muons—particles from the sun—and on and on. Each image is aimed at creating an emotional response—even if the emotion is only disgust. Disgust is more engaging than no emotion at all.

We might also ask students to play with their imaginations while considering the properties of the air—for example, by imagining various entities as characters (that speedy Muon family!) or building hugely enlarged models of pollen, dust, and radio waves and hanging them from the ceiling.

Gradually, we build the students' sense that the air is full of wonders—many gases in odd proportions, radio waves, particles from the sun, dust, pollen, and so on. The story we are telling is that the air, which students assumed was empty and boring, is in fact more complex, full, and rich than almost anything we can see. It is much more interesting than the chairs and tables in an average room. The binary

opposites that give structure to the unit are the sense of empty and boring contrasted with full and fascinatingly complex.

## Toward a More Human Curriculum

To engage students in learning, we must begin by bringing out the imaginative and emotional features of the content, whether in mathematics, science, or any other curriculum area. Everything in the curriculum is human knowledge—a product of human hopes, fears, and passions. If we want to make that knowledge engaging to students, we have to show it in the context of the hopes, fears, and passions from which it has grown and in which it finds a living meaning. By shaping curriculum content around the cognitive tools that students have available, we can make it more imaginatively engaging and more human. Then we will see no more “reluctant” learners.

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# Learning in Depth

Kieran Egan

*Imagine if schools were repositories of expertise—  
and the students were the experts.*

At the end of the first week of 1st grade, at a ceremony attended by family members, Sara and her classmates each receive a topic that they will study throughout their schooling. There is much excitement as the students prepare to discover what they will become experts in. Sara walks on the stage in her turn, and the teacher hands her a folder. Inside is a small, colorful tile on which her topic is written, along with a picture of the topic and her name. Sara announces to the audience that she is to learn about apples for the next 12 years. The tile is added to a wall of such tiles in the school.

The teacher has received materials related to each of the topics her students will study, along with suggestions for getting the process of engagement and discovery going. In her first meeting with Sara a week later, she asks what Sara's caregivers and older friends have suggested she might do to learn about apples. Then the teacher suggests that Sara check out the varieties of apples in her local supermarket and, if possible, buy one apple from each variety.

Sara begins to make a list of the apple varieties she finds. With her teacher's help, she develops a table in which she gives each variety one to five points for taste. She finds additional varieties at a farmers market, adds their names to her table, and also scores them by taste. She draws the apples, trying to show the differences among the varieties. She

learns by the end of her first year that there are about 7,500 varieties of apples in the world and that nearly all those varieties are descended from a sweet apple that grew wild in Kazakhstan thousands of years ago and that still grows there. She looks the country up on a map.

Her teacher suggests that she might like to learn stories or poems about apples, so Sara learns about William Tell, Johnny Appleseed, Isaac Newton, and many others. Then her teacher guides her to a series of sayings about apples whose meanings Sara is to explore: “the apple of my eye,” “one rotten apple spoils the whole barrel,” “an apple a day keeps the doctor away.” She learns to write in part so that she can make a list of these. She decorates her page of sayings with a barrel of brightly colored apples on a pirate ship because she has discovered that apples protected sailors, as they do the rest of us, from scurvy.

Year after year, Sara’s portfolio on apples grows, in directions driven partly by her own interests and partly by the guidance of her teachers, family, and older students who are studying the same topic. If you were to browse through her portfolio as she enters secondary school, you might see sections on the fact that apple trees are part of the rose family and that the biggest apple documented was around four pounds. One small file explains why apples float. Another explains that the current Lady apple was first cultivated by an Etruscan woman named Api and that in France, it is still called *pomme d’Api*—a good way for someone to be remembered, Sara notes. The Greeks and Romans prized apples and knew about 20 varieties. Sara has created a complex family tree showing the development from those early apples to our current abundance of varieties.

By the end of her schooling, Sara is an expert on the medicinal properties of apples and the manner in which the human body metabolizes their various healthful components, as that has become a special interest of hers. She also knows many poems about apples, a favorite being W. B. Yeats’s “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” with its magical images of a “glimmering girl/With apple blossom in her hair” and of Aengus and the glimmering girl plucking “The silver apples of the moon,

the golden apples of the sun.” Sara also knows much about the Trojan War, which began with Eris, Goddess of Discord and Strife, throwing a golden apple into the middle of a wedding party and Paris of Troy awarding the apple to Aphrodite in order to win Helen.

Sara has become active in campaigns to preserve rare apple varieties. Current monoculture farming, which reduces these species’ ability to survive diseases, puts these less popular varieties of apples at risk of extinction. Sara is also knowledgeable about the production of apples in different countries. She has learned a good deal of mathematics from calculating the proportions of apples produced in both the United States and China and the prices at which they were sold on different world markets. She knows the locations of the major orchards of the world as well as their owners, costs of production, profits, and transportation problems.

Like all her classmates, Sara is massively expert about something. It has come at little cost in teacher time and has beneficially influenced everything else she has done in school.

## A World of Experts

Imagine a future in which it would be routine for schools to randomly assign 1st graders one topic to study through grade 12, along with the regular curriculum. Students would learn about birds, apples, the circus, railways, the solar system, and so on. They would meet regularly with their teachers, who would give guidance, suggestions, and help as students build personal portfolios, which are ungraded, about their topics. Each student, by the end of his or her schooling, would know as much about that topic as almost anyone on earth.

Imagine what school would be like if we implemented such a project on a large scale. Instead of simply introducing students at a superficial level to the vast encyclopedia of human knowledge that constitutes the current curriculum—of which, depressingly, students retain so little when they leave grade 12—the school would become

a repository of expertise. It would be a place in which each student would amass knowledge about something, classify it, reorganize it, and develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of it.

Each student would develop a single portfolio through his or her entire school career, meeting once or twice a month with a supervising teacher for perhaps 15 minutes at a time. Sometimes groups of students would meet with a teacher to report on their progress; both teacher and students could comment on further directions the portfolios might take. Each year, students would make a presentation to their class, to which parents would be invited, to show what they had learned about their topic during the past year. Students would build confidence as learners, develop ownership of their learning, and gradually and paradoxically, recognize the dynamic and ever-changing nature of knowledge.

## Why Learning in Depth Is Important

There are six good reasons for implementing such an innovative curriculum.

**1. *It makes students specialists.*** Surveys have consistently reported that a majority of students know little of the curriculums they have studied during their 12 years of schooling (see Barrows, 1981; Bauerlein, 2008; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Students who are successful in school remain disturbingly ignorant even of concepts and content they do well on in tests. For example, physics students at Harvard were unable to correctly answer basic questions about principles they had “learned” when asked about those principles in a slightly different context (Gardner, 1991). Gardner concluded that 12 years of study had barely disturbed students’ misconceptions in physics and that this situation appears to be prevalent in other disciplines as well.

One problem is that throughout their schooling, students remain “outside” the knowledge they study. Learning in depth would permit

students to get “inside” that topic area. At present, this virtually never happens in school. At best, students specialize in some curriculum area and learn it a bit less superficially.

Students occasionally have the opportunity to study some topic in depth for a semester, or even a year. Learners who have had such opportunities remember those extended studies as highlights of their education experience, recalling details with pleasure far into adulthood. As one teacher remarked to me recently, “In 8th grade, I did a yearlong study on pyramids. I ate, drank, and slept with pyramids on my mind! It was the happiest memory of my schooling.”

Learning in depth is not simply a matter of accumulating facts about leaves or apples for 12 years. Knowledge makes its own demands on the mind. Once the student learns a significant amount of knowledge, he or she must classify it and, in time, develop new conceptual structures to organize and enrich its meaning. During a typical 12 years of schooling, students’ understanding of their topics will go through distinctive changes in the kinds of understanding brought to bear on the elaborating portfolio. Their focus of interest will likely shift from collecting and classifying facts to a more theoretical appreciation of their topic and even to social action related to it.

## ***2. It teaches students the difference between opinion and fact.***

I remember taking a taxi in New York City some years ago and the driver solemnly telling me something I’ve since forgotten. I forgot because I was so taken by his concluding assertion: “That’s my opinion—and it’s very true.”

At present, the superficiality of most school learning leaves many students vulnerable to deceptive claims. Students don’t really understand what it means to secure a claim to knowledge. They seldom learn how knowledge differs from belief and opinion, thereby making them, potentially, more gullible. Some are prone to take on board unsound beliefs whereas others become assertively confident in their own opinions about things in which they lack secure knowledge. As

G. K. Chesterton once remarked, it's not that people who lack deep knowledge come to believe nothing, but rather that they will believe anything.

Consider the thousands of people who eagerly pass on various urban legends, from the recent tales of camel spiders in Iraq, which supposedly attack and eat camels, to the notion that sleeping in a room with a revolving fan can cause death by asphyxiation or hypothermia. Learning in depth provides an inoculation against this confusion between knowledge and opinion by making it clearer to students over the years of building their portfolios that securing knowledge claims is a complex endeavor.

**3. *It hones skills that transfer to learning in other content areas.*** Students can't study something in detail for 5 or 10 years without that experience profoundly shaping their understanding of everything else they learn. If they have learned that it is possible to classify apples in a number of ways—by size, color, nutritional value, shelf life, times of ripening, and so on—they will carry this understanding into the organization of other content areas as well; if they have grasped the importance of preserving apple varieties to protect the species against devastating disease, they will be able to use this cognitive skill in looking at how humans manage other food sources. Students who go through this kind of program will likely demonstrate increasing energy and interest in learning across the board.

**4. *It encourages learning for its own sake.*** The superficiality of so much learning in schools and the insistent drive to “cover the curriculum” deprive many students of the intense delight human beings experience as they acquire massive, detailed knowledge and understanding. This kind of knowledge stands apart from the increasingly common utilitarian purposes for learning—we learn what we need to know for the demands of everyday life—and from how we so often spend the rest of our time—in entertainment.

Students who have had the opportunity to learn something in much greater depth than usual in school usually take great pleasure in their special knowledge. Think of those collections that students become so enthralled in—of dolls, hockey cards, action figures, and so on. They think of their topic as a hobby—it's theirs, and they can take it in whatever direction they wish. They are working for themselves and not for a grade. Chances are, they'll become lifelong learners.

**5. *It creates a community of learners.*** Learning in depth can help schools develop new kinds of communities. If we define specific and recurring topics for students to study, a 5th grader and a 10th grader, say, would have the same topic as each 1st grader. Students with the same topic could work together now and then, with older students helping younger ones and each sharing their findings.

Students of different ages could collaborate on their annual presentations. This would work as well for students with the same topic as for those with different topics. Imagine the following scenario: Sara meets Jon at a friend's party. They happen to discuss their topics—she has apples and he has birds—and they decide to do a joint presentation at the end of the year that will show the many ways in which apples and birds interact. They will thread through their presentation the Italian folktale “The Dancing Water, the Singing Apple, and the Talking Bird.”

Sara meets Jon's older cousin, who, it turns out, also has apples as a topic. In a subsequent meeting, she shares with him a section of her portfolio on the historical development of apple species. He shows her, on his laptop, a world map he has drawn that indicates where different varieties of apples grow and in what quantities. They discuss merging the information and producing a similar map for every century from ancient Greek times to the present.

**6. *It stimulates the imagination.*** Being able to find particular knowledge in the mountains of information in libraries or on the Internet is educationally valuable, of course. However, the downside of the

emphasis on such procedural skills is a disastrous underestimation of the importance of actually *knowing* things and having access to knowledge in the memory—because the imagination works only with what we know (Egan, 1997, 2005).

The imagination is not some idle spinning of airy nothings, as some have represented it, but one of the great workhorses of learning. The more we know about something, the more imaginative we can be about it—and the more imaginatively we can problem solve. At the end of her schooling, Sara will have immensely stimulating material that can engage and enrich her imagination when she thinks about her topic.

## Ah, But It Will Never Work

No doubt a number of objections to such a project might already have occurred to you. Some may say that students will get bored studying the same topic for 12 years. But boredom is a product of ignorance; the more we know about something, the more interesting it becomes.

Some may suggest that the random assignment of topics is absurd and that student choice must be part of such a scheme. Of course, some flexibility would be important here, but children's interests change. Which of the topics you're most interested in today are the same ones you were interested in when you were 7? So picking a topic on your own at that age is no guarantee that you'll be interested in that topic years later.

Others might suppose that it would be too complicated to organize, but if we are more committed to an *education* system than to a *school* system, then we can make it work. In addition, teachers, librarians, volunteer parents, and older students studying the same topic in depth can help mitigate some of the costs in time.

Some may think that many of these topics are developmentally inappropriate for very young children. I have always liked what

psychologist Jerome Seymour Bruner had to say about that. He wrote, “Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to a child at any stage of development” (1966, p. 33).

Finally, some may worry that *depth knowledge* won’t transfer to *breadth knowledge*. I suspect it will transfer unstoppably.

Curiously, when I talk with groups of administrators about learning in depth, the most common response I get is that it would be a great addition to what schools offer—but that teachers will never go for it. When I speak with teachers, the most common response I get is that it would be a great addition to what schools offer, that they would *love* to be involved in nongraded explorations of topics with individual students—“This is exactly what I got into teaching for!” one teacher said recently—but that administrators will never go for it.

## A Notion That’s Taking Off

A dozen or so schools in the Vancouver, British Columbia, area have expressed interest in learning in depth. Several are preparing their staffs for a pilot project slated to begin in 2009. The principal of an Australian school who heard about learning in depth is now determined to have his school be the first in Australia to implement the program. A school district in Oregon has requested detailed information. A Japanese school has already begun the program, with a cultural twist: Students make fortune cookies, slip a piece of paper with a topic inside, then randomly choose a cookie—and their topic.

Pilot projects initially cost little to put in place. Teachers would need to decide on a set of suitable topics so that each student would have a different topic to work with. They would also need to do some preliminary research to understand what kinds of information and experiences students should be exposed to as they explore their topics.

## Schooling—Transformed

Learning in depth can transform schooling. As students gradually build their portfolios, they exercise increasing ownership of their learning. They become explorers in a long and fascinating adventure in which they invite the rest of us—teachers, peers, and parents alike—to explore along with them.

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*Author's note:* For additional information about learning in depth, visit [www.ierg.net/LiD](http://www.ierg.net/LiD).

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# Clash! The World of Debate

Amy M. Azzam

*Combine one part student, one part game, and one part controversy.  
What do you get? Student debate.*

Two hundred high school students are gathered in the cafeteria at Hyde Leadership Public Charter School in Washington, D.C. The noise level is high, just what you'd expect in a roomful of so many teenagers. But it's not a weekday, it's not lunch, and they don't have to be here. They've *chosen* to be here on this Saturday morning at the early hour of 8:30 a.m. I see jackets and ties, dresses and heels. In the din I can make out snatches of conversation: What are you running? What's the evidence? At the table across from me, two girls in suits are huddled over papers, discussing impacts.

These students are debaters in the District of Columbia Urban Debate League, and they've come from 10 public, private, and charter schools in the area to do what kids love to do—argue. In a few minutes, they'll know which team they've been paired with, and they'll head for the assigned room and battle it out before a judge. Most of the students are doing *public debate*; they have another minute to finish jotting down notes about their topic on a yellow sheet of paper, the only bit of written information they'll be allowed to bring into the room. A smaller portion of the students, those lugging bins and expanding files full of evidence, are doing *policy debate*. The public debaters have 30 minutes of talk ahead of them. It will take the policy debaters about 90 minutes to finish their round. Both groups are hoping to launch a volley of arguments

that collide head-on with those of the opposing team, what people in the field call *clash*. Clash in debate is good. Avoidance—arguments whizzing by but never intersecting—is bad.

The adrenaline is pumping; the kids are ready to go. And clash is what they're looking for.

## Then and Now

Debating has been around for a long time, with some pretty spectacular results. Look at Socrates, who was put to death in 399 BCE for corrupting the youth of Athens; his accusers couldn't forgive him for incessantly questioning their beliefs and making "the worse appear the better cause." Abraham Lincoln went head to head with Stephen Douglas in the Illinois senatorial race of 1858; those debates catapulted Lincoln into the presidency. More recently, debating has morphed into a sport for the elite, often associated with affluent schools and drawing from a pool of primarily white males who go off to prestigious colleges and careers.

The urban debate movement, with its 19 or so leagues across the United States, is working to change those demographics and bring the benefits of debate to a wider audience. Debate teaches critical thinking and literacy. It helps develop students' organizational and research skills. It promotes self-confidence. Most of all, it empowers students, especially marginalized students, by giving them a voice; it can transform them into advocates for themselves and their communities (Warner & Brusckhe, 2001). Given these benefits, debate has a better chance than many other school activities of turning adolescents into good thinkers, good researchers, good speakers, and good citizens.

## Public Debate: The Place to Start

Run any of these topics by a group of high school students and, chances are, many will have an opinion:

- Beauty pageants do more harm than good.
- Cigarettes should be illegal.
- Public schools should adopt year-round schedules.
- The proposed fence along the U.S./Mexico border is justified.
- Community service should be mandatory in high school.
- School attendance should be voluntary.
- The United States should sign the Kyoto Protocol.
- Warrantless wiretaps make the United States safer.

This is how public debate begins: with a proposition. At each debate, teams of three students argue four topics that they've researched in advance: one school based, one regional, one national, and one international. The proposition team upholds the proposition by listing arguments in its favor. Team members try to prove that the motion is more likely to be true than false. For example, students debating whether public schools should adopt year-round schedules might point out that students would no longer experience the huge loss of knowledge that occurs over an extended summer break. The members of the opposition team must show why the case is wrong and what harm would result if it were implemented. They might mention that the proposal would be detrimental to teachers, many of whom take summer jobs to supplement their incomes. The catch? Students don't know in advance which side they'll be assigned to debate, so they must be prepared to argue both sides.

Students can get pretty riled up about the motions, which is a good thing in a society in which apathy among adolescents is on

the rise. Consider the following resolution that students at Hyde will debate: Kids under 18 should be prevented from logging onto online social networks like Facebook. I wander into one of the classrooms as the first speaker for the proposition team, standing solo in the middle of the room, shoots out her arguments to the judge. “It’s dangerous for minors, who give out information unawares. . . . Sexual predators lurk online. . . . As kids compete for larger numbers of posted ‘friends,’ they foolishly accept as friends people they don’t know.” Crack!—The two seated team members rap sharply on their desks to signal their agreement on this point.

It makes a lot of sense to me—until the speaker for the opposition rises and fires back. “There’s a high advantage to social networking online and a relatively low risk of meeting a predator.” The speaker’s teammates punctuate the point with an enthusiastic *Hear! Hear!* “Not everyone can access your information; it’s up to you to accept people as ‘friends’ . . . And if social networks are so bad, then why hasn’t crime gone up?” Crack!—In approval of the point, a second set of knuckles hits the wood.

What adolescent *wouldn’t* love this?

Debate is a game, and students play to win. Of course, while they’re “playing,” they’re furiously taking notes because they can’t refute their opponent’s arguments if they don’t remember what those arguments are. Likewise, they would have difficulty expanding on and amplifying their teammates’ arguments, one of the requirements of the format, if they don’t write them down. As they take notes, the students are also listening, summarizing, weighing arguments, looking for weaknesses in the arguments of the opposing team, and preparing to talk. In this sense, debate takes multitasking—a process that kids have wonderfully mastered—to a whole new level. When the round is over, the judge gives immediate and detailed feedback, which will provide students with an edge the next time around.

## Getting Started with Debate

Teachers who want students to practice debating skills don't need to wait to form a debate team or attend tournaments. They can immediately integrate elements of debating into their classes. Students can start off by practicing two fundamental debating skills:

**Making an argument.** There are three parts to a complete argument, conveniently abbreviated ARE. An argument begins with an *assertion*, a statement that describes the main point the speaker is trying to make, such as, "Barbarian invasions caused the fall of the Roman Empire." Students then follow up with *reasoning*. This is the "because" part of the argument, where the debater supports the assertion he or she has made: "Barbarian invasions caused the fall of the Roman Empire—because the barbarians were able to take out a government that could no longer defend itself." Finally, *evidence* provides the proof for the speaker's reasoning; this is the "for example" part of an argument: "For example, the Vandals were able to take over Roman territories in Africa in only a few years." This technique is essential for debates, in which students must make a variety of arguments supporting their side of a topic. In classroom discussions, students can use assertions, reasoning, and evidence to advance their ideas and hone their ability to make complete arguments.

**Refuting an argument.** Debate isn't just about making points for your side. Students must also answer points that others have made. One simple procedure that students can use to respectfully answer others in an organized way is four-step refutation.

- Step 1 ("They say . . ."): The student refers to the argument he or she is about to answer—an essential element in complex discussions. A student might begin, "They say that invading barbarians caused the fall of the Roman Empire."
- Step 2 ("But . . ."): The student makes his or her counterpoint, similar to a counter-assertion: "But actually it was internal corruption that caused that fall."
- Step 3 ("Because . . ."): The student supports that point: "Because emperors had raised taxes to such high levels and the economy was collapsing, many people moved outside the empire. Those who remained actually welcomed the invaders."
- Step 4 ("Therefore . . ."): The student compares, contrasts, or synthesizes the competing ideas: "Therefore, it's more likely that corruption caused the fall of the Roman Empire than that barbarian invasions did."

To see both middle school and high school students debating a variety of topics—such as why television is a bad influence and why the United States should lower the voting age—visit the video resources page at [www.middleschooldebate.com](http://www.middleschooldebate.com). Curricular materials are also available on the Web site for teachers to use in either classroom or competitive debate.

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## Policy Debate: The Next Step Up

Policy debate can be a thing of beauty. For those watching it for the first time, however, it's perplexing—until you get your bearings. Speakers speak as fast as they can because the team that makes the greater number of arguments increases its chances of winning. Eloquence is not rewarded—evidence is. And speakers tend to read a lot of it. As one judge commented, “We don't care how pretty you sound.”

Yet for those who engage in policy debate, who make that commitment in time and effort, it can change their lives. One volunteer in the Urban Debate program, himself a policy debater in high school and now director with a polling firm in Washington, D.C., pointed out the powerful effect that policy debate can have on high school students:

Suddenly, you're taken seriously. In debate, people treat you as an adult. They refer to you with respect, as Mr. or Ms. What's more, they listen to you. You get to talk about interesting things that people actually talk about in the news or at the dinner table. Most important, debate is fun. It's the most strategic game you can play.

Every year, the National Forensic League ([www.nflonline.org](http://www.nflonline.org)) selects a policy debate topic that all policy debaters across the United States will tackle. In previous years, teams have debated whether the U.S. government should increase its support of U.N. peacekeeping operations, protection of marine natural resources, or public mental health services. For the 2007–08 season, debaters will tackle the following: *Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially increase its public health assistance to sub-Saharan Africa.*

At Hyde Leadership, in the first round, 11th graders Adam and Allan are arguing the case in support of this resolution. In the next round, they'll argue against it. These students have spent loads of time researching the topic, breaking it down into such major issues as the lack of clean drinking water, the prevalence of AIDS, the effect of water-borne

diseases, and the danger of escalation inherent in local conflicts. They've considered the major arguments for and against different policy proposals related to this issue. Today, they've narrowed the topic down, as the team supporting the resolution must do, to something more specific: *Resolved: The United States should spend \$10 billion to provide clean drinking water to sub-Saharan Africa.*

Adam cites a litany of problems that those dollars could cure as well as the horrors that an adequate source of drinking water might prevent—conflicts like Darfur, which, he explains with complete assurance, began as a water war. He extends the impact of the case: Local conflicts can easily escalate into national and international conflicts. In this era of weapons of mass destruction, should we take this risk? He cites pertinent research, then closes his argument: “Not only do you die from not getting water, but you also die trying to get it.”

The opposition launches its arsenal of arguments, the first being that the United States couldn't possibly pay out such a sum, given the cost of its involvement in Iraq and the collapsing U.S. dollar. The team agrees to the importance of providing clean drinking water, but suggests a counterplan: A country like Japan, which has had far greater success getting water aid to Africa, would be a better provider than the United States. The speaker pulls out evidence to this effect and reads it to the judge. During the cross-examination, Allan stands up to question the evidence, which he asserts doesn't support the opposition's claim. He makes the team reread it aloud, to its great disadvantage. The opposition persists, and among its arguments, a zinger: The United States can't even provide health insurance to the low-income children here, so why would we think of giving aid to an impoverished somewhere else?

In a different classroom, Riah and Faith take the entire argument somewhere else. They veer off topic to debate—debate! Among their claims: That the arguments in policy debate often have little to do with what actually happens in the real world. That some debaters “read to prove you wrong and not to learn about the topic.” That you're not allowed to agree with the opposition's point—that would be conceding.

Ironically, even as they argue against what they perceive to be the format's limitations, they do so with skills that policy debate has honed. They look the judge squarely in the eye. They present their arguments with grace and authority. They discuss the evidence. They question the status quo. They speak confidently for change.

Ninety minutes later—after four 8-minute speeches, four 3-minute cross-examinations, four 5-minute rebuttals, and some built-in preparation time to construct arguments on the spot and ferret out the opposition's weaknesses and fling them before the judge—the round is over. The judges make their picks. Some students win; others lose.

But they all win, of course. These high school students know the background on Darfur. They know the reasons for and against signing the Kyoto Protocol. They know why people do or don't support the proposed fence between the United States and Mexico. Week after week, their research and discussions take them out of their neighborhoods and into the world. They talk about "bilateral relations," "destabilizing forces," "the collapsing U.S. dollar," and "privatization"—and they know what those terms mean. Because they must be prepared to argue both sides of an issue and cite the supporting evidence, they've learned that problems are never simple. And they've learned one of the hardest things of all: Faced with an opposing point of view, they listen.

## Rigorous Thinking for All

More than 150 years ago, John Stuart Mill, in his treatise *On Liberty*, discussed the importance of an open exchange of ideas in a free society. He wrote

However true [an opinion] may be, if it is not fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed, it will be held as a dead dogma, not living truth.

Debate can help bring that living truth back into the classroom, along with the exhilaration students experience when, in a social and

strategic context (Fine, 2001), they make those truths their own. Debate can help all students—whether they come from high-income or low-income schools, from suburbia or the inner city—become competent, fearless thinkers.

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*Author's note:* To obtain additional information about urban debate, contact Colin Touhey, executive director of the District of Columbia Urban Debate League (<http://dcdebate.org>). The league is housed at the University of the District of Columbia. Several national organizations support urban debate:

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# Part 4

Instilling the Desire  
to Achieve



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# Students at Bat

Thomas R. Guskey and Eric M. Anderman

*Students can learn to act responsibly by practicing meaningful decision making in school.*

Neighborhood baseball games were the highlight of summer days while we were growing up. Each game began with a bicycle trip around the neighborhood to round up equipment and every available player, boys and girls alike. Sharing was essential because not everyone had a ball, bat, or glove.

Games started with the selection of team captains who then picked their teammates. The traditional bat toss between captains and a hand-over-hand climb to the bat's end determined who chose first. Teams were different for every game. We chose our positions, decided the batting order, and established rules. Although we all knew the general rules of the game, we had to decide on a multitude of local rules: Where were the bases? What was a home run? How much of a lead from the base was permitted? Would the younger kids be allowed four strikes instead of three? Issues of fairness governed all these decisions.

When disagreements arose, we resolved them through compromise and consensus. An unresolved dispute might end the game, and nobody wanted that. We all cheered good plays; we laughed at mistakes and then quickly forgot them. An injury brought everyone on both teams together to help. Older kids taught younger ones about batting, fielding, and base running. Most of what we learned about baseball, we learned in those neighborhood games.

Today, few boys or girls take part in neighborhood baseball games. Their experiences with baseball come primarily through leagues that adults have organized. The adults pick the teams and determine the schedules. Adults assign players to positions and arrange the batting order. Adults establish the rules and do all the teaching. When disagreements arise, adults do the arguing. Players watch, wait, and abide by whatever decision the adults make. The players' only responsibility is to show up and play the game. Even kids' attendance is determined largely by the adults who drop them off and then pick them up afterward.

Sadly, for increasing numbers of children, their baseball experience is more restrictive still. They play baseball on a computer that sets all the rules and determines their skill level on the basis of how carefully they time their key press on a remote control.

## Doing What They're Told

In school, children's experiences with responsibility are similarly restricted. Pressured to improve scores on high-stakes assessments in language arts and math, many teachers drastically limit the choices that students are allowed to make. Using the guidelines provided by the state or district, teachers determine what students will learn, when they will learn it, and how they will demonstrate their learning. In most classrooms, teachers choose where students will sit, with whom they will work, and how they will spend their time. Teachers even decide when students can and cannot talk, when they can eat, and when they can go to the restroom. As students advance in grades, these decisions become more formalized and restrictive through course requirements and structured school schedules.

Both in school and in the neighborhood, children today have few opportunities to learn about sharing, establishing rules, fairness, and responsibility. They seldom experience the challenge of resolving disputes through compromise and consensus. They rarely actively participate in decisions about learning goals, classroom procedures,

or rules of conduct. Yet despite this lack of experience or guidance in responsible action, adults often become incensed when students show little personal responsibility for their actions and the possible consequences.

Research and common sense suggest that students should experience increased opportunities to demonstrate responsibility as they progress into higher grades in school. Educational psychologists have long acknowledged that as children develop into adolescents and young adults, their abilities to critically evaluate choices and make responsible decisions greatly improve (Grisso et al., 2003). Researchers also have demonstrated that adolescents clearly *want* to be responsible and *want* to make meaningful decisions (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987).

Ironically, studies of classroom procedures reveal not only that students have few opportunities to be responsible and make meaningful choices in school but also that those opportunities actually *decline* as students progress into higher grades. For example, one study showed that middle school students thought they should have more opportunities to make decisions in math class than they had in elementary school (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987). However, their middle school teachers believed that students should have *fewer* opportunities for decision making in class than their elementary school teachers thought they should have the previous year.

## A Combined Effort

Many educators believe that it's the parents' job, and not theirs, to instill a sense of responsibility in children. Parents clearly provide an important starting point; their support for developing autonomy in children is crucial (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & LaGuardia, 2006), particularly for boys (National Institute of Child Health and Development, 2008). Teachers can purposefully build on this early and ongoing work by offering parents specific suggestions for building students' autonomy and sense of responsibility. They might recommend that students help plan family

meals and food purchases, make decisions about family outings, or engage in community service.

Optimal results occur, however, when responsibility is encouraged in both settings. In school, developing a sense of responsibility in students depends in large part on the opportunities that educators provide for meaningful decision making throughout the day. If teachers make nearly all the decisions for students and give them little say, then students are unlikely to develop much of a sense of responsibility. Believing their thoughts, opinions, or preferences do not matter, the students also are unlikely to take much ownership of their learning. Without ownership and personal responsibility, students have little motivation to succeed. When students feel empowered to be responsible in school, however, they tend to prefer more challenging academic tasks, set higher academic goals, and persist when confronted with difficult tasks (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998).

## Teaching Responsibility

Educators can implement a variety of instruction and management practices at the school and classroom levels that encourage students to develop a sense of responsibility (see Anderman & Anderman, in press; Guskey & Bailey, 2001). A key element in all of these practices, however, is a positive orientation. Rather than punishing students for irresponsible actions, these practices teach students to make responsible decisions and follow through with responsible actions. They also involve having students take ownership of the consequences that stem from their actions, both good and bad.

## Let Students Decide How to Use Their Time

Teachers can set aside a block of time once a week and outline three tasks that students should accomplish during that time, clearly describing the criteria for success. In the younger grades, after teaching students how to effectively manage their time, teachers might set aside one hour. In the upper grades, they might set aside as much as two hours. After the teacher advises the students to use their time constructively and responsibly, students decide how to allocate their time to accomplish the tasks.

For example, in an elementary classroom, the teacher might suggest the following three tasks for students to complete related to a story they just read: (1) write a paragraph summarizing the story, (2) draw a picture of your favorite scene, and (3) write an alternate ending. The teacher could give the students a 90-minute block to complete the three tasks. At the end of that time, the teacher and the students would examine how much the students accomplished. The teacher would ask those students who did not complete all three tasks to suggest ways they might have used their time more efficiently.

## Let Students Choose Classroom Rules

Instead of simply providing students with a list of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors at the beginning of the year, teachers can engage students in developing their own rules for the classroom. Students can divide into four or five teams, with each team assigned a particular rule category. For example, one team may decide the rules for using the classroom computers, whereas another team may work on rules for cleaning up the classroom after science experiments or art projects. Teams then present their rules to the entire class, along with their rationale for choosing them, as well as a description of consequences for not following the rules.

Initially, teachers will need to provide examples of rules—some good and some bad—along with the rationale behind them and possible consequences for not complying. Students can then discuss their interpretations regarding the fairness of each rule and offer alternatives if needed. When disagreements arise, teachers will need to guide the students through a consensus-building process, showing how people share divergent perspectives and develop meaningful compromise. Once students decide on the rules, they are all held accountable for following them, for taking responsibility for their own behavior, and for knowing the consequences of misbehavior.

### Let Students Choose Work Locations

After assigning a particular task, teachers can let students choose where they will complete their class work. Students develop a sense of responsibility when they decide whether to work at their desks, at the reading center, or at some other work location in the classroom. Elementary teachers may need to ask students to choose from a list of possible options. Teachers may need to remind students in upper grades that some areas in the classroom—such as right next to the door or close to their friends—might be distracting and less advisable choices. In some schools, teachers can give students the option of working in the library, computer laboratory, or study center. Teachers typically set explicit time limits for completion of the work and outline specific criteria for success.

### Let Students Choose Tasks

Teachers also can encourage responsible decision making by allowing students to choose from a variety of academic tasks. Not all students in the class have to be working on exactly the same assignment at the same time. Anderman and Anderman (in press) distinguish between *within-task choices* and *between-task choices*. In one classroom, for example, all students might be working on a unit on the

planet Mars. Even though they are assigned a given task—studying Mars—students can choose how they want to explore it—a *within-task* choice. Some students might go to the library to find books or other reference sources about Mars. Others might use the Internet to gather information about the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) Mars Exploration Program. Still others might use a telescope to find Mars in the night sky and then draw or photograph the planet.

In contrast, in a language arts classroom, the teacher might let each student select the novel of his or her choice to read as well as the method to report on it—a *between-task* choice. Some students might choose to write a traditional book report, whereas others might develop a Web page, prepare an oral presentation with slides, or compose a song about the book.

## Let Students Develop Rubrics

When included as part of the instructional process, carefully structured rubrics dramatically improve the quality of students' work, especially in writing (Andrade, Du, & Wang, 2008). After students become accustomed to using rubrics, teachers can increase student responsibility for learning by engaging students in developing their own rubrics.

For example, the teacher could ask students to read two paragraphs describing a similar situation and determine which paragraph they liked better. After some group discussion, students would individually construct a list of five things each one thought made one paragraph better than the other. Next, they could compare their individual lists and develop a shared list of characteristics of high-quality writing. Finally, they would write a paragraph on a different topic using their shared list of characteristics as a guide. This kind of involvement not only improves the initial quality of students' work but also encourages students to take greater ownership of—and become more thoughtful judges of—that work (Andrade, 2000; Arter & McTighe, 2001).

## Implement Student-Led Conferences

In student-led conferences, the teachers' role becomes that of facilitator. During the conference, students lead family members through a discussion of their work, which is usually organized in a portfolio. The portfolio might consist of several examples of the student's writing from the current school year, mathematics exercises, results from science experiments, and recently completed art projects.

Typically, several conferences take place simultaneously in a classroom, with family groups seated far enough apart to guarantee privacy. The teacher circulates among family groups, stopping long enough to offer pertinent comments and answer any questions. Instead of offering specific comments about the student's work, however, the teacher simply clarifies project goals and explains activities. Students take charge of explaining the nature of their successes and describing areas in which they are working to improve. Organizing these conferences requires significant planning to assemble the portfolios and help students develop skill in presenting their work to parents. However, increasing numbers of teachers find that student-led conferences enhance students' ownership of their learning and improve parents' involvement in school activities (Bailey & Guskey, 2001).

## Report Achievement and Behaviors Separately

Most teachers today combine a wide variety of achievement and behavior indices when assigning grades. They mix scores from major assessments, projects, reports, and quizzes with records of homework completion, class participation, punctuality of assignments, effort, and other work habits. The result is a hodgepodge grade that is difficult for parents or students to interpret (Brookhart, in press; Guskey & Bailey, 2001).

However, schools using standards-based grading typically distinguish grades for learning or achievement from those for different aspects of student behavior (Guskey, 2001, 2006). Teachers using

standards-based grading report that students take homework, effort, work habits, and other aspects related to responsibility more seriously when those grades are reported separately (Guskey, in press).

Once the system is in place, this kind of grading requires no additional work because teachers don't need to gather any additional information. It also helps avoid irresolvable debates about how best to combine diverse types of evidence on achievement, attitudes, and behaviors into a single grade (Bailey & McTighe, 1996).

## It Takes Practice

Although the decisions young people make become more important and the consequences of their decisions grow more serious as they get older, the opportunities they have to make responsible decisions and learn from those experiences in school decline (Eccles et al., 1993). As a result, many students have not developed this vital life skill.

Students inevitably experience difficulties making responsible decisions at first. For example, if a teacher allows students to choose their own work locations, some students may initially make irresponsible choices. A student might choose to work in the library, but end up spending most of the time there talking with friends and reading magazines rather than completing the assignment.

That student will suffer the consequences of having made an irresponsible decision. The teacher may call the student's parents, offer fewer options for doing the next assignment, or assign a low grade. Most students learn quickly that poor choices lead to undesirable consequences—and that they have control over these consequences. If students continuously receive support in this area, they become more comfortable making responsible decisions and actually choose responsible options far more frequently.

Some educators undoubtedly fear that if we give students greater autonomy and more opportunities to make responsible decisions, many will choose less responsible options, and problematic behaviors will

result. But no evidence that we know supports this claim. To the contrary, research suggests that students actually become more engaged and more task focused when they are allowed to make responsible decisions (Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998).

Teachers need to provide these opportunities for increased responsibility within the context of an effective classroom management system. Students can learn from small decisions first, recognizing consequences that might be relatively minor, before they consider major decisions with consequences of great significance.

The lessons we learned in neighborhood baseball games serve us well today. It is imperative that we help all students learn similar lessons. Few life skills are as important.

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# Feedback That Fits

Susan M. Brookhart

*To craft teacher feedback that leads to learning,  
put yourself in the student's shoes.*

From the student's point of view, the ideal "script" for formative assessment reads something like, "Here is how close you are to the knowledge or skills you are trying to develop, and here's what you need to do next." The feedback teachers give students is at the heart of that script. But feedback is only effective when it translates into a clear, positive message that students can hear.

## Student Understanding and Control

The power of formative assessment lies in its double-barreled approach, addressing both cognitive and motivational factors. Good formative assessment gives students information they need to understand where they are in their learning (the cognitive factor) and develops students' feelings of control over their learning (the motivational factor).

Precisely because students' feelings of self-efficacy are involved, however, even well-intentioned feedback can be very destructive if the student reads the script in an unintended way ("See, I knew I was stupid!"). Research on feedback shows its Jekyll-and-Hyde character. Not all studies of feedback show positive effects; the nature of the communication matters a great deal.

Recently, researchers have tried to tease out what makes some feedback effective, some ineffective, and some downright harmful (Butler & Winne, 1995; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Other researchers have described the characteristics of effective feedback (Johnston, 2004; Tunstall & Gipps, 1996). From parsing this research and reflecting on my own experience as an educational consultant working with elementary and secondary teachers on assessment issues, particularly the difference between formative assessment and grading, I have identified what makes for powerful feedback—in terms of how teachers deliver it and the content it contains.

Good feedback contains information a student can use. That means, first, that the student has to be able to hear and understand it. A student can't hear something that's beyond his comprehension, nor can a student hear something if she's not listening or if she feels like it's useless to listen. The most useful feedback focuses on the qualities of student work or the processes or strategies used to do the work. Feedback that draws students' attention to their self-regulation strategies or their abilities as learners is potent *if* students hear it in a way that makes them realize they will get results by expending effort and attention.

Following are suggestions for the most effective ways to deliver feedback and the most effective content of feedback. Notice that all these suggestions are based on knowing your students well. There is no magic bullet that will be just right for all students at all times.

## Effective Ways to Deliver Feedback

### When to Give Feedback

If a student is studying facts or simple concepts—like basic math—he or she needs immediate information about whether an answer is right or wrong—such as the kind of feedback flash cards give. For learning targets that develop over time, like writing or problem solving, wait until you have observed patterns in student work that

provide insights into how they are doing the work, which will help you make suggestions about next steps. A general principle for gauging the timing of feedback is to put yourself in the student's place. When would a student want to hear feedback? When he or she is still thinking about the work, of course. It's also a good idea to give feedback as often as is practical, especially for major assignments.

### How Much Feedback?

Probably the hardest decision concerns the *amount* of feedback. A natural inclination is to want to “fix” everything you see. That's the teacher's-eye view, where the target is perfect achievement of all learning goals. Try to see things from the student's-eye view. On which aspects of the learning target has the student done good work? Which aspects of the learning goals need improvement and should be addressed next? Are any assignments coming up that would make it wiser to emphasize one point over another? Consider also students' developmental level.

### What Mode Is Best?

Some kinds of assignments lend themselves better to written feedback (for example, reviewing written work); some to oral feedback (observing as students do math problems); and some to demonstrations (helping a kindergarten student hold a pencil correctly). Some of the best feedback results from conversations *with* the student. Peter Johnston's (2004) book *Choice Words* discusses how to ask questions that help students help you provide feedback. For example, rather than telling the student all the things you notice about his or her work, start by asking, “What are you noticing about this? Does anything surprise you?” or “Why did you decide to do it this way?”

You should also decide whether individual or group feedback is best. Individual feedback tells a student that you value his or her learning, whereas group feedback provides opportunities for wider

reteaching. These choices are not mutually exclusive. For example, say many students used bland or vague terms in a writing assignment. You might choose to give the whole class feedback on their word choices, with examples of how to use precise or vivid words, and follow up with thought-provoking questions for individual students, such as, “What other words could you use instead of *big*?” or “How could you describe this event so someone else would see how terrible it was for you?”

## The Best Content for Feedback

Composing feedback is a skill in itself. The choices you make on *what* you say to a student will, of course, have a big influence on how the student interprets your feedback. Again, the main principle is considering the student’s perspective.

### Focus on Work and Process

Effective feedback describes the student’s work, comments on the process the student used to do the work, and makes specific suggestions for what to do next. General praise (“Good job!”) or personal comments don’t help. The student might be pleased you approve, but not sure what was good about the work, and so unable to replicate its quality. Process-focused comments, on the other hand, give suggestions that move the work closer to the target, such as, “Can you rewrite that sentence so it goes better with the one before it?”

## Relate Feedback to the Goal

For feedback to drive the formative assessment cycle, it needs to describe where the student is in relation to the learning goal. In so doing, it helps each student decide what his or her next goal should be. Feedback that helps a student see his or her own progress gives you a chance to point out the processes or methods that successful students use. (“I see you checked your work this time. Your computations were

all correct, too! See how well that works?") Self-referenced feedback about the work itself ("Did you notice you have all the names capitalized this time?") is helpful for struggling students, who need to understand that they *can* make progress as much as they need to understand how far they are from the ultimate goal.

### Try for Description, Not Judgment

Certain students are less likely to pay attention to descriptive feedback if it is accompanied by a formal judgment, like a grade or an evaluative comment. Some students will even hear judgment where you intend description. Unsuccessful learners have sometimes been so frustrated by their school experiences that they might see every attempt to help them as just another declaration that they are "stupid." For these learners, point out improvements over their previous performance, even if those improvements don't amount to overall success on the assignment. Then select one or two small, doable next steps. After the next round of work, give the student feedback on his or her success with those steps, and so on.

### Be Positive and Specific

Being positive doesn't mean being artificially happy or saying work is good when it isn't. It means describing how the strengths in a student's work match the criteria for good work and how they show what that student is learning. And it means choosing words that communicate respect for the student and the work. Your tone should indicate that you are making helpful suggestions and giving the student a chance to take the initiative. ("This paper needs more detail. You could add more explanation about the benefits of recycling, or you could add more description of what should be done in your neighborhood. Which suggestion do you plan to try first?") If feedback comes across as a lecture or suggestions come across as orders, students will not understand that they are in charge of their own learning.

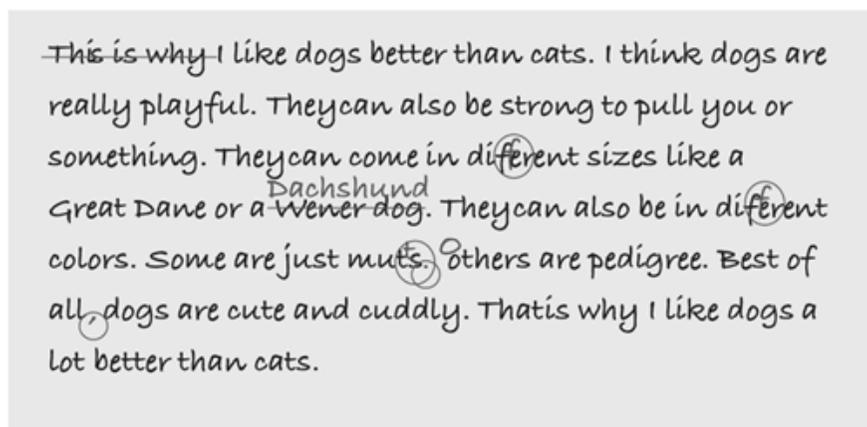
Feedback should be specific enough that the student knows what to do next, but not so specific that you do the work. Identifying errors or types of errors is a good idea, but correcting every error doesn't leave the student anything to do.

These feedback principles apply to both simple and complex assignments, and to all subjects and grade levels. The following example of ineffective and, especially, effective feedback on a writing assignment reflects these principles in practice.

## A Tale of Two Feedback Choices

As part of a unit on how to write effective paragraphs, a 4th grade teacher assigned her students to write a paragraph answering the question, "Do dogs or cats make better pets?" They were asked to have a clear topic sentence, a clear concluding sentence, and at least three supporting details. Figure 1 shows what a student named Anna wrote and what *ineffective* teacher feedback on Anna's paragraph might look like.

Figure 1. Ineffective Feedback on Anna's Writing Assignment



To provide feedback, this teacher decided to make written comments on each student's paper and return the papers to students the day after

they turned them in. So far, so good. However, the feedback in Figure 1 is all about the mechanics of writing. This doesn't match the learning target for this assignment, which was to structure a paragraph to make a point and to have that point contained in a topic sentence. Because the mechanical corrections are the only comments, the message seems to be that Anna's next step is to fix those errors. However, this teacher has already fixed the errors for her. All Anna has to do is recopy this paragraph. Moreover, there is no guarantee she would understand why some words and punctuation marks were changed. Recopying by rote could result in a "perfect" paragraph with no learning involved!

The worst part about this feedback, however, is that it doesn't communicate to Anna that she did, in fact, demonstrate the main paragraphing skills that were the learning target. Anna successfully fashioned a topic sentence and a concluding sentence and provided supporting details. She needs to understand that she has accomplished this. Once she knows that, suggestions about how to make her good work even better make sense.

Figure 2 lists *effective* comments a teacher might write on Anna's paper or, preferably (because there is more to say than a teacher might want to write or a 4th grader might want to read), discuss with her in a brief conference. A teacher would probably use a few—but not all—of these comments, depending on circumstances.

Notice that these comments first compare the student's work with the criteria for the assignment, which were aligned with the learning goal. They acknowledge that Anna's paragraph shows that she understands how to produce a topic sentence, supporting details, and a concluding sentence.

The rest of the feedback choices depends on the context. How much time is available to discuss this paper? Which other feedback comments would align with learning targets that have previously been emphasized in class? Which of the possible next steps would be most

**Figure 2. Examples of Effective Feedback on Anna's Writing Assignment****Possible Teacher Comments**

- Your topic sentence and concluding sentence are clear and go together well.
- You used a lot of details. I count seven different things you like about dogs.

*What's Best About This Feedback*

These comments describe achievement in terms of the criteria for the assignment. They show the student that you noticed these specific features and connected them to the criteria for good work.

**Possible Teacher Comments**

Your paragraph makes me wonder if you have a dog who is playful, strong, cute, and cuddly. Did you think about your own dog to write your paragraph? When you write about things you know, the writing often sounds real like this.

*What's Best About This Feedback*

This comment would be especially useful for a student who had not previously been successful with the writing process. The comment identifies the strategy the student has used for writing and affirms that it was a good one. Note that "the writing often sounds genuine" might be better English, but "real" is probably clearer for this 4th grader.

**Possible Teacher Comments**

Your reasons are all about dogs. Readers would already have to know what cats are like. They wouldn't know from your paragraph whether cats are playful, for instance. When you compare two things, write about both of the things you are comparing.

*What's Best About This Feedback*

This constructive feedback criticizes a specific feature of the work, explains the reason for the criticism, and suggests what to do about it.

**Possible Teacher Comments**

- Did you check your spelling? See if you can find two misspelled words.
- Feedback about making the topic sentence a stronger lead might best be done as a demonstration. In conference, show the student the topic sentence with and without "This is why" and ask which sentence she thinks reads more smoothly and why. Ask whether "This is why" adds anything that the sentence needs. You might point out that these words read better in the concluding sentence.

*What's Best About This Feedback*

These comments about style and mechanics do not directly reflect the learning target, which was about paragraphing. However, they concern important writing skills. Their appropriateness would depend on how strongly spelling, style/usage, and word choice figure into the longer-term learning targets.

beneficial for this particular student, given her previous writing? For example, if Anna is a successful writer who likes writing, she probably already knows that describing traits she has observed in her own dog was a good strategy. If she has previously been an unsuccessful writer but has produced a paragraph better than her usual work—because the assignment finally asked a question about which she has something to say—it would be worth communicating to her that you noticed and naming “write about what you know” as a good strategy for future writing.

## Feedback Practice Makes Perfect

Feedback choices present themselves continually in teaching. You have opportunities to give feedback as you observe students do their work in class and again as you look at the finished work. Take as many opportunities as you can to give students positive messages about how they are doing relative to the learning targets and what might be useful to do next. Make as many opportunities as you can to talk with your students about their work. As you do, you will develop a repertoire of feedback strategies that work for your subject area and students. The main thing to keep in mind when using any strategy is how students will hear, feel, and understand the feedback.

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# Springing into Active Learning

Allison Zmuda

*Students need to understand that learning isn't neat: It can be messy, unpredictable, and full of exhilarating challenges.*

One of the most significant and persistent barriers to student achievement resides in the collective mind-set of the very students we teach. Too many students have become compliant workers who simply follow directions and finish the necessary paperwork on time. They function like low-level bureaucrats—they complete each allocated task to make space for an endless litany of new tasks until the day they quit or get promoted.

Educators must reevaluate the degree to which compliance has affected every aspect of the learning environment, including the use of established classroom assessments and grading systems to identify success. Many A students have earned high marks primarily because of their meticulousness in following directions, their knack for repeating procedures on cue, and their ability to expertly summarize other people's ideas.

## Compliant Versus Engaged

The difference between compliant and engaged learners surfaces in a range of school activities. In classroom discussions, compliant learners typically restrict themselves to answering the question the teacher asked, whereas engaged learners tend to raise additional questions,

delve more deeply into thinking, or offer another point of view. When researching an issue, compliant learners often look for simple answers to complex questions, whereas engaged learners not only search for additional context about the topic to determine an appropriate focus for the research but also continually evaluate the validity of the sources they consult.

When revising written work, compliant learners typically fix identified errors, whereas engaged learners tend to evaluate feedback about their paper's strengths and weaknesses before making a decision about what to revise. In reading assignments, compliant learners tend to read what the teacher expects them to read during the given time frame and complete the accompanying task; engaged readers tend to read the text for both content knowledge and connections, not only to complete the specified task, but also to make sense of what they've read.

## Beyond Bad Karaoke

For students to move beyond lip-syncing someone else's words, ideas, and solutions, they need the opportunity to struggle with a task that inspires their performance, that motivates them to do more than just go through the motions of learning and truly understand what the discipline requires. Just because students write a thousand paragraphs in middle school does not mean they are becoming writers or can even articulate what a paragraph is. Just because they conduct dozens of investigations in biology and chemistry does not mean they are thinking and working like scientists. Just because they are locating information online and in print does not mean they are researching and evaluating information.

In fact, the more educators focus instructional time on a prioritized set of discrete skills and tasks in isolation, the more compliant students become. Their only challenge is to remember the procedure, strategy, formula, or facts until the classroom assessment, state assessment, or advanced placement test.

The more schools require students to merely remember, the more bored students become. This boredom depresses their performance, which typically causes teachers to further sanitize classroom assignments with more structures, scaffolds, and cues—which, unsurprisingly, creates more boredom. The cycle continues as high school English teachers question why students don't know how to write a decent paragraph and as math teachers wonder why students still don't understand fractions.

## Problematic Beliefs

We can break the cycle of compliance by rooting out common misunderstandings that many students have about learning and about whether or not they are good at it. These beliefs, which intensify throughout the school years, can be highly detrimental to student achievement.

**Belief 1:** The rules of a classroom and a content area are based on what the teacher wants.

Students who hold this belief see classroom rules, protocols, scoring tools, and performance expectations as driven by the *teacher's* personal choice about how to structure the learning environment. This is profoundly different from seeing them as expectations driven by a specific *discipline*—what professionals in the field do to create, develop, and analyze ideas and information; produce quality work; and communicate effectively with others.

**Belief 2:** What the teacher wants me to say is more important than what I want to say.

Students who adopt this way of thinking become more blunt about it as they move through school. They might ask the teacher, What

do you think a good color choice would be? What do you see when you look at the data? What do you think is important to remember here? Students come to believe that if they can figure out what the teacher wants, likes, and thinks, they will succeed in the class. They have given up on their own points of view, ideas, creative impulses, and problem-solving approaches as unworthy of pursuit.

**Belief 3: The point of an assignment is to get it done.**

Students who believe this typically feel as though they are drowning in work—there are always more problems, more readings, and more tasks to complete. They become stressed out, not only because they feel overwhelmed by time pressures, but also because they are insecure about the quality of their work.

**Belief 4: Once an assignment is finished, it's off the to-do list.**

Students who adopt this way of thinking do not welcome the opportunity to revise their work. They often become unhappy when a teacher asks them to reexamine what they have produced. Typically, they only work to fix identified weaknesses or errors, especially those that are straightforward or easy to repair.

**Belief 5: If I make a mistake, my job is to replace it with the right answer.**

Students who think this way routinely erase incorrect answers during class work or homework reviews, replacing them with the correct answers. Students don't attempt to learn what went wrong in the original attempt or to confirm whether, in fact, the response was even incorrect in the first place.

**Belief 6: I feel proud of my work only if I receive a good grade.**

Students who hold this belief always go right to the grade as the only valid source for feedback. Students are reluctant to perform tasks that the teacher isn't grading. "Why should I," they think, "if it doesn't really count?" Often, they just glance at the comments that accompany the grade or score—if they read them at all—even though this explicit feedback is not only the most time-consuming for teachers to communicate but also the most powerful in improving student performance on similar tasks.

**Belief 7: Speed is synonymous with intelligence.**

Students who hold this assumption watch other students finish first and become envious. "Why can't I be finished already, too?" they wonder. Often these students either try to work at a pace that is unnatural for them—too quickly to focus on the details, nuances, development, and mechanics of the task—or they work at their own pace but berate themselves for being slow and stupid.

**Belief 8: Once I get too far behind, I can never catch up.**

Students who believe this assume that teachers and other students label them: He's one of the slow ones; she tries hard but doesn't really get it; he's just not that smart. They also believe that teachers sort, group, and schedule them differently. They think that teachers are giving them easier work, which only widens the gap between them and their peers. Pretty soon they expect to be in classes with different students altogether—the other ones who dropped back from the pack.

**Belief 9: What I'm learning in school doesn't have much to do with my life—but it isn't supposed to—it's school.**

Students who think this way have resigned themselves to the fact that school is boring. School is what happens in between more meaningful learning experiences, such as communicating with friends, researching topics of personal interest, and learning how to solve authentic problems.

## Embracing the Struggle

If students believe that school is boring, that they are stupid, that it shouldn't feel this hard, and that it has no connection to the real world, then they will regard every assignment, no matter how standards-based or authentic the task, as little more than busywork. Educators need to help students realize that these detrimental beliefs are not facts—they are simply thoughts that have become reinforced over time.

Students can adopt more nourishing thinking that will inspire their work. Instead of focusing on the grade or score, they can focus on their progress. Instead of focusing on getting the assignment over with, they can find satisfaction during the creation and production of work. Instead of trying to eliminate or cover up mistakes, they can evaluate the source of the error and search for a potential insight about their understanding—or their misunderstanding—of the content, the discipline, or themselves.

Students need to learn to embrace struggle as a necessary part of growth. This lesson is crucial, not only for developing resiliency, but also for honing creativity, ingenuity, and entrepreneurship. One of the best ways to model high engagement during times of significant struggle—when students agonize to improve, to understand the

problem, to break through existing barriers—is to share the insights of famous people from different time periods and fields who struggled with learning within their respective domains.

The amount of failure is staggering. Thomas Edison, for example, invented the light bulb on the 2001st try. And to think that so many of our students give up after the first or second time! Edison was a great promoter of the value of effort. “Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration,” he said. “As a result, a genius is often a talented person who has simply done all of his homework.”

Students would also find solace in hearing what basketball great Michael Jordan had to say about failure and success:

I’ve missed over 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot—and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.

Becoming stronger, smarter, more sophisticated, more efficient, and more expressive all require taking on challenges that do not follow predictable paths to a predetermined right answer. Share with students Isaac Asimov’s thoughts on the lack of predictability in learning: “The most exciting phrase to hear in science, the one that heralds new discoveries, is not *Eureka*, but *That’s funny*. . . .”

Or introduce students to the encouraging words of Linus Pauling, who wrote, “The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas.”

Our discomfort with failure will never go away entirely. But as Vinod Kosla, the cofounder of Sun Microsystems, pointed out about the stresses of problem solving in the business world, “No one will pay you to solve a non-problem.” By accepting the inevitability of failure—and the role it plays in ultimate success—students can move from simply going through the motions of a task to becoming fully engaged learners.

## The Compliance-Free Curriculum

To assess how compliance has influenced your classroom practice, consider the following questions:

- *To what extent do the classroom rules encourage the “neatness” of compliant behavior instead of the inherent messiness of engagement?* When classroom rules allow for the messiness of engagement, discussions are no longer exclusively focused on what the teacher thinks. Students become more interested in what their classmates think. The discussions may become louder and students may grow more frustrated, but the quality of the information and ideas the students are trying to convey and their use of technical vocabulary, evidence, and supporting details will likely improve.
- *To what extent do scoring tools over-reward students for packaging their work and underreward the quality of thinking?* It is crucial to scrutinize all scoring tools to ensure the appropriate balance among quality of thought or approach, quality of process, and quality of presentation. The design of scoring tools can overcompensate students for the presentation phase of the work—the mechanics, neatness, and organization—and minimize the importance of the thinking that motivated the work.
- *To what extent do school staff members “save” students from having to struggle?* Every student, regardless of past performance, must struggle to learn. Students construct knowledge and create meaning as they actively work to make sense of the discrete parts of a problem. This struggle to “connect the dots” creates true fluency within a discipline as students learn to handle increasingly complex tasks. In an effort to make the work more doable, teachers should not strip the task of the hard parts, leaving students only with the follow-through—for

- example, teaching them to write a letter that has become a pat formula, teaching them to solve a word problem by identifying all the important information for them, or teaching them to use a database by telling them how to enter the search terms.
- *To what extent do students revise work?* Revision doesn't happen as often as it should because of mutual reluctance: Students often are unwilling to dig below the surface of their original work without significant guidance from the teacher about what is wrong, and teachers are hesitant about putting substantial amounts of time into scoring the work again because they are not convinced that students will actually use the feedback to improve. The revision process will be more successful if you clarify what quality looks like, as established by the scoring tool and models of student work, and discuss the work with students before they revise it. This will ensure that their efforts will address key weaknesses as opposed to cosmetic changes only.
  - *To what extent has the pace of the curriculum compromised the opportunity to go more deeply into the discipline?* The frenetic attempts to cover the curriculum have prevented teachers from giving students ample time to figure things out for themselves. Students will ask tangential questions, wonder about things that have no space in the curriculum, pursue avenues that are dead ends, and spin their wheels with no apparent breakthrough in sight. Although it may seem difficult to slow down the increasingly aggressive pace of instruction, giving students time to learn in this way will pay off in the end. When students have meaningful opportunities to understand, they are more likely to wisely use that knowledge in future tasks and situations.

## The Authentic Learning Environment

Educators need to reflect on questions like these with one another and with students. When these conversations happen frequently enough, the definition of what learning looks like, sounds like, and feels like will begin to shift. Students will grow more accepting of not getting it right the first time, of feeling frustrated, of being on a rollercoaster, of wanting to give up. But they will also learn that a breakthrough can be right around the corner, that the right words are on the tip of their tongue, that the connections they are hunting for are right before their eyes. Such faith in one's capacity creates the joy, tolerance, and fascination that forge engaged learning environments that embrace the unexpected.

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# They Can Because They Think They Can

Richard T. Vacca

*Instruction that lifts struggling readers' sense of self-efficacy  
prepares them to face even difficult texts.*

Thirty-something years ago, at the age of 23, I began full-time doctoral studies at Syracuse University. I had just completed my third year as a high school English teacher. Throughout my brief tenure as a public school teacher, I was continually perplexed about why my students, many of whom were at risk of school failure, seemed helpless in the face of reading. My concern for these struggling students led me to pursue doctoral studies in the field of reading, focusing mainly on adolescent learners. My motivation for studying reading was to better understand why older students who struggled with text found it difficult to view themselves as readers and to use reading to learn.

Not far into the doctoral program, however, I found myself struggling with reading—and doubting my ability to read academic materials—in the same ways that my students had. Although I could read a best-selling novel with ease in five or six hours, I found myself taking similar amounts of time to read a single assigned chapter from one of my statistics and research methods textbooks—only to come up short in understanding what I had read. I soon eschewed altogether reading texts that defied my comprehension in favor of taking copious notes in class and participating in study groups.

During my first year of doctoral study, I often wondered why I had ever left the classroom. Was I out of my league? Not as smart or as wise as my fellow doctoral students, who in many cases were a decade or two older than I? On more than one occasion, I thought about quitting and returning to classroom teaching, at which I had been successful. To encourage me to stay with it, my wife, Jo Anne, hung an inspirational poster prominently in my study area. The poster showed several seagulls flying effortlessly across the sea above a caption from the ancient Roman poet Virgil: “They can because they think they can.” Whenever I felt like caving into the pressures of doctoral study, I looked to the poster for confidence and inspiration.

What I know now that I didn’t know then is that self-efficacy and text comprehension are situational. That is, the emotional and cognitive demands placed on a reader vary according to the subject matter that the reader is tackling. Whether or not a reader feels confident that he or she has the skills to handle a given reading situation makes a difference in that reader’s approach. Bandura (1986) explains that self-efficacy refers to “people’s judgment of their abilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance” (p. 391). Self-efficacy is an “I can” belief in oneself that leads to a sense of competence. Self-efficacy is less concerned with the text comprehension strategies that students bring to content-reading tasks than with their judgments of what they can do.

Although I easily and competently read fiction, I experienced difficulty when I tried to comprehend technical material that might as well have been written in a foreign language. I lacked the confidence to read statistical text and research methodology at the beginning of my doctoral program, and that lack of confidence threatened both my motivation and my reading comprehension. Over time, I developed competence in reading these kinds of texts—and confidence in my ability to do so. Explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies is essential to bringing struggling readers along. But without a sense of competence, students will have a hard time digging into enough positive

reading experiences to get the practice they'll need to internalize those strategies.

## Self-Efficacy and Text Comprehension

Uncertainty, coupled with lack of strategy, subverts too many struggling readers' ability to comprehend text. When middle or high school students approach content-area reading assignments, some feel confident in their ability to pull off the task, but many others feel clueless about how to successfully comprehend the text.

Self-efficacy and text comprehension are not only situational but also interrelated, and motivation is related to both elements. If students believe, for example, that they have a good chance of succeeding at understanding what they are reading, then they are likely to be more motivated to engage in reading and to persevere. Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) call for "a reading engagement model" that underscores the importance of both increasing students' motivation to read and providing instruction in comprehension strategies and social interaction in the classroom. Without the spur of motivation, struggling students stand less chance of becoming engaged readers.

## Strategies to Increase Engagement

One of the realities facing teachers across all content areas today is that many students either read at a superficial level to answer homework questions or find ways to circumvent reading altogether. When I was tempted to take the avoidance path as a graduate student, I was fortunate to have the family support and personal motivation to keep me going and help me develop workable strategies. Educators need to give struggling readers the same kind of boost by increasing their motivation to comprehend texts and introducing students to a variety of comprehension strategies. Effective research-based comprehension strategies include question generation, question-answering routines,

comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, summarization, graphic organizers, and familiarity with different text structures.

To use any comprehension strategy effectively, students need to focus their attention on the reading task at hand. Simply assigning them a text for homework or in-class discussion won't necessarily guarantee that they will attend to the reading task with the focus needed for effective comprehension. In fact, the opposite may be the case. Students with low self-efficacy can easily become discouraged with the task before they even start if their only motivation is to fulfill an assignment. Once into reading, these students' minds will quickly wander from the reading task if the text holds no inherent interest for them, if they read without purpose, or if they fail to make personal connections with the material as they are reading. If students lack engagement with texts, they are unlikely to tap into whatever reading strengths and strategies they possess.

What teachers do *before* assigning students a text is an integral part of instruction in content-centered literacy lessons. Teachers are in a better position to increase students' motivation if they activate learners' background knowledge and get students thinking about the topic before they begin to read. Prereading instructional strategies often involve arousing curiosity about the topic, evoking predictions and creating anticipation for reading, presenting problems to be solved through reading, or eliciting student-generated questions about the material before assigning a particular text (Vacca & Vacca, 2005).

## Using Real-Life Motivators

### Name That Snake

A personal anecdote can be a powerful instructional tool that establishes a personal context in which readers can interact with new information. For example, a middle school science teacher I taught in one of my graduate-level education courses used a real-life situation

that he had encountered to pique his students' interest before assigning research about snakes as part of a unit on reptiles. While looking for a parking spot, the teacher had noticed a flyer posted on a telephone pole, reading

SNAKE FOUND  
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 24  
ON INDIANA AVENUE  
PLEASE CALL 262-9415  
DESCRIBE TO CLAIM

The science teacher retrieved the flyer to use as a motivational tool in his students' study of snakes. Before he even assigned reading materials, the teacher recounted to students how he had come across the flyer en route to a college football game. He aroused students' curiosity with this simple anecdote. Next, he elicited student questions by establishing a hypothetical problem to be solved. He asked the students, "If you were to make a telephone call in response to the flyer, what would you need to know about the lost snake in order to describe it and claim it?" This led to discussion in which students raised such questions as, "Is it a pet snake or a wild snake?" and "What does the snake look like?" The class decided that the snake had to be someone's pet, especially if it had been found near a college campus in an urban area.

To tap students' background knowledge, the teacher then started a discussion about what kinds of snakes make good pets. Once students were curious and motivated to solve the problem, they formed collaborative groups, each conducting a purposeful search for information about various kinds of pet snakes. The teacher, working with the school librarian, had gathered together various resource books about snakes for the student teams to use in their research. In addition to books, student teams were encouraged to use the Internet to find information about pet snakes. After researching the topic, each team had to choose one kind of snake to describe in detail. The teacher then had students

role-play the telephone conversation that might occur if they called to claim the snake.

This science teacher followed a reading engagement model to involve students in an active, purposeful, and thoughtful search for text information about snakes. From a strategy perspective, students were engaged in thinking about texts before, during, and after reading.

### Creating Hooks to Students' Lives

Using an analogy that connects reading material to students' lives is another way to activate student motivation. Mathiason (1989) suggested that analogies provide "cognitive hooks" on which to hang new ideas. These hooks help students look at their past experiences and existing knowledge in new ways.

For example, consider a high school English teacher who is beginning a unit on Shakespeare by introducing students to the importance of theater in the lives of people during Shakespeare's time. The teacher might make an analogy between modern moviegoers and theatergoers in the Elizabethan era.

The teacher might lead into this analogy with a general question like "What did you do this weekend for fun?" or "Did anyone see a movie this weekend?" and follow up with questions to determine why students went to see a given movie at the local theater or rented a popular DVD. Responses undoubtedly will vary from "Because we heard it was funny" to "Everyone else was going." The discussion stemming from these questions will help students recognize that today's movies affect their lives in ways similar to the way plays affected people's lives 500 or more years ago. The class might reflect on key differences in customs: For example, people in Elizabethan days gathered outside their homes for live entertainment, whereas movie lovers today can watch movies or even filmed plays at home. To complete the discussion, the teacher might show a brief clip from the movie *Shakespeare in Love*

to give students a sense of Elizabethan life and a visual image of the Globe Theatre.

## Flight Conditions

To paraphrase Virgil, students can read potentially difficult text if they think they can. When students feel certain that they *can* master the material they are facing, even those students for whom reading rarely comes smoothly stand a better chance at achieving that mastery. Reading may never become as effortless for us as flying across the sea is for seagulls. But if we provide situations in which students feel both motivated and competent, even daunting texts will have no chance of grounding them.

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# The View from Somewhere

Maja Wilson

*In making objectivity the Holy Grail of scoring writing,  
have we forgotten that real assessment of writing  
requires an interaction between two minds?*

It's old news that high-stakes, summative assessment practices don't help students learn, although word hasn't yet trickled up to politicians. We know that when Carl, a struggling 8th grader, takes the state writing exam (theme—"Friends"), he won't receive any kind of helpful response if he writes,

im not going to write about friends because i don't have any friends and ive never had any friends and i had a friend once but he tried to kill me the end.

His failing score, when he sees it months later, will not help Carl develop his thoughts or guide him to think about how well his words match his intent. Even if Carl is lucky enough to live in a state that still uses human rather than computer labor for attaching numbers to written expression, the scorer will not establish a mentoring relationship with him, a bond we know is important to all learners and especially crucial to Carl.

## Creating Distance

Anonymous assessment like this is not just unhelpful; it can also be damaging. The prompt reminds Carl of his difficult social interactions, the testing situation reinforces his many school failures, and these failures compound his social alienation. At the end of the day, we'd have to agree with Carl when he announces, before crumpling up his rough draft and stomping away, "No one is going to care what I have to say about this, anyway."

Why can't competent, caring teachers of writing assess the work of learners like Carl? Because we're not "objective" enough, of course. Objectivity is ingrained in these testing procedures. Teachers, the argument goes, are too close to students to be fair; our caring might interfere with our assessments.

All of this objectivity adds up to distance. Because of built-in physical, situational, and psychological distance, the scorer, scoring procedure, and reporting process won't touch Carl, except negatively. So he distances himself, refusing to engage fully in the test or in writing itself.

The earliest conceptions of *objectivity* in philosophical literature were quite different from those implied by our current usage. In late medieval times, the term was used to refer to "objects of thought, rather than those of the external world" (Daston, 1992, p. 600). This is an inversion of the distinction we now make between subjectivity (which is "unreliable" because our perceptions cannot be trusted) and objectivity (which is "reliable" because it exists outside the shifting nature of our minds). This definition began to change in the 18th century. In 1759, Adam Smith foreshadowed the connection policymakers now make among objectivity, impartiality, and distance when he described a man who viewed experience

neither from our own place nor from his, neither with our own eyes nor with his, but from the place and with the eyes of a third

person, who has no particular connexion to either, and who judges with impartiality, between us. (Daston, 1992, p. 20)

Scorers and procedures in the current assessment landscape embody this man distanced from himself, standing in “no particular” place and looking through “no particular” eyes, a conundrum that Thomas Nagel (1986) described as “the view from nowhere.” Carl cannot show his thoughts to someone who assumes this view from nowhere; he is lost enough already. Teachers’ reluctance to challenge the suitability of objectivity undermines our commitment to teaching, learning, and assessment.

## Rubrics and the View from Nowhere

Although the harm done by the distance and objectivity of high-stakes assessment practices is clear, more subtle incarnations of the pursuit of objectivity have similar effects. Rubrics were developed to make direct writing assessments palatable to testing companies—and thank goodness, or multiple-choice grammar tests would still be the only acceptable method of determining writing skill. However, the disagreement that is inevitable when unique individuals bring their perspectives to a text doesn’t lend itself to objective testing procedures. So rubrics meet the demands of objectivity by distancing teachers from their own perceptions in order to create agreement among readers—writing assessment’s view from nowhere.

Consider how the rubric in the following scenario pushes a group toward this universal but bland perspective. Teachers are assessing a 6th grader’s response to a districtwide writing prompt. All but one think the paper should earn the high score of 4 on the districtwide rubric. The odd-teacher-out stubbornly insists that the paper is vacuous and shouldn’t earn higher than a 2, so the session leader directs everyone to the wording of the rubric. He leads the group category by category through the scores for mechanics, sentence fluency, and organization,

until the rebel teacher is forced to concede that according to the rubric, the student has earned a 4. What this teacher actually sees in the paper is not of concern; the rubric's rigid categories take precedence.

If the rubric had included a category for "originality," the teacher's insight might have stood a fighting chance. But the way that these teachers related to the rubric, feeling that they must fit their responses into it, should give us pause. Writing assessment expert Bob Broad (2003) spent a year listening to assessment conversations on student writing among members of a university's English department. He identified 89 distinct categories of values the professors expressed about student writing. A typical rubric has four to seven categories that teachers must confine their reactions to. Given Broad's observation, it's safe to assume that even a rubric with 15 categories would likely shut down teachers' responses, including the responses of rebel teachers, which might help students write more meaningfully. What matters with rubrics is agreement.

Agreement (or reliability) is central to objectivity in positivist testing theory, but it runs roughshod over the nature of writing and reading. Louise Rosenblatt (1976) and other literacy theorists have posited for years that the meaning and value of texts are not simply fixed in syntax and word choice; instead, meaning and value develop in relationship to the experiences that readers bring to words. People can't agree on the meaning (let alone the "worth") of any text because the truth of the text is bigger than anything we could express or agree on and because the meaning evolves with the perspective of its readers. This interaction of reader with text—and of reader with other readers—demands a shared assessment process that defies agreement or expression through numbers.

This collaborative nature of meaning and value in texts has always threatened the work of standardized test makers. Educational Testing Service's Paul Diederich was appalled in the early 1960s at the wide range of scores his 53 "esteemed readers" gave to papers. Instead of adjusting assessment to accommodate the nature of language, Diederich

and his colleagues tried to adjust the nature of reading and writing to fit the needs of objective assessment procedures (Diederich, French, & Carlton, 1961). He tried to bypass reader reaction by standardizing it, distilling the comments of the 53 readers into a list of five factors—writing assessment’s scientifically derived view from nowhere. We see the effects of Diederich’s oversimplification in the introduction to a Michigan Educational Assessment Program rubric (2005): “Here is an explanation of what readers think about when they score your writing.” The rubric lifts the readers out of their own responses and tells them what to think, thus violating the complexity of reading, writing, and responding for the sake of objectivity. Rubrics, which classroom teachers routinely use for formative assessment, compound the distance created by high-stakes tests.

## Assessment as Conversation

I suggest that any assessment tool designed around the concept of objectivity is not, in fact, assessment. Before you dismiss me as too radical, consider the Latin root of the word assessment—*assidere*, to sit beside. I admire teachers who take the time to sit or crouch down next to their students to listen and question and work. The physical position conveys not only respect for the student but also recognition that, in order to help, the teacher must get closer to the student and his or her work. Proximity matters; the teacher gains a better view of what the student needs and can bring individual experience—and an individual perspective—to bear on the interaction.

What might an assessment process informed by a reader’s unique view from somewhere and by the transaction among reader, text, and author look like? Consider what happens in a good conversation. I share my perspective or experience. This inspires you to respond—to share a similar experience, perhaps. These two stories blend and make me realize something I’d never thought about before, and I offer this new idea for your consideration. The process continues until we’ve reached

new conclusions and raised new questions. Through this collaboration, we've articulated and developed our thoughts, even changed our minds. Neither could have done this without the other. This sounds very much like the transaction between text and reader that Rosenblatt describes—and like learning itself.

How can teachers view writing assessment as a conversation? First, pay attention to what goes on in your mind as you read students' writing, and articulate those reactions; give each student your experience of reading her or his paper. As students respond to your reactions, you might find that your interpretation and suggestions change. Be open to each writer's purposes, experiences, and personality, using everything you know about that person and yourself as a reader.

## Conversation with Justin

An assessment conversation I recently had with my student Justin demonstrates how perspectives evolve in such assessment. Justin wrote about a tennis match he played during which his mind was really on the impending death of his grandfather. His first paragraph began,

Some days in life you find yourself lost, the trivial experiences of yesterday are no longer as important as they were a mere 24 hours before.

Six more general, abstract sentences followed, and I found myself zoning out and cursing whoever had taught Justin the inverted funnel introductory paragraph structure. I wasn't engaged until the fourth page, when he vividly described the barrage of images that assaulted him with every bounce of the tennis ball. I wanted to tell Justin to cut the first three pages. On the other hand, I was worried that my bias against five-paragraph essays was getting in the way of a "fair" assessment. I needed more information from Justin. So I flipped to the last page, where I'd asked students to write about how they'd started writing, where they'd struggled, and their concerns. Justin had written,

I was stuck for a while at the beginning. I was not exactly sure what I wanted my topic to be. . . . I wrote the first paragraph without any topic but then I decided to go with it and chose a story that fits it.

As I imagined the first paragraph as Justin's way out of writer's block, my initial reaction made sense. I wrote to Justin,

I think you may have struggled a bit in the intro, trying to find the memory you wanted to write about. There isn't anything really wrong with the intro—there are some interesting, true statements in it, but it is so abstract. What if you see the intro as useful in the sense that it helped you define your memory, but delete it because it doesn't fit the vivid, descriptive nature of the rest of the paper?

Then I remembered how Justin had told me that his response group had been amazed by the introduction. I imagined they saw his abstractions as sophisticated, and I thought that, developmentally speaking, Justin needed to be allowed to try out this kind of writing. To honor both perspectives, I added this suggestion,

When *you* read it [the intro] you layer all the things you know about the moment you were playing tennis . . . onto it. But your reader doesn't have the benefit of the knowledge you have, so the whole intro remains very abstract and general. . . . What if you pick the most meaningful sentences from your intro, and figure out a way to work them into the ending of the paper? This way, your reader will be able to pile the specific memories, feelings, and images onto these abstractions.

I was surprised by what I'd written; I'd never thought about the interaction between abstractions and details in quite this way before. In negotiating the conflict between my response and that of Justin's group, I had come to a new insight about writing. That insight came as I reflected on my reaction, his group's reaction, and Justin's intent and

experience of writing. A variety of particular perspectives—not a bland, universal view of writing—informed my suggestions.

When Justin handed in his revision, which we both felt had improved tremendously, I asked him to reflect on his process. He wrote,

I liked how you addressed what you saw and felt from the paper and then gave your suggestions. Together they gave me a greater understanding of what you meant and made it easier to . . . know where each suggestion was coming from. I think that what you were saying was somewhere in the back of my mind and I just needed it vocalized to me in a fresh perspective.

For Justin to make difficult cuts and changes, it was important for him to know “where each suggestion was coming from.” He needed my perspective, not the codified feedback of a rubric.

In assessment conversations like this, there is no single objective perspective—not only because the teacher’s experience is fundamental to this process, but also because the teacher’s perspective changes in response to the student’s perspective, intention, and writing process. This model is blasphemous to many testing specialists, whose Holy Grail is objectivity. But it has the potential to help our students become better writers and assessors of their own work.

Using grades to prompt revision usually leads students to ask, What changes should I make for three more points? rather than, What am I trying to say and how can I say it more interestingly? But most teachers need to turn in a grade at the end of the day. Linda Christensen (2004–2005) has negotiated this conflict by assigning a point value to each draft a student turns in. If students engage in each stage of revision, they receive all the possible points, although some may need to work through more drafts. I’ve gotten around the issue of points altogether by working with students to choose a small number of papers each term that we will work on until we are both happy. I don’t have a substantive assessment conversation with each student for every paper,

but not all papers need to go through this intense process. At the end of the term, the student and I decide together what grade to assign.

## Dialogue /s Assessment

This view of assessment as a conversation works as well for research- and literature-based writing as it does for personal narrative. For any writing in which ideas, experience, intent, and audience matter—which is to say most anything worth writing or reading—a conversation is the only process responsive enough to expose the human mind’s complex interactions with language. Even a frequently revised rubric I create won’t be as responsive as a conversation. I don’t want to be held to statements and reactions determined in advance, or even to my own best ideas, because I know they’ll change as I collaborate with my students.

The conversations that teachers have with students about their writing—questioning, articulating, and changing perspectives together—are not dialogues we have before assessment takes place to give the student a fair shot at the best possible grade; they *are* assessment. Objectivity and reductionism may still rule in school, but let’s not confuse a grade or any tool designed to generate a number with assessment. As long as I have any say in my own classroom, I’ll be assessing writing through conversation, boldly asserting that the view from nowhere can never be as rich as the view from *here*.

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# Part 5

Building on  
Student Interests



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# The Music Connection

Andrea H. Antepenko

*Music deepens students' engagement with academic content—  
and enriches the learning community.*

As we listened together to the song “We Look like Men of War,”<sup>1</sup> my 5th grade students entered into the mind-set of black soldiers from the 54th regiment trudging back from a U.S. Civil War battle. I sensed students empathizing with the soldiers’ emotions. And I witnessed, as I have often, the power of music to enhance the classroom environment and the working of students’ minds. As we shared this music in our unit on the Civil War, my students were no longer a class requiring “management,” but rather a group engaged in meaningful learning.

As a first-year teacher at Centennial Arts Academy in Gainesville, Georgia, I face the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse group of 5th graders. My students come from varied backgrounds and socioeconomic levels: the majority coming from white or Latino backgrounds, and over half of them qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. Like all 5th graders, each of my students learns differently. With the intense pressure on 5th grade teachers to prepare students to meet and even exceed standards, it’s easy to forget that my most important goal is to create an environment in which every student is involved in meaningful learning. Music helps me accomplish that goal.

Both music and words are essential ingredients for creating a positive learning environment, and music is particularly powerful in creating a relaxing, yet stimulating, atmosphere. When I play music

that is related to the content we're learning, it also makes students' learning more relevant.

## Integrating Music Into Classroom Life

My students hear music as they come into my room each morning, and we listen to music periodically throughout the day. I play instrumental music during class work, on special days when students join me in the classroom for lunch, and sometimes while they take tests. I don't always play music, of course, because silence is important for learning too. For example, I don't use music during direct, whole-group instruction unless it's part of the lesson. Because lyrics can be distracting, I reserve music with lyrics for times when we can focus on the words.

I choose music to create the kind of atmosphere I want in the classroom. For example, in the morning I want students to feel good about being at school and motivated to get to work on their starter assignment, so I'll play soft jazz without lyrics, such as anything by Chuck Mangione.

Our classroom soundtrack usually corresponds to the period in history that we're exploring. We listen to tunes sung by soldiers during World War II, folk songs about the Dust Bowl, or songs associated with the struggle for civil rights in the United States, such as "Ruby's Shoes," written and recorded by Lori McKenna, which describes the experience of 6-year-old Ruby Bridges, the first black child to attend an integrated Arkansas public school. I never would have imagined that 11-year-old kids would request music by Billie Holiday and other jazz musicians that we heard when we studied the Harlem Renaissance—but they do!

I have found that students respond well to writing in response to a piece of music. We also use music to introduce and reinforce math, science, social studies, and grammar concepts, and even intangible concepts important to students' developing characters, such as respect for diversity.

Music sets the tone for an environment that is mutually respectful and advantageous to learning. For example, when we are doing small-group work, my students know how to complete the sentence, “If you can’t hear the music playing . . .” (then it means you’re too loud).

## Why Music Enhances Instruction

During my first year of teaching, I learned two key things about why music enhances a learning environment and makes instruction more effective.

### Music Empowers Student Writers

One of my initial struggles as a teacher was convincing students that becoming great writers would benefit them, bringing both success in school and more intangible rewards such as a heightened imagination and broader vision for their futures. Originally, I prefaced writing lessons with reasons why students should become strong writers. I told stories about my work as a project manager in large corporations and how my communication skills brought me lucrative opportunities.

But it was impossible to *convince* students that writing is a ticket to many destinations. Students would need to experience joy and success as writers to believe me. Integrating music into instruction—in language arts and other areas—does a lot to help students develop their own voice and a desire to write.

When students listened to music as they wrote, words moved more directly out of their hearts and minds and onto the page. I also found music enhanced our class experience of *reading* good writing: It moved words straight off the page and into the heart. I accomplished my goal of replacing students’ “have-to” feeling about writing with a “want-to” feeling.

## Words and Music Together Equals Meaning

Teaching uses words, whether our words, students', or an authors'. Joining music and words to reinforce a concept or material heightens the meaning of the content. Our experience listening to “We Look Like Men of War” in the Civil War unit is one example. A large collection of primary source documents, trade books, and picture books helped my students explore their interests and gain deeper insights than a textbook alone would provide. I played songs from my collection of Civil War and African American music as students read, talked, explored, and listened.

But “We Look Like Men of War” led to deeper comprehension and more reflection on personal values than any of the other resources. We had read accounts by black soldiers who were barred from fighting alongside white soldiers, assigned menial tasks, or paid less than their white counterparts. But this song—whose lyrics emphasize courage and passion in fighting for a cause—deepened the students’ understanding of the situation.

The kids requested the song many times in subsequent weeks. When asked to write about something they had learned as part of the Civil War unit, almost all the students wrote about “We Look Like Men of War.” Students talked about how the song spurred them to feel what it was like to be someone else and to have someone else’s perspective. I later witnessed students taking on a different perspective when we needed to address a situation on our own battlefields on the playground or the school bus.

My students’ scores on our state social studies assessment showed that they learned required content about the Civil War; 96 percent of them met or exceeded state standards. But the more personal learning engendered by listening to music changed how my students think about life and themselves. Music paid dividends beyond improved classroom management; it made an immense, positive contribution to

students' learning lives. I encourage anyone who wants to add depth to student learning to search out the music connection.

### Practical Tips to Get Started Using Music

- Talk to the music teacher at your school. Music teachers receive publications that include content integration suggestions, and these are a great source of potential songs.
- As you listen to music, keep in mind the question, How could I use this music in my classroom? For example, when I watch a movie, I almost always hear a song appropriate for the classroom—either for the atmosphere the song induces or for its powerful lyrics.
- Vary the music you showcase for students. I listen to country, Christian, rhythm and blues, classical, jazz, hip-hop, and rap. If you respond to a piece of music, someone in your class will too.
- Keep alert to possibilities wherever you go. I found a compact disc of songs about trains at a garage sale and a collection of World War II songs at a discount store. Keep your eyes open for any book that comes with a compact disc.
- Use the Internet to research music that connects to specific content and characters you are teaching about. One good Web site is the Sounds of America audio programs available through the National Museum of American History, which highlights music of different locations and eras (<http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/music.cfm?key=1228>).
- To find the lyrics to songs, enter the name of the song and the artist into an Internet search engine.
- Ask your students where they get their music and learn from them. At least one kid in the class can show you how to download music from free sources right onto your computer.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>This song can be found on *The Long Road to Freedom: An Anthology of Black Music*, CD set, produced by Harry Belafonte, 2001, Buddha Records.

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# Turning On the Lights

Marc Prensky

*Compared with students' technology-infused lives outside of school, the traditional classroom is a somber place.*

For most of history, kids grew up in the dark intellectually. Right up until the mid-20th century, when television became widespread, the world outside their own neighborhoods was largely unknown to them. Few traveled. Some heard tales of adventure, war, or derring-do. Many parents told stories of just how dangerous “out there” really was. Few young people read widely. In terms of knowing the world you lived in, as a kid you were pretty much left in the dark.

Until you got to school.

That was the beginning of your enlightenment—the day your window opened on the outside world. As you advanced in the grades, the window opened wider, and more and more light shone in. From your teachers, you learned wonderful things you knew to be true—because they told you so. They taught you to read and, as a result, more of the world became available to you. The images you came across in books and the artifacts you discovered in museums broadened your knowledge.

Over time, your teachers taught you how to conduct experiments, test ideas, and separate fact from fiction. They showed you systems and frameworks that would help you understand history, geography, mathematics, science, and your own and other cultures. You were exposed to civilization’s greatest accomplishments and learned about famous

men and women. You learned to think logically, structure your ideas and thoughts, and write them down for others to read and critique.

Not every kid found school interesting, of course, and some left earlier than others. But for a great many students, school was truly empowering. It exposed kids for the first time to a wide variety of useful things they knew nothing about, in ways that the students were unable to do on their own.

In fact, one of the key purposes of school was to lead as many kids as possible out of the intellectual darkness into the intellectual light. That is what made being an educator a truly noble calling: We were the people who showed the kids the light.

## Plugged in and Connected

There's one big problem with this noble thought today: Today's kids grow up in the light. They're deeply immersed in it long before educators ever see them.

Kids today are connected to the entire world around the clock, in real time, through their media and their myriad personal devices, both electronic (such as TV) and digital (such as the Internet and cell phones). In the 21st century, young people certainly don't grow up with perfect understanding of the world—after all, they *are* still kids. But can we still characterize their intellectual state as one of ignorance and darkness? Hardly.

Thanks to technology, kids in developed countries grow up knowing about, or being able to find out about, pretty much anything from the past or present that interests them. Google, Wikipedia, and millions of reference sites stand at their beck and call.

Many 21st-century kids grow up literally *surrounded* by light, from the first flash of the camera at the moment of birth. They progress to seeing the world through the glow of the TV tube, the sheen of the silver screen, the interactive animations of the computer screen, the LCD on their cell phone, and the screens on their Game Boy Advance

consoles, Nintendo DS Lites, and PlayStation Portable Systems. They teach one another to actively participate as often as possible in the world—locally and around the globe—through instant messaging, e-mails, and increasingly free telephone calls, as well as online connections, discussions, and creative social and communal activities that range from making and sharing music, to helping to slow global warming, to helping to stop genocide in Darfur.

Long before they ever get to school, kids have seen a tremendous amount of the world. They've watched wars in far-off countries and explorations of distant planets. They've seen wild animals up close. They've simulated racing, flying, and running businesses. Many have taught themselves to read through the electronic games they play.

The world is no longer a dark, unknown place for today's school kids. Kids are not intellectually empty. Even though some of what they know may be incomplete, biased, or wrong, they arrive at school full of knowledge, thoughts, ideas, and opinions about their world and their universe.

## Powering Down in School

Given this new state of affairs, one might suppose that educators would acknowledge that today's kids grow up differently and that kids are enlightened by all their various connections to the world. Educators would figure out ways to use, build on, and strengthen students' reservoirs of knowledge. They would assume that kids will use their connections to the light to find information quickly, structure it in new ways, and communicate with peers around the world in a powerful, 21st-century learning process. Teachers would no longer be the providers of information but instead would be the explainers, the context providers, the meaning makers, and the evaluators of information that kids find on their own. Teaching would still be a noble calling, perhaps even more so than before.

But we've chosen something else. Somehow, schools have decided that all the light that surrounds kids—that is, their electronic connections to the world—is somehow *detrimental* to their education. So systematically, as kids enter our school buildings, we make them shut off all their connections. No cell phones. No music players. No game machines. No open Internet. When kids come to school, they leave behind the intellectual light of their everyday lives and walk into the darkness of the old-fashioned classroom. What are they allowed to use? Basal readers. Cursive handwriting. Old textbooks. Outdated equipment.

“Whenever I go to school,” says one student I know, “I have to power down.” He’s not just talking about his devices—he’s talking about his brain. Schools, despite our best intentions, are leading kids away from the light.

## The Boredom Crisis

The reality is that students are, for the most part, bored. Pick an average kid, with an average schedule, and shadow him or her for a day in school—go where the student goes, sit in on all his or her classes—and see if *you* can stand it. Recently, at a conference of the heads of California’s top independent schools, I asked a bright 10-year-old from one of the very best schools how often she’s bored in class. “Ninety-nine percent of the time” was her immediate answer—she didn’t even have to reflect. Even with the best teachers we have, most middle school and high school kids say they’re bored 50–70 percent of the time.

And it makes perfect sense. A kid who has seen lunar landings and rovers working on Mars, who has done lots of research on the Internet on astronomy, and who comes to school excited about space travel may likely hear, “If you want to go to outer space, learn your math.” But the math she learns is not about space—it’s 1,200-year-old algebra and 4,000-year-old Egyptian geometry. A kid who has read and enjoyed the Harry Potter books must, in general, learn the rules of

### Prensky's Principles for Principals

- Announce that henceforth students will have a meaningful voice in setting all school policy regarding technology use. Hold assemblies that include teachers, students, parents, administrators, and technologists to hear all points of view and establish school policies regarding such issues as blocked Web sites and use of cell phones.
- Make it your business to eliminate boredom from your school—make 100 percent engagement the goal. Poll students as to which of their teachers and classes are engaging and which are boring and why. Investigate and take action.
- Talk with 2–4 students each day for at least one-half hour about their learning. If you feel you can't spare that time to engage with kids, you may need to rethink your priorities.
- Work with both students and teachers to implement the new “kids teaching themselves with guidance” model. Eliminate lectures and busywork from your school. Ask teachers who use active learning to share their practices with their colleagues.
- Promote technology use and move toward one-to-one computing.
- Orient your school toward the future. Offer classes in programming, robotics, long-distance collaboration, and cutting-edge science.
- Keep the computer lab open late and on weekends, especially in areas with limited technology access.
- Introduce computerized exercise games that kids really enjoy, such as Dance Dance Revolution, into your physical education classes.
- Have students share your school's most effective practices and results with the world via YouTube.

writing, spelling, and literary analysis not from the science fiction and fantasy books he enjoys, but from the books in the official curriculum. A kid who masters the electronic games *Caesar III*, *Age of Kings*, *Age of Empires*, *Civilization IV*, and *Rise of Nations*, and therefore knows a lot about world history, is likely to hear, “I don't know what's in those games, but the information may be incorrect. And besides, the history you should care about is what will be on the test.”

School instruction is still mostly cookie cutter and one size fits all, despite the fact that we live in an era of customization—students continually customize their buddy lists, photos, ring tones, cell phone skins, Web sites, blogs, and MySpace and Facebook accounts. Moreover, with large class sizes and hundreds of kids to a counselor, schools are unlikely to be able to discover kids' passions and address their education from that base.

## Where Kids Learn

### Less in School . . .

In the United States and other developed countries, education is quickly splitting into two separate—and unequal—parts. One part is “school,” the education that kids, for the most part, are obliged to experience by law. In exchange, school offers credentials—a diploma and a set of grades—that help determine students' future education and employment.

But many students find that schooling is almost entirely irrelevant to their present and future lives. For one thing, school is usually about the past—what we've learned up until this point (or some point a while ago) about math, science, language, and social studies—with, occasionally, a bit of current events thrown in.

School is certainly not about the future, which kids tell us is their most pressing concern. If schools were future oriented, they would be full of classes in programming, multimedia literacy and creation, astronautics, bioethics, genomics, and nanotechnology. Science fiction and fantasy literature would be a part of the curriculum, as representative of alternative visions of the future. Students would be learning and practicing such future-oriented skills as collaborating around the world electronically and learning to work and create in distributed teams.

Some educators justify the focus on the past by saying, “We don't even know what tomorrow's jobs will be—they haven't been invented yet.” Perhaps. Yet we do know many, if not all, of tomorrow's needed

skills—we're just not focusing on teaching them in school. Instead, school "covers material." It prepares kids for standardized exams. It continues to offer, for a ton of familiar reasons—such as No Child Left Behind, standards, and parent pressure—an outdated education that most students find irrelevant.

### . . . Than After School

There is another dimension to our kids' education that I call "after-school." After-school education is whatever the kids learn when they're *not* in class, doing their homework, or preparing for or taking tests. Some after-school learning—such as robotics clubs, competitions, and browsing in computer labs—takes place in our school buildings. But after-school learning goes much further. It encompasses all the time kids spend on the Internet at home. It includes all their blogging and social networking in MySpace or Facebook. After-school includes all the time kids spend sharing messages and pictures, talking on their cell phones, and creating many of the hundreds of thousands of videos posted on YouTube. It includes the time kids spend playing complex electronic games like Runescape and World of Warcraft and exploring online nongame worlds such as Whyville, Club Penguin, and Second Life, which are huge learning environments. After-school includes game and other computer programming classes that kids either sign up for or teach themselves. It includes an increasing number of noncurricular summer courses, learning camps, and other learning activities.

It's their after-school education, not their school education, that's preparing our kids for their 21st-century lives—and they know it. This after-school education doesn't bore them because, among other things, they help design it. It's different for every one of them. And there are no exams, only clear levels of competence that everyone knows and respects.

## How to Turn On the Lights

To make education relevant to students' lives and truly prepare kids for the future, we need to bring these after-school attractions into our schools. Four important practices can help.

- *Give students the opportunity to use technology in school.* This is less about teachers mastering specific tools or techniques—such as electronic games, blogs, or search engines—than their being willing to allow students to use these tools to find information and create products. We vastly underestimate our students' ability in technological areas and vastly inflate the threat of harm. These two perceptions have the combined effect of locking students in the past.

Some school districts have taken a different path. For several years, students at Mabry Middle School, Cobb County, Georgia, have created 2- to 3-minute videos for a school “Oscars” program. The videos tackle such topics as immigration, adoption, physical fitness, homelessness, technology, and child labor (see <http://mabryonline.org/archives/mtv>). The judges, many of whom work in the communications and media industries, select winning films in such categories as best cinematography, best sound, best documentary, best dramatic comedy, and best teaching and learning film.

These are the kinds of products we should expect from our kids. Schools can address the “inappropriate use” issue, particularly in the higher grades, with one simple rule: If something comes on the screen that a student knows shouldn't be there, he or she has two seconds to shut off the computer—or lose all privileges.

Once we let students (particularly in groups) take the lead on technology projects, teachers tend to see more engagement and better results. As students share works in progress with the

class for critical evaluation from both teacher and students, the teacher takes on the valuable roles of explainer, context provider, meaning maker, and evaluator/coach.

- *Find out how students want to be taught.* This means devoting a meaningful amount of school time (and after-school time if possible) to conversing with students. It also involves promoting discussions on this topic among students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Such discussions might take the form of assemblies moderated, perhaps, by invited guests, such as a local law school professor with expertise at letting all groups have their say. Students would be invited to attend and contribute to the discussion. Both students and teachers have told me that in addition to using technology in school, students like having goals they want to reach, doing rather than listening, getting involved with the real world, having teachers ask them about their ideas and opinions, creating products that are important to them, and thinking seriously about their futures.
- *Connect students to the world.* Today's students know that if they post something on YouTube, the entire world can see it—and comment. Many kids are in touch, through instant messaging, with friends and relatives around the world. So if students are studying the Middle East, why aren't they hooked up with Middle Eastern kids their own age? If they're learning Spanish, why aren't they connecting with kids in Latin America? If they're studying societies in social studies class, why aren't they exchanging videos showing their respective views of their own society?
- *Understand where kids are going—that is, into the future—and help them get there.* “Most of us prefer to walk backward into the future,” said management thinker Charles Handy, “a

posture which may be uncomfortable, but which at least allows us to keep on looking at familiar things as long as we can.” Covering the material and preparing kids for the test is not preparing them for the future. To find out the skills students need, look, for example, at the work of the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, which highlights such areas as computer and technology skills, critical thinking and problem solving, teamwork and collaboration, ethics and responsibility, and global awareness.

By engaging in these four practices, schools have a shot at being part of the “creatively preparing students for the future” process rather than just giving it up to after-school programs. To participate meaningfully in our kids’ futures, schools must be willing, finally, to turn on the lights.

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# A (Pod)cast of Thousands

Ann Marie Dlott

*Creating podcasts inspires elementary students—  
and prepares them to speak through digital media.*

I received this e-mail from a parent on Mother's Day:

Margaret turned 10 today and with great pride chose to share with her family, grandparents, cousins, and sisters her podcast. It was emotional for my husband and me to hear, too. Margaret has always struggled with her speech, but the clarity, inflection, and confidence in her voice shone brightly on her face today. Margaret made it clear to us that you took her hand and, step by step, the podcast developed. You gave Margaret the opportunity to succeed, and she did, and for that we thank you.

This message reaffirmed my belief that teachers make a difference in children's lives. As I logged on to the blog where Margaret's podcast was published, I read comments from 18 other people, many of them classmates proud of her achievements. I had discovered motivational learning tools that could involve the whole school community: podcasting and blogging.

## Podcasts: The What and Why

If we want our students to be confident, effective communicators in the coming decades, we must prepare them to communicate through digital media. Young adults increasingly not only read online but also test out their writing voices online. Jobs may soon require employees to be comfortable researching and presenting information to an unlimited audience through the Web. And for students like Margaret, digital technologies can open new doors to confidence and communication.

As the instructional integration specialist for Shrewsbury Public Schools in Massachusetts, I was fairly new to the terms *podcast* and *blog* but intrigued about how teachers might use these tools to enhance student learning.

A podcast is a digital broadcast that anyone can produce using a computer, a microphone, and audio editing software, such as GarageBand (for a Macintosh computer) or Audacity (for a PC). The broadcast can be downloaded and accessed through any MP3 player. A blog is a Web site about some topic or issue; visitors to the site can share comments on that topic.

Because I liked the idea of having a learning community write comments in response to students' podcasts, I decided to have students post their podcasts on a blog. I set the wheels in motion for three projects through which elementary classes would make podcasts linked to thematic units. I knew that—as with any project—the most important part of making podcasts would be the process. I believed that creating podcasts would motivate students to learn content, and viewing these creations on a blog would motivate them to write comments to their peers. Skills they would need as 21st-century writers would emerge. What I didn't realize was how powerfully revising scripts for broadcasting would improve students' writing.

## Promote the Midwest, Young Man

My first podcast project, with Ruth Cook's 4th grade class at Spring Street School, involved U.S. geography. To introduce the unit, Ruth and I scripted our own podcast. If we expected our students to create a podcast, we had to experience making one ourselves. We met one day after school to record our scripts. We spent considerable time rerecording and laughing as we fumbled over our words. But we were proud of our final project and couldn't wait to post it on the class blog.

Ruth and I introduced the unit to her students, explained what a podcast was, and showed students the blog where our podcast was posted. Students asked whether their grandparents living in another state would be able to listen to their podcasts. They were impressed to learn that their voices would be on the Web for all to hear.

We invited students' parents to listen to our unit introduction podcast with their children and submit comments. And comment they did! The messages we received conveyed the excitement felt by both students and parents. One parent wrote, "I can't wait to hear what the kids are going to teach us. I'll be waiting!"

The class began the unit by researching Lewis and Clark. I set up a Web page containing links to resources about these explorers' accomplishments. We also assigned each learner a podcast to listen to from the Web site <http://lewisandclarktrail.com/elearning.htm>. Using the strategy of a think aloud, I demonstrated the skills students would need to listen successfully to a podcast: how to rewind, replay, and pause to take notes.

Ruth and I chose a small group of students to develop a question-and-answer podcast about Lewis and Clark. The students were eager to share the experience with their classmates. We posted that podcast on our class blog and asked the rest of the class to listen to it and submit comments. Students couldn't wait to start researching and scripting their own podcasts.

Mrs. Cook assigned each student a state in the Midwest or West to research. She painted this scenario:

The President of the United States will be visiting the Midwest/West to announce which state will be the recipient of his latest award, “Best Midwestern/Western State to Live in or Visit.” To help him decide, he will be downloading and listening to each of your podcasts about a state. Create a podcast that will convince the President to select your state. Your podcast should include descriptive and persuasive language that creates a wonderful image of your state.

Each student created her or his own podcast featuring music and sound effects. We posted each one on our blog (<http://spsmidweststates.blogspot.com>). We gave students a rubric showing how their work was to be critiqued. Rather than write a report listing the physical features of their state, they had to sell these features through descriptive language. Our reading specialist, Lucy Lubke, worked with students on how to use descriptive language, how to hook an audience with a good lead sentence, and how to close with alluring wording so the reader would be left with a desire to visit. Students practiced delivering their remarks with expression.

Brendan was generally hard to motivate as a writer. But he eagerly chose to write about Colorado for his podcast because he had gone there to visit his grandfather. Brendan revised his script several times; his final product and his delivery were wonderful. Brendan’s grandfather sent him this comment:

Your podcast made me want to get on a plane right now! It’s more fun to talk about a place when you have been there and know the inside story, isn’t it? Where shall we go next?

Margaret was thrilled when she logged on to the classroom blog and read what her former 3rd grade teacher, Mrs. Ogren (who had moved out of state), had to say about her podcast:

You did a super job! You made Indiana sound like a great place to visit. This project must have been lots of fun to do. Keep up the good work.

## A Digital Tour of the Town

The 3rd grade curriculum for Massachusetts requires that students learn about the history of their town. In the past, Shrewsbury students would tour historic landmarks of the town and write reports about them. Mary Lou Ganas of Spring Street School and I decided that, instead, we would ask students to do digital reporting. Students created a podcast of an audio walking tour of historic Shrewsbury Center that we posted on the class blog.

I presented examples of city audio tours from two Web sites: <http://audisseyguides.com> and [www.boston.com/travel/boston/freedomtrail/podcast](http://www.boston.com/travel/boston/freedomtrail/podcast). We assigned each small group a historic landmark within Shrewsbury, such as a one-room schoolhouse dating from 1830. Our curriculum specialist, Marcia Smith, and I provided information on local history and landmarks to prime their research. As a class, we created a walking map of the center of town, including a key to the location of each stop on the tour.

Students in each group developed questions about their landmark and then set out to find the answers and craft a script. Students had to describe the location's physical features and talk about its history. They also had to write a transition sentence to carry the listener from their landmark to the next location on the tour.

Two students wrote additional stories based on Shrewsbury lore. Tim wrote a script for a podcast describing what the common in the center of town might have looked like in the 1700s. Aaron wrote a script for a podcast about Dr. Brigham, a town doctor who practiced in the 19th century.

People from town also created podcasts to further enhance the audio tour. Beverly Fisher, a lifelong Shrewsbury resident, spoke about

what it was like to attend an old school that now houses the historical society. Bill Glascock, third owner of the historic Sumner House, described the house and the people who had visited there. And history teacher James Smith recorded in the role of Artemas Ward, a resident of colonial Shrewsbury who was the first commander in chief of the Continental Army.

Students and their parents can now download the podcast to their MP3 players and take the walking tour themselves. The podcasts and information about historic landmarks in Shrewsbury are available at [www.shrewsbury-ma.gov/schools/Spring/ShrewsburyHistory/HistoryofShrewsbury.html](http://www.shrewsbury-ma.gov/schools/Spring/ShrewsburyHistory/HistoryofShrewsbury.html). The URL for the audio walking tour is <http://spsaudiotours.blogspot.com>.

## A Creative Collaboration

Our final project was a collaboration between two elementary schools in the district. Each student in Rachel Correia's 4th grade class at Spring Street School created a podcast of a poem he or she had written. Each student from Joan Beall's 3rd grade class at Floral Street School listened to one of the poems and drew a picture to go along with it. The poem and illustration were combined and posted as a visual podcast at <http://spspoetryproject.blogspot.com/>. Students were excited by this collaboration, and authors waited with great anticipation to see what their partners' illustrations would look like.

## Well Worth the Effort

As the teachers and I wrapped up these projects, we asked ourselves whether the time spent redesigning these units and learning how to effectively use the technology was worth the effort. The answer was an emphatic *yes*. The excitement of creating a polished product for the Web and the possibility of reaching a diverse and real audience were tremendous motivators. When students were immersed in writing for a

global audience, their writing improved. Listening skills also improved because they were required to be specific in their public, written comments to peers. Students worked tirelessly to publish their best work.

Every student was proud of his or her final podcast and would enthusiastically ask when it would be posted so he or she could share it. One of the most rewarding outcomes was the response from parents and family. Students were proud when distant family members wrote to them.

We as teachers must do all we can to prepare students to achieve to their highest potential. Introducing the tools of the 21st century is an essential part of that preparation. Podcasting in education is still evolving. Don't be afraid to experiment with all it has to offer.

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# “You Should Read This Book!”

Jennifer Hartley

*Sustained silent reading was the breakthrough for these urban learners  
—but only because their teacher tried and tried again.*

One Monday, my 5th grade students were, as usual, visiting the classroom library, returning and checking out books. One of my boys pulled a bookmark out from about 10 pages into his book. When I asked why he was returning his book, he said, “Because I’m finished.” When I questioned him about the story, he could only give details about the very beginning. He checked out another book and went on his way. Although my kids always had a book available to read after they finished their class work, I began to notice the pattern: Many students turned books in whether they were finished with them or not. Perhaps my students were not reading as much as I had thought.

I teach in an urban elementary school; 98 percent of my students are economically disadvantaged. My 5th grade class that year consisted of 20 black students, 11 boys and 9 girls. Their reading abilities ranged from a low 1st grade level to a middle school level. To begin gathering information about their reading habits, I surveyed students’ parents about their children’s reading behaviors at home. Most of my students were not reading outside of school, and many parents indicated that they wished their child could and would read more. Although we had shared and guided reading daily, my students were only reading assigned materials at assigned times. True, I gave them choices, but their choices came from a list of *my* choices. The truth

was, my students were not getting enough time to sit and really read what *they* wanted to read.

After discovering Pilgreen's (2000) research about making independent reading a success, I committed to changing my book selections, my classroom's appearance, and my instruction. Sustained silent reading is a time when everyone, including the teacher, reads silently for a given length of time (Butler & Turbill, 1987). To get essential information from my students about what they enjoyed and did not enjoy about reading, I gave each student a short reading survey. The results revealed that most of my students were not motivated to read—especially the boys, many of whom claimed they did not like to read at all.

## Ready, Set—Chaos!

Clearly, I had to begin updating my classroom library. I started by ordering *Sports Illustrated Kids* and *National Geographic for Kids*. Right away I noticed that the boys, and many of the girls, gravitated toward the magazine section. My next step was to get the students involved in choosing books for our classroom library. During our book fair, when boys got to pick two books apiece to add to our collection, they came up with graphic novels featuring Batman and Spiderman, as well as the Goosebumps graphic novel series. They also selected multiple nonfiction books, of which we had few to start with, centered on science, sports heroes, and world records. Girls also picked for the library, choosing mostly fiction that highlighted female characters and books based on TV shows.

My next step was to change the class library's appearance. I needed a shelf that screamed, "Choose me!" On our new display shelf, books face forward with their covers visible; the shelf reads "Excellent 5th Grade Reads." At WalMart, I found cushions, chairs, mats, and beanbags for reading comfort.

My final step was to incorporate silent reading into our daily classroom routine. I knew my students would initially be reluctant, but

I was hoping the added books and comfy seating arrangement would make the transition easier for them.

The first day of our new sustained silent reading trial, students decorated their own folders and picked out books they wanted to read. They could sit anywhere they wanted. I was hoping that finding a comfortable reading position would help motivate them to read.

What I got was chaos! Students ran around the room fighting over the cushions or a place to read on the carpet. Some chose reading materials that were too difficult for them, and some chose books they could finish in two minutes. Needless to say, we did not get a lot of reading done that day. I was disheartened and frustrated. How was I going to get students to love reading?

## Setting up Supports

Instead of scrapping the whole idea, I hit the computer to do a little research on the best way to implement sustained silent reading in my classroom. Steve Gardiner (2005) discussed how he models for his classes what good adult readers do. I began working with my students on how to choose appropriate reading materials at their ability levels by evaluating books through the “five-finger test.” Students determine whether a book is too hard for them by skimming a page and raising a finger every time they come to a word they do not understand. If they raise all five fingers, the book is too difficult to read without help. We talked about different physical places where a reader might feel comfortable reading. Students described situations that might distract them when they read, giving them a way to determine whether their reading location was appropriate for focusing on reading.

We discussed different ways students could monitor and support their own reading using strategies like predicting, asking questions, rereading for meaning, and making connections. Students decided to use reading logs to track what they were reading, how much they were reading, and when they finished a book. Because they wanted to share

what they read with other students, I downloaded from the Internet (at [www.abcteach.com/free/f/form\\_bookrecommendation.pdf](http://www.abcteach.com/free/f/form_bookrecommendation.pdf)) a form we could use titled “You Should Read This Book!” The form gives readers the opportunity to share their favorite parts of each text and articulate why they would recommend favored books to their peers.

I also modeled ways students could set personal reading goals. Goals included such achievements as completing one to three pages every five minutes (for my lowest-achieving readers); choosing harder and longer books; or focusing on a particular comprehension strategy, such as summarizing or questioning. Students let me know how many books they wanted to read each week and month. We discussed their reading levels and book choices and made goals together depending on the types of books each student decided to read.

We had two rules for sustained silent reading, adapted from Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2006):

- Students must have self-selected reading materials in their desks before the reading period begins. If a student forgets to bring something to read, the teacher gives the reader a book, selecting something he or she might like.
- No one moves around during the reading period.

## Success!

The second time we tried silent reading, students came in after lunch, pulled out their reading folders, and began to read at their desks. After a couple of minutes, I announced that students should choose a reading spot somewhere around the room. Each reader could pick his or her own place, but if the reader was distracted—or distracting—in that spot, I would suggest a better location. Some pulled out beanbags, some settled under their desks on mats and pillows, and one tucked up underneath the computer tables. Contrary to the second *s* in *sustained silent reading*, my classroom was not completely quiet. You could hear

whisper-reading and hushed talking throughout the room and the occasional burst of laughter when someone read something funny.

The class worked up from reading 5 minutes to 25 minutes each day. It wasn't long before students were begging me to let them share what they were reading with their peers. The reading by itself was not satisfying enough, and they wanted to go beyond filling out the “You Should Read This Book!” form.

So we instituted partner sharing. After each reading stretch, students returned to their desks and turned to a partner to share what they were reading. This practice actually helped with accountability; unfocused readers now had a motivating reason to delve into their books. Occasionally, students asked to share with the whole class. These presentations gave students ideas for books they wanted to read and initiated some excellent book discussions.

Eventually, we combined the partner and whole-group sharing through a strategy called “Rap” (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2006). After one partner shared what he or she had experienced in a book, the other partner would turn around and pass on what he or she had heard to the rest of the class. This technique helped my students become better listeners and improved their retelling skills, which standardized tests in our district evaluate. One unexpected outcome of this method of operating was that my classroom blossomed into a learning community.

## Worth All the Work

After nine weeks of this daily reading, students again filled out the reading survey they took at the beginning. The results were astounding: Surveys showed a major increase in students' motivation to read. Students read more at home, embraced more variety in their reading selections, and were more likely to finish their books. Many students reported that they enjoyed the peer sharing and the quiet atmosphere, which they didn't have at home. Throughout the year, I assessed students using the ThinkLink test, Rigby Running Records, and the DIBELS assessment.

Students' scores on all assessments improved as we continued to do sustained silent reading. All but one of my students were eager to continue the program, and my readers made comments like, "Sustained silent reading gives you more time to communicate with books. You get the feeling you want to read all the way through the book, and you get to know the characters."

Although introducing silent reading into my classroom took a lot of hard work and multiple adjustments, it was a success that will contribute to these students' future learning. They grew to love reading, and they used books to expand their knowledge both at school and at home. Now, whenever we miss a day of silent reading, my students beg me to let them read.

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# Part 6

Empowering  
Students



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# Footprints in the Digital Age

Will Richardson

*In the Web 2.0 world, self-directed learners must be adept at building and sustaining networks.*

As the geeky father of a 9-year-old son and an 11-year-old daughter, one of my worst fears as they grow older is that they won't be Googled well. Not that they won't be able to *use* Google well, mind you, but that when a certain someone (read: admissions officer, employer, potential mate) enters "Tess Richardson" into the search line of the browser, what comes up will be less than impressive. That a quick surf through the top five hits will fail to astound with examples of her creativity, collaborative skills, and change-the-world work. Or, even worse, that no links about her will come up at all. I mean, what might "Your search did not match any documents" imply?

It's a consequence of the new Web 2.0 world that these digital footprints—the online portfolios of who we are, what we do, and by association, what we know—are becoming increasingly woven into the fabric of almost every aspect of our lives. In all likelihood, you, your school, your teachers, or your students are already being Googled on a regular basis, with information surfacing from news articles, blog posts, YouTube videos, Flickr photos, and Facebook groups. Some of it may be good, some may be bad, and most is beyond your control. Your personal footprint—and to some extent your school's—is most likely being written without you, thanks to the billions of us worldwide

who now have our own printing presses and can publish what we want when we want to.

On the surface, that's an unsettling thought—but it doesn't have to be. In fact, if we are willing to embrace the moment rather than recoil from it, we may find opportunities to empower students to learn deeply and continually in ways that we could scarcely have imagined just a decade ago.

## Networking: The New Literacy

Whether we like it or not, social Web technologies are having a huge influence on students who are lucky enough to be connected, even the youngest ones. Many 7- and 8-year-olds are busy exploring Club Penguin or Webkinz with other 7- and 8-year-olds half a world away, middle schoolers are connecting with global warriors in World of Warcraft, and adolescents preen themselves in front of their “friends” on MySpace and Facebook. A recent National School Boards Association survey (2007) announced that upward of 80 percent of young people who are online are networking and that 70 percent of them are regularly discussing education-related topics. They're creating all sorts of content—some, as we all know, doing so very badly—and they're doing all sorts of things with online tools that, for the most part, we're not teaching them anything about. In the process, they're becoming Googleable without us. By and large, they do all this creating, publishing, and learning on their own, outside school, because when they enter the classroom, they typically “turn off the lights” (Prensky, 2008).

This may be the first large technological shift in history that's being driven by children. Picture a bus. Your students are standing in the front; most teachers (maybe even you) are in the back, hanging on to the seat straps as the bus careens down the road under the guidance of kids who have never been taught to steer and who are figuring it out as they go.

In short, for a host of reasons, we're failing to empower kids to use one of the most important technologies for learning that we've ever had. One of the biggest challenges educators face right now is figuring out how to help students create, navigate, and grow the powerful, individualized networks of learning that bloom on the Web and helping them do this effectively, ethically, and safely. The new literacy means being able to function in and leverage the potential of easy-to-create, collaborative, transparent online groups and networks, which represent a "tectonic shift" in the way we need to think about the world and our place in it (Shirky, 2008). This shift requires us to create engaged learners, not simply knowers, and to reconsider the roles of schools and educators.

As author John Seely Brown (Brown & Adler, 2008) points out, these shifts demand that we move our concept of learning from a "supply-push" model of "building up an inventory of knowledge in the students' heads" (p. 30) to a "demand-pull" approach that requires students to own their learning processes and pursue learning, based on their needs of the moment, in social and possibly global communities of practice. Our students must be nomadic, flexible, mobile learners who depend not so much on what they can recall as on their ability to connect with people and resources and edit content on their desktops, or, even more likely, on pocket-size devices they carry around with them. Our teachers have to be colearners in this process, modeling their own use of connections and networks and understanding the practical pedagogical implications of these technologies and online social learning spaces.

## Transparent and Trackable

So what literacies must we educators master before we can help students make the most of these powerful potentials? It starts, as author Clay Shirky (2008) suggests, with an understanding of how transparency fosters connections and with a willingness to share our work and,

to some extent, our personal lives. Sharing is the fundamental building block for building connections and networks; it may take the form of ruminations on life in a blog, photos of the latest family picnic on Flickr, or discussion notes students post to a classroom wiki for others to read and contribute to.

Publishing content online not only begins the process of becoming “Googleable,” it also makes us findable by others who share our passions or interests. A few years ago, the teacher who stood up in a professional development gathering in Atlanta, Georgia, and voiced his passion for “mountain biking—on a unicycle” would have had little ability to find others who enjoy such pursuits and learn with them about that avocation. Today, he can easily connect to other “municyclists” who share their adventures on their blogs or in YouTube videos. In doing so, provided he knows whom and what to trust, he can learn a great deal.

Although many students are used to sharing content online, they need to learn how to share within the context of network building. They need to know that publishing has a nobler goal than just readership—and that’s engagement. Take, for example, the story of Laura Stockman, a 10-year-old from the Buffalo, New York, area. Last December, in an effort to honor the memory of her grandfather who had died the year before, Laura decided to do one good deed each day in the run-up to Christmas. She decided, with her mother’s approval, to share her work with the world.

Laura’s blog, “Twenty-Five Days to Make a Difference” (<http://twentyfivedays.wordpress.com>), quickly caught the eye of some other philanthropic bloggers. Within a short time, Laura found herself in the midst of a community of volunteers far outside her geographic reach. The ClustrMap on her site tracks tens of thousands of readers from such places as China, Australia, Africa, and South America (see <http://www3.clustrmaps.com/counter/maps.php?user=2cf404cc>).

But here is the difference: Laura is not just publishing, and others are not just reading. Now when she wants ideas for charities to work

for as her project enters its 11th month, Laura says, “I ask my readers” (Richardson, 2008). She has collected hundreds of books for local libraries and dozens of pajamas for kids in need; she has raised thousands of dollars for charities ranging from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to local homeless shelters. In fact, Laura has become a go-to expert on younger kids doing charity work. Last April, students in Florida who wanted to make a difference in their own community interviewed her live online. Her interactions with her network, on both her blog and the other blogs she reads, teach her much about a passion that is not in the standard curriculum. In the process, Laura is already on her way to being Googled well.

In addition, under her mother’s guidance and care, Laura is learning online network literacies firsthand. As Stanford researcher Danah Boyd (2007) points out, we are discovering the potentials and pitfalls of this new public space. What we say today in our blogs and videos will persist long into the future and not simply end up in the paper recycling bin when we clean out our desks at the end of the year. What we say is copyable; others can take it, use it, or change it with ease, making our ability to edit content and comprehend the ethical use of the content we read even more crucial. The things we create are searchable to an extent never before imagined and will be viewed by all sorts of audiences, both intended and unintended.

## What Students Need to Know

These new realities demand that we prepare students to be educated, sophisticated owners of online spaces. Although Laura is able to connect, does she understand, as researcher Stephen Downes (2005) suggests, that her network must be diverse, that she must actively seek dissenting voices who might push her thinking in ways that the “echo chamber” of kindred thinkers might not? Is she doing the work of finding new voices to include in the conversation? Is she able to make astute decisions about the people with whom she interacts, keeping

herself safe from those who might mean her harm? Is she learning balance in her use of technology, or is she falling into the common pattern of spending hours at the keyboard, losing herself in the network? This 10-year-old probably still needs to learn many of these things, and she needs the guidance of teachers and adults who know them in their own practice.

More than ever before, students have the potential to own their own learning—and we have to help them seize that potential. We must help them learn how to identify their passions; build connections to others who share those passions; and communicate, collaborate, and work collectively with these networks. And we must do this not simply as a unit built around “Information and Web Literacy.” Instead, we must make these new ways of collaborating and connecting a transparent part of the way we deliver curriculum from kindergarten to graduation.

Younger students need to see their teachers engaging experts in synchronous or asynchronous online conversations about content, and they need to begin to practice intelligently and appropriately sharing work with global audiences. Middle school students should be engaged in the process of cooperating and collaborating with others outside the classroom around their shared passions, just as they have seen their teachers do. And older students should be engaging in the hard work of what Shirky (2008) calls “collective action,” sharing responsibility and outcomes in doing real work for real purposes for real audiences online.

But to do all that, we educators must first own these technologies and be able to take advantage of these networked learning spaces. In this way, we can fully prepare students not just to be Googled well, but to be findable in good ways by people who share their passions for learning and who may well end up being lifelong teachers, mentors, or friends.

## Get Started!

Here are five ideas that will help you begin building your own personal learning network.

1. *Read blogs related to your passion.* Search out topics of interest at <http://blogsearch.google.com> and see who shares those interests.
2. *Participate.* If you find bloggers out there who are writing interesting and relevant posts, share your reflections and experiences by commenting on their posts.
3. *Use your real name.* It's a requisite step to be Googled well. Be prudent, of course, about divulging any personal information that puts you at risk, and guide students in how they can do the same.
4. *Start a Facebook page.* Educators need to understand the potential of social networking for themselves.
5. *Explore Twitter* (<http://twitter.com>), a free social networking and micro-blogging service that enables users to exchange short updates of 140 characters or fewer. It may not look like much at first glance, but with Twitter, the network can be at your fingertips.

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# Amplifying Student Voice

Dana L. Mitra

*Students have much to tell us about how best to reform our schools.*

To improve student achievement, it makes sense to go straight to the source—students. Students can not only share opinions about their classroom experiences, but also play a significant role in school improvement efforts. But how do we best involve students in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers?

A growing body of research describes such efforts as *student voice* initiatives (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2008), projects that are categorically different from traditional student leadership roles in school, such as planning dances and holding pep rallies. At the simplest level, student voice initiatives give young people the opportunity to share with administrators and faculty their opinions about school problems. In more extensive student voice initiatives, students collaborate with adults to address significant problems in their schools. And in rare cases, students assume leadership roles in change efforts (Mitra, 2005).

Research into student voice initiatives shows that such efforts can actually improve teachers' classroom practice (see Cushman, 2000; Daniels, Kalkman, & McCombs, 2001; Kincheloe, 2007). Often termed *consultation*, these student voice projects partner teachers and students to discuss teaching and learning. Faculty members, for example, may ask students for feedback on instructional styles, curriculum content, assessment, and other classroom issues (Rudduck, 2007).

The experiences of students and teachers collaborating for school improvement at Whitman High School in northern California illustrate the positive effects that increasing student voice can have on teaching and learning. As a researcher, I observed this reform process closely and saw how it led to better instruction, better student-teacher relationships, and more empowered students.

## The Beginnings of Reform at Whitman

Located in a suburb of San Francisco, Whitman High School<sup>1</sup> serves a community of first-generation immigrants from Latin America and Asia as well as working-class black and white families. When Whitman first launched its reform efforts in 1998, 50 percent of the school's students were English language learners, and 50 percent qualified for free or reduced-priced lunch. With the school graduating only 57 percent of the students who entered in 9th grade and with one-third of its teachers electing to leave each year, Whitman High School staff members saw the need for change. The school's reform leadership team made the unusual decision to involve students in these reform efforts.

Whitman began by narrowing its reform focus to the question, Why are so many 9th graders struggling to pass their classes? To gather data on this question, fourth-year English teacher Amy Jackson convened student focus groups so the school could learn directly from young people about the types of supports they needed to succeed. Focus groups reflected the diverse student body, including students from all grade levels and a broad range of academic achievement levels and social cliques. A diverse group of Whitman students was chosen to develop the interview questions and conduct the interviews, with Jackson's help. This project gave students their first taste of being meaningfully involved in bringing change to Whitman.

## Gaining Insight into School Problems

With the support of the school's reform coordinator and two outside consultants, Amy Jackson worked with the student group that conducted the interviews to analyze the transcripts from each focus group separately. In subsequent meetings, they analyzed transcripts across focus groups to identify any repeating themes. The adults helped by asking probing questions and providing informal assistance with research methods; students particularly needed help breaking the data into chunks and summarizing findings. But students took the lead in "translating" what the comments of the focus groups implied about the support that students needed to succeed in 9th grade and beyond.

Teachers quickly learned the value of having students help analyze the focus group transcripts. Students frequently clarified responses that adults had misinterpreted. For example, in discussing a particular girl's response, many adults interpreted the girl's comment to mean that she saw no value in coming to school. A student in the analysis session interpreted this comment very differently: The girl in question had missed school because of family problems, and when she came back to school, she believed her teacher was angry with her for missing so much class. Ashamed of letting her teacher down and mentally tired from the problems at home, the girl stopped coming to class mainly because she hoped to avoid a confrontation with the teacher.

Students and adults together identified four main themes in the transcripts as the most pressing areas for reform: (1) improving the school's reputation, (2) increasing counseling and information resources for incoming 9th graders, (3) improving communication between students and teachers, and (4) raising the quality of teaching. The students presented these findings to the school faculty. Their comments made teachers aware of their desire for strong teacher-student relationships and of the need for school improvement.

## Student Involvement in Professional Development

Many Whitman students involved in the focus groups got charged up and wanted to continue working to solve the problems they had identified. A core group of eight organized themselves into a body they called Student Forum; about 20 additional students frequently came to Student Forum meetings. Adults involved in the reform effort guided this group in choosing their next steps.

This collection of leaders agreed that school climate was a pressing—and realistic—issue to tackle. With the broader goal of improving school climate in mind, Student Forum member Joey Sampson, a sophomore, suggested that the group hone its focus to “building partnerships and communication between teachers and students.” Students hoped this focus on teacher-student connections would lead to greater equity for students.

As one piece of this relationship building, students took part in the reform work teachers were conducting. Ten Student Forum members also participated with teachers in professional development trainings designed to improve Whitman’s curriculum and instructional practices, particularly for English language learners (40 percent of Whitman students fit into this category). Before students attended one three-day training, teachers involved in the reform effort explained to students what would be happening at the sessions and reviewed with them some of the education vocabulary they would likely hear. The students also learned about multiple intelligences so that they could better articulate their personal learning styles in conversations with teachers.

Sean Martin, the school’s reform coordinator, welcomed students to the first professional development meeting they attended by emphasizing that students were “partners in the conversation. . . . This is not a hierarchical relationship, but a partnership of equality.” He stressed the importance of confidentiality and of keeping specific names out of the

conversation when students or teachers critiqued a teacher's practice or a student's performance.

Veteran Whitman teachers commented that there was a different tone in the room when students were present at professional development sessions. The facilitators also perceived that, with student leaders present, resistant teachers were less likely to engage in unprofessional behaviors such as grading papers during meetings or openly showing hostility to colleagues. In essence, the students served as an accountability mechanism for teachers, and they expressed pride in this role. Joey Sampson commented,

When teachers are with each other, they're with their peers. But with students around, their "teacher part" engages, and they want to show that they can be on task.

Facilitators had structured this training so that students could share with teachers their positive and negative classroom learning experiences. A large part of one session focused on how to meet the needs of English language learners. The facilitator asked students in the room (most of whom were Latino) to share their experiences with the English as a second language program. Sophomore Anita Lozano commented,

Often the teacher is not patient enough to repeat what he or she has said in sheltered classes. [We] don't get it quick, so [we] don't do our homework. You said it too fast and [we] didn't catch it.

Elsa, a studious senior, added,

We've talked about having students translate the directions in Spanish. The English language learners don't know what's happening in the classes. It's easier for them to have other students explain to them, so peer tutoring and translation would help.

A sophomore student spoke about students who don't understand but just sit quietly "afraid of looking dumb." Smaller classes ("fewer than 32 people"), the student suggested, would help these students speak up.

Students served as experts on the classroom experience. They provided teachers with feedback on how they thought students would be likely to respond to different pedagogical strategies and new lessons these teachers were developing. They suggested ways to make lessons more applicable to students' needs and interests.

Students talked about specific modifications to instruction that would help them master content, drawing on the information about multiple intelligences that adults had shared with them. They suggested strategies like presenting more information visually and providing after-school tutoring. Sonia, a junior, explained that she had difficulty in one class because

the teacher was not teaching the way that I learn. In my honors U.S. history class, I was overwhelmed by all of the information. During the pop quiz, I got a *D*. . . . Right after school, the teacher spent two-and-a-half hours with me showing me pictures, cycles, and everything. She allowed me to keep the worksheet with the examples. . . . The pictures and the chart were much more helpful to me. I needed the visual learning.

## Translating Between Adult and Youth Worlds

These youth leaders also translated education terminology and expectations for their peers. One Student Forum member, junior Troy Newman, explained that he spent much of his time at the professional development session explaining vocabulary that some students may not understand and helping make rubrics and departmental standards more comprehensible.

Other students in the Whitman initiative also helped improve instruction and assessment by translating curricular standards into student-friendly terminology. For example, Whitman students were required to take a schoolwide writing assessment twice a year. Student researchers polled their peers and discovered that they did not take the assessment seriously because they saw the questions as irrelevant to their lives. So student researchers developed new questions for the following year's writing assessment, choosing topics relevant to students and phrasing questions in language most students could easily grasp.

To develop essay questions, students visited classrooms and asked their peers what issues they wanted to write about. They then developed prompts focused on these suggested subjects.

## Added Benefits: Metacognition and Relationships

After the professional development sessions, Student Forum representatives continued to work with teachers in research groups focused on learning and experimenting with comprehension strategies. These research groups met during teachers' monthly collaboration period. All teachers were required to participate, and students were included in each of the groups.

Working in teacher research groups deepened students' understanding of their own learning processes. Junior Shane Johnson explained that participating in a reading research group helped him and other students gain a greater understanding of his teachers' instructional strategies, the curriculum, and the classroom from a teacher's perspective:

One of the things that [teachers in my group learned to use] was reading circles. My teacher used it on us today [in class]. Knowing where it came from, having the background, that was cool—knowing what we were going to be doing.

Partnering with teachers to examine practice also helped students develop positive relationships with teachers where none had existed previously. Senior Sala Jackson explained, “You get to interact with the teachers and see who they really are—not only how they act in the classroom.” Through multiple interactions, students and teachers recognized that they often had similar reactions to activities and situations within the school. One teacher commented,

Getting to know kids outside of the classroom is huge. . . . And seeing how aware and how knowledgeable they are . . . They echo absolutely everything that I and other colleagues have talked about in terms of dismay at [lack of] staff and resources. . . . I think it makes me a much better teacher.

## Benefits at Whitman and Beyond

By emphasizing a partnership between students and teachers, Student Forum sought to both build support for their initiatives and gain respect and understanding from teachers and administrators, which they believed was essential to changing the culture of the school. In the process, they established the legitimacy of student voice as part of school change.

A survey of Whitman teachers conducted at the end of this research (Center for Research on the Context of Teaching, 2002) found that, when asked whether student voice was a bigger factor in school decisions since the initiative began, 85 percent agreed; and 23 percent noted a “substantial increase.” In a survey conducted three years after the project began, teachers marked increase in student voice as the area in which they’d seen the greatest change at Whitman, ahead of curriculum, school structures, leadership, professional development, or parent involvement. Clearly, Student Forum influenced teachers’ conceptions of student roles in the school.

The ways Whitman tapped into student leadership and the new views on instruction and assessment that students’ involvement brought

show how including student voice in reform efforts can strengthen schools. Students' invaluable perspectives help identify the issues most in need of improvement and focus faculty on what students truly experience and what kinds of support they need. Youth also play an important role in bridging adult and youth worlds.

Participating in reform efforts increases students' agency, self-worth, respect, and sense of membership in the school (Mitra, 2004; Rudduck & Demetriou, 2003). Student voice initiatives help any community's youth develop in a positive direction and strengthen their skills (Mitra, 2004). To become effective leaders, youth need to participate deeply, not simply "be heard." They need opportunities to influence issues that matter to them (Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2000) and actively solve problems, as the Whitman students did (Fielding, 2001).

Consider the words of Felipe, a senior who struggled at Whitman, particularly in English class. Recalling his positive experiences in the reading research group, he commented,

One day the teacher made everybody [in the working group] stop and said to me, "What were you going to say?" I said it. I felt good. Somebody was listening, you know?

Considering the benefits of student voice initiatives raises the question of why such initiatives are not more common. As the evidence for the value of such efforts increases, researchers are considering how to make student voice projects occur more often and last longer (see Cook-Sather, 2006; Mitra, 2007).

Unfortunately, most schools are not structured in ways that encourage student voice. Large school and class sizes and segregation by age and ability increase student alienation; pressure to prove school effectiveness can lead to a tendency to sweep controversies under the rug and a lack of tolerance for differences of opinion. Although changing the tradition of who has a voice in reform conversations is challenging, the experiences of Whitman and many other schools suggest that it's a challenge worth taking on.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>All school and student names are pseudonyms.

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# Working with Tech-Savvy Kids

Sylvia Martinez and Dennis Harper

*For help with technology integration and tech support,  
schools need look no further than their students.*

Most school or district technology plans call for the inclusion of all stakeholder groups as key to creating a sense of ownership and support that will lead to long-term success. However, these plans often ignore the largest stakeholder group of all—the students.

This situation is especially unbalanced given the fact that today's students are increasingly savvy about the role technology plays in modern life. And most schools are not keeping up in this area. Project Tomorrow's Speak Up survey,<sup>1</sup> which polled more than 300,000 students, parents, and administrators about 21st-century skills and technology use in school, found that students are increasingly discontented with rules that limit their access to technology at school and prohibit them from using the tools and devices they use outside school, such as cell phones, e-mail, and text messaging. In addition, more than 40 percent of students polled in grades 6–12 cited their teacher as an obstacle to using new technology in the classroom.

However, schools *can* teach students the 21st-century skills they need by involving them in technology planning and implementation. By empowering students to work with adults to solve real-world problems, schools can engage students in meaningful dialogue about technology use, Internet safety, online learning, and filtering. In the process, they hone students' skills in problem solving, collaboration, civic awareness,

ethics, leadership, and information and media literacy. Schools benefit from students' insights and experience; at the same time, they show students how their education is relevant for the world today. This kind of involvement captures students' enthusiasm, creates new communication pathways to parents and the community, promotes deeper understanding of the school technology policy, promotes student leadership, improves technology integration schoolwide, and builds respect and trust among all groups.

## Five Time-Tested Models

To avoid using students simply as free labor and to maximize the educational benefits, schools should carefully plan the process of student involvement in technology decision making and implementation. Over time, five models have emerged that balance the benefits of service learning and leadership with the needs of schools struggling to integrate technology.

### Model 1: Students as Committee Members

Last year, Shorecrest Preparatory School, the oldest independent day school in Florida, found itself dealing with several technology-related challenges: privacy issues related to social networking tools like Facebook, a situation involving a student using another's online identity, and students posting inappropriate videos on YouTube. Deciding to proactively address the situation, the school formed a Digital Citizenship committee, consisting of 2 high school students, 10 faculty members, 2 administrators, and 2 parents. The committee immediately tackled a rewrite of the school's 5-year-old technology Acceptable Use Policy. This document needed to accommodate the quickly changing technology landscape of the Web 2.0 world and communicate ideals of citizenship and academic excellence. New guidelines now apply to

all technological devices on campus—those the school purchased as well as those that students bring in.

Students provided invaluable insight to the process, bringing real-life examples and different points of view to the discussions. They shared how their fellow students use computers and other technological devices in and out of school, and they helped write one of the hardest parts of the Acceptable Use Policy, which pertained to cell phones and handheld devices. Students helped shape what they thought were appropriate consequences of misuse. According to Anna Baralt, the Digital Citizenship committee chair, “The Acceptable Use Policy is not only better and stronger because of the students, but for the first time, I believe it will be the catalyst for real school change.”

Students also collaborated on a wiki, creating a living document that students, teachers, and parents could access to view the school’s Acceptable Use Policy. The document also describes the many ways in which students use online tools for doing homework and schoolwork and provides parents with answers about social networking and online safety. Students maintain the site and keep it up to date.

As with any initiative promoting student voice, there are pitfalls and practical considerations. Students must have a real say and a vote that counts; otherwise, they will lose trust in the process. Meeting times need to accommodate student participation, and students may need coaching to understand why committee meetings are so long and sometimes seem to stall as participants strive to reach a consensus. If student participation and involvement are schoolwide goals, it pays to have an adult who can be a liaison to students, encouraging them and teaching necessary collaboration and communication skills.

## Model 2: Students as Trainers

In the San Juan School District in central California, five middle schools have implemented GenYES. In a GenYES school, a group of students participates in a class or club in which they learn technology and

trouble-shooting skills. A designated GenYes teacher shows students how to collaborate with adults, plan technology lessons and assessment activities, and manage projects. GenYES students then work one-on-one with teachers throughout the school to complete projects that help the teachers integrate technology in the classroom, often teaching the teacher how to use the technology. GenYES students also provide tech support that time-strapped and technology-reluctant teachers need to get going with classroom technology.

According to Pete Ribadeneira, math and GenYES teacher at Louis Pasteur Middle School,

Having the GenYES kids teach teachers technology has changed the culture of our school. We make sure the program is available to all kinds of students, not just the ones who are already successful. It lifts their self-esteem, and it translates to other classes. And teachers who would never use technology before are asking for student help.

Last year, Pete made sure that Sophia was placed in his GenYES class. Sophia had already been a low-performing student who was disinterested in school—and then her mother passed away. At that point, nothing seemed to matter to her; both punishment and praise were met with the same indifferent shrug. Pete assigned her to partner with an English teacher who was trying to help students understand Accelerated Reader’s reading assessment process. Sophia and her teacher partner decided that a video would be the most helpful. Sophia learned to use a graphic design program and video software and created a video showing students how to check books out of the library and take the assessments. The video was so successful that all English teachers are now using it. Pete noted, “Now Sophia has a reason to come to school. She’s part of the team and valued for her contributions.”

Gregor was one of those kids you couldn't count on, unless it was to be in the middle of a fight. He was raised in a Russian-speaking household and was failing English. Pete decided to put Gregor to work with an English teacher. At the start of 7th grade, all English classes at Louis Pasteur create an auto-biographical project. Usually, the students make a journal, paste in pictures of themselves, and write a bit about themselves. This year, Gregor showed his partner-teacher how to use Comic Life software, which creates a comic strip-style book. The plan was for Gregor to teach the entire class how to scan their pictures and use the software to complete the assignment.

Other students in GenYES videotaped his practice sessions presenting this lesson. As they showed the video to the GenYES class, Gregor sat in the back row with his head down, sure the other students would laugh and make fun of it. However, student comments were positive, which surprised him. Other students were excited about the software and wanted Gregor's input on additional projects. At the end of the GenYES class, he was sitting up straight with a smile on his face. Said Pete, "He walked out of the classroom that day 10 feet off the ground."

Students can be excellent trainers for instructional technology. In Hudson Falls School District in New York, GenYES students have been helping teachers for more than 10 years. Students attend vendor trainings along-side teachers and bring their knowledge back to the school. Students are often patient and supportive with teachers, who can feel overwhelmed by new technology. Student workshops on high-end graphic programs like Photoshop, Web design tools like Dreamweaver, or 3-D modeling tools like Google SketchUp can be popular with teachers, students, and the community. As instructional technology resources become scarce and budgets are cut, students can provide one-on-one support where teachers need it most—in the classroom.

### Model 3: Students as Technical-Support Agents

Mr. Viles is trying to record his students for his weekly class podcast, and it's not working. Doran is a student on a mission; he has to troubleshoot the problem, correct it, and explain the fix to Mr. Viles, all before an upcoming history exam. Sliding into the classroom, he quickly notices what's wrong and shows the teacher how to make it work. Then it's off to class.

Eleventh grader Doran is one of the Tech Sherpas at Nokomis Regional High School in Newport, Maine. To become Tech Sherpas, students must learn how to handle troubleshooting and repair tasks. They help teachers with any number of tech problems, from updating Web pages, to videotaping classes, to setting up iPods. But more than that, they learn communication and collaboration skills that will serve them well in their future careers and academic pursuits. As Doran noted,

I've learned so much, and not just about the technology. It's made me realize that you have to connect with the teacher you're helping. I think the teachers have become more comfortable with the tech, knowing there are students who can help them right in their own classrooms.

Many schools worry that student tech-support agents will be security problems or cause more issues than they can fix. Technology integrator Kern Kelley, advisor for the Tech Sherpas, doesn't see this as an issue. "We believe that students who are given real responsibility will be more invested in their school," he explained. "If they have a personal connection with the teachers and technology, they're far less likely to be a security threat. Keeping the system up and running becomes their concern—because they're part of the team that has to fix it!"

## Model 4: Students as Resource Developers and Communicators

Students can create curriculum resources, user manuals, documents, presentations, videos, and Web sites for class, school, or community use. Students can be involved in monitoring safe and ethical use of new technology tools, such as e-mail and Web 2.0, along with planning and implementing their use in classroom instruction as well as in communications with parents and the community. They can form a student committee to decide on rules and punishments for students who violate e-mail use policy. Trained, responsible students can moderate forums and blog postings for their own classmates or younger peers who are using online collaboration tools. Students can be in charge of posting new information to the school Web site and can keep these sites up-to-date. Students can be the communicators to “walk the talk” of student empowerment to the community and the school board.

They can also play a major role in conferences. This is the case at the Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia, which opened in partnership with the Franklin Institute. The academy focuses on science, technology, mathematics, and entrepreneurship. In January 2008, in collaboration with the teachers and principal Chris Lehman, students helped run an education conference called Educon 2.0. Students were on hand to meet and greet, videotape, and stream the 50-some conference sessions live on the Web. Students also organized the day for the 150 educators from around the United States who attended. Sessions had such titles as *We’re All Student Teachers*; *New Media Literacies for the 21st Century*; *Yes, All Students Should Learn to Program*; *Advisory: The Soul of School*; and *Engineering: The Constructivist Curriculum*.

The students didn’t just help—they participated. These teens waded into discussions and spoke their minds. They facilitated discussions of diverse education issues—such as the role of technology in the

classroom, project-based learning, student involvement in governance, and school reform—sharing their opinions and experiences with people they'd never met before. It was obvious that the academy listens to these young adults; they know they can share their voice.

In June 2008, students created, edited, and produced a video documentary about the Science Leadership Academy to raise money for the school. The documentary premiered at the Franklin Institute; students provided all the publicity, flyers, and community outreach. Most important, the students were able to create an original piece of media that spoke to their vision of their school.

### Model 5: Students as Peer Mentors and Leaders

Peer mentoring is a well-known and research-proven strategy to increase students' ownership in their work. It is often as rewarding and academically enriching to the mentor as it is to the mentee. English teachers often use peer editing to improve student work, provide a wider range of reactions and comments, and teach editing and mentoring skills.

Peer mentoring is also a perfect complement to technology. By teaching peer mentors technology skills, schools can support a wider range of technologies, software, and hardware. Mentors can free up a teacher from having to be a tech guru on a variety of new tools and technology. Students can easily work with students of various ages, ability levels, and home language backgrounds.

At Nevada Middle School in Nevada, Iowa, David, Amber, Maddie, and Joe are TechYES peer mentors. TechYES is a technology literacy certification program for students in grades 6–9. To obtain certification, participants must successfully complete a project that meets state and local technology proficiency requirements. As part of TechYES, a structured peer-mentoring program creates a cadre of trained peer

tutors who help other students complete their TechYES projects and achieve certification.

This year, these four Nevada Middle School students are devoting their study halls and summer to doing just that. They love computer programming and are adept at such multimedia tools as the iLife suite, which students use to create, organize, view, and publish pictures, movies, music, and Web pages. They naturally are the ones called on when student projects use these elements. Although they have not always been the most stellar students, they have been working hard to keep up their grades so they can remain in the TechYES peer-mentor group.

The peer mentors make it possible for the school to offer a much richer and more varied technology experience. They become role models and get positive attention for their strengths. In addition, at Nevada Middle School, almost one-half of the peer mentors are girls, showing that girls can be just as tech savvy as the boys. According to Ann Malven, the advisor for the TechYES Peer Mentor club,

The younger students, and especially the girls, really react to seeing how competent and knowledgeable the peer mentors are, and I'm hearing more and more from other teachers that my peer-mentor team members are helping them with technology, too! I have to work hard to keep challenging these kids. One of the big benefits for our district is that these students help with summer staff development classes. We are offering four technology integration classes this summer. The peer mentors have volunteered to help us teach the teachers and staff. These digital natives are eager to show the adults what they have learned, and the staff is very receptive to their assistance and praise them often for their expertise.

## Getting Started

*Creating a plan that includes students in school technology decision making and implementation is just the first step. Keep the following in mind:*

- Provide student access to training, hardware, and software as needed.
- Give students adequate time and attention to help them grow into their new roles. They will not automatically know how to participate in these opportunities. Encourage a student-led culture with real responsibility that increasingly challenges students to step up and prove themselves. Reward proven responsibility with increased trust.
- Don't forget your younger students. It's never too early for authentic learning opportunities, and these students can be surprisingly helpful with concrete, well-defined tasks.
- Plan for turnover. Continually recruit and train new students. Allow veteran student leaders to mentor new recruits.
- Look for ways to encourage long-term student involvement. Make student involvement part of a credit-bearing class, which counts toward graduation or service-learning credits. This involvement can also take the form of independent study or an internship.
- Create an adult advisory position. This person should have a passion for student empowerment. The advisor will monitor participation, recruit and train new members, and facilitate group activities.
- Be sure to include school administration and staff in planning for any for-credit student tech-support classes or similar courses. School counselors need to know that these classes will have high expectations for students to participate, collaborate, and be independent thinkers and leaders. Create a plan to recruit students and persevere, even if the classes are small to begin with.
- Don't mistake the ease with which youth today use technology in their everyday lives for knowing how to use it in education settings. Teach them the appropriate use of technology and its role in enhancing learning.

## A New Respect

Student involvement in technology planning and implementation is more than just kids helping out. As students share their knowledge and enthusiasm for technology with adult educators, they come to know real human beings who are striving to make the world a better place.

In return, as teachers and administrators collaborate with students, they share their expertise and passion for education with a new generation, and they come to see students in a new light—as competent partners. Using these five time-tested models to include students as true stakeholders in technology planning and implementation fosters a new respect for everyone’s role in improving education.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Project Tomorrow. (2008). *Speak Up 2007 for students, teachers, parents, and school leaders: Selected national findings*. Irvine, CA: Author. Available: [www.tomorrow.org/docs/national%20findings%20speak%20up%202007.pdf](http://www.tomorrow.org/docs/national%20findings%20speak%20up%202007.pdf)

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# The Power of Audience

Steven Levy

*When student work culminates in a genuine product for an authentic audience, it makes a world of difference.*

I was meeting with Laura, a first-year 6th grade Spanish teacher in an urban school. She slumped deep in her chair, exhausted after another frustrating day. Quite a contrast from her enthusiasm at our summer institute, where she had first encountered the idea of Expeditionary Learning Schools.

Laura had been particularly excited about *learning expeditions*—academic investigations that teach standards-based content and skills in the context of meaningful projects. Although she had not had time to design an expedition during our summer work together, she had developed a few ideas that she thought would engage students. She had received encouraging feedback when she presented them to her colleagues.

During the first three weeks of school, however, she received different feedback from her students—numerous eye rolls and incessant grumblings. All the activities she thought would appeal to them were greeted with yawns. They couldn't have cared less about her songs, dialogues, or posters. When I met her, she was returning from the copy machine with a stack of pages copied out of a Spanish workbook. "At least they'll be doing something you're supposed to do in Spanish class," she said grimly.

### About Expeditionary Learning Schools

Expeditionary Learning Schools Outward Bound is a national nonprofit organization that works with schools to improve student achievement, build student character, enhance teacher practices, and instill a positive school culture. At the heart of this approach are learning expeditions: interdisciplinary units aligned with state and district standards that culminate in sophisticated products demonstrating student skill and understanding.

The Expeditionary Learning approach is experiential and project based, involving students in original research—with experts—to create high-quality products for audiences beyond the classroom. Third-party studies conducted by the Rand Corporation, the Academy for Educational Development, the American Institutes for Research, and the National Staff Development Council support the effectiveness of the Expeditionary Learning approach.

To learn more about the projects described here and others from Expeditionary Learning schools, visit the Expeditionary Learning Schools Outward Bound Web site at [www.elschools.org](http://www.elschools.org).

“Is there *anything* you did that seemed to get their attention?” I asked hopefully.

“Well, I asked them to make life-size posters of themselves and label the body parts in Spanish. I thought that would be fun, but mostly they just goofed around. At least they did something. But I know that’s not really what expeditions are about.”

“Do you have any other plans?” I asked.

“I thought it would be interesting to study some countries where they speak Spanish. But these kids are too difficult to manage, and it’s too hard to organize. No, for now we’ll just keep doing pages from the workbook.”

How could I help this teacher?

I thought of a photograph my wife and son had just brought back from a two-week trip to Guatemala where they were helping to build houses in an Ixil community called San Juan Cotzal. Women and children were the main inhabitants of this highland village. Many of the men had been killed by either the Guatemalan army or guerrilla revolutionary forces. The photograph showed a small “school” in the

village: a patchwork tin roof held up with some poles, with no walls, a dirt floor, and children of all ages gathered around the teacher. One teacher for 40 kids.

For these children, most of whom spoke Ixil as their native language, the key to any future life outside their village (or to a productive life in their village) was to learn Spanish. But the school had few resources—and certainly no Spanish books to help children learn the language.

I told Laura about my family's trip and about the school's desperate need to teach its students Spanish. "Do you think your students could make simple books, first readers, that we could send to the Ixil children in Guatemala?"

She seemed interested. "But what about the district standards?"

"Let's say your students are going to write a simple story. Aren't characters an important part of a story?" I asked. "They'll need to learn the parts of the body to be able to describe their characters. And setting, isn't that an important part of a story? They'll have to learn about all the geographic terms and natural features: mountains, rivers, trees, sky, and so on. And plot, doesn't there have to be some action in a story? Won't they have to learn some verbs? And sentence construction? Aren't all these part of the standards?"

We went on exploring all the ways she could teach her students core content and skills in the context of making these books for the Ixil children. Because students were at different levels, some students could make an ABC book with pictures and Spanish words, and other students could add sentences. Students who already spoke Spanish could actually write more complex stories. All these would be authentic products, genuinely useful to various children in San Juan Cotzal.

The next week I visited Laura's class, told some stories about the conflict in Guatemala, and showed some photographs from San Juan Cotzal. Laura introduced the idea of making books to send to the children. In a short time, Spanish class was transformed from "Gotta

do boring worksheets” to “Can we make books to send to these kids in Guatemala?”

To be honest, the finished books were not of particularly high quality. But at an exhibition of student work in which all the books were displayed, you would have thought the students had each won the Pulitzer Prize. They radiated pride. The parents were equally enthusiastic. Many had never seen their child work so hard to produce anything like this book. The students read their books to younger children learning Spanish at the elementary school. The school librarian put copies in the library.

Laura’s students had learned much more than they would have from worksheets. Laura still had much to learn about improving quality by using models of exemplary work, establishing criteria for excellence, teaching students to give feedback, and supporting them through multiple drafts. But the culture of her classroom had changed. She had learned the first principle of getting students to take responsibility for their own work: the power of audience.

## Why Audience?

Writing teachers know about the power of audience. When you write an essay, you have to know who your audience will be so that you can adjust your message and style accordingly. Chorus and band directors know the power of audience. Why do students work so hard practicing the same passages over and over, week after week? Because the audience is coming for the concert!

But who is the audience for 99 percent of the work students do in school? Right—the teacher. If you happen to work with students who come to school eager to win their teachers’ approval, you won’t need to do much to motivate them. (There might be other problems ahead for students who do their work mainly to please their teachers, but that’s another story.) But more and more students come to class with no desire to please their teachers and no vision of the role school might

play on their path to success. They may have no one in their family who has traveled that road.

The most effective way to engage these students in learning is to create an authentic audience, giving them a sense that someone else (besides teachers and parents) cares about their work. They need to have a vision of a product that matters. They need to learn content and develop skills to complete the product. One of the first things we consider when we design curriculum in Expeditionary Learning Schools is how students can apply knowledge and skills in creating a product that will serve an authentic community need.

## Examples of Authentic Audience

### Dimillo's Floating Restaurant

Make sure to bring your family with you when you eat at Dimillo's Floating Restaurant in Portland, Maine. The children won't mind waiting for their meal because they'll be busy working on the activity book created by 2nd graders at East End Community School.

Teachers Holly Merrow and Nancy Hess invited owner Johnnie Dimillo to their class to talk to students about a problem at his famous seafood restaurant. He told them how kids often got bored waiting for their food, a problem 2nd graders could relate to. He asked the students whether, as part of their study of ocean habitats, they could create an activity book to keep children engaged until their order was ready.

Teachers and students looked at models of activity books and brainstormed a list of the things they might include in theirs. To produce a high-quality product that the restaurant could really use, they found that they needed to master much content and many skills.

One of the essential features of products in Expeditionary Learning Schools is that they demonstrate mastery of the learning targets. The activity book the 2nd graders created showed their scientific understanding of ocean habitats, life cycles, and systems, as well as form and function. For example, one page, which traced a lobster's journey from

the ocean to the table at Dimillo's Floating Restaurant, required them to build their economic understanding of goods and services. The students spent a day on a lobster boat and interviewed the captain. They visited a lobster pound. They met with a chef, collecting notes along the way. They read books on lobsters and the ocean habitat. They refined their writing skills and developed rich vocabulary as they produced many drafts. Their learning was embedded in the creation of an authentic product for a famous restaurant.

## The Erie Canal

Many students in the city of Rochester, New York, study history through an important local landmark, the Erie Canal. The original canal flowed through the city until 1920, when it was converted to a subway system that ran until 1956. Now it is a dilapidated corridor that the state has proposed to fill in with concrete.

Students in Shannon Hillman's and Kate Daniels's 6th grade class at the Genesee Community Charter School learned about an alternative plan to revitalize downtown Rochester by recreating the canal. They embarked on a yearlong expedition investigating the pros and cons of the proposal.

Guided by the New York State social studies standards, they began their expedition by developing an understanding of the historical roles and significance of canals, which enabled early cities to rise in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, Rome, and the Meso-American culture. They examined how the construction and uses of canals have changed over time and how canals have affected the economics and environment of the communities they serve. They studied the physics principles at work in locks, boats, and construction equipment.

To understand how cities make decisions about economic development, groups of students traveled to four cities in the United States and Canada where similar downtown waterways have been successful in revitalizing and preserving urban neighborhoods. To raise money for

these trips, the students all completed a Red Cross babysitting training class and offered their services to families in the school. They also got a grant from a local bank to supplement funds in the school's fieldwork budget.

In Ottawa, Canada; Providence, Rhode Island; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and San Antonio, Texas, students met with city planners, business owners, mayors, city engineers, economic development experts, city council members, and visitors' bureau representatives. They met with the architects of the waterway projects. They also interviewed tourists and residents. Students gathered data about steps in the planning process, financing municipal projects, economic outcomes, and the effect of revitalized waterways on residents, business owners, and visitors.

They prepared a formal report of their findings to present to Rochester's mayor, Robert J. Duffy, who agreed to squeeze them into his busy schedule at 7:30 a.m. because he had a city council meeting at 8:00. One by one, students approached the podium and presented different parts of the report. When they finished, the astonished mayor invited the class to repeat their presentation to the entire city council. The class also presented their research at a public town meeting and hosted a call-in talk show on a local radio station to elicit public comments and answer questions about the plan. In a subsequent meeting, the city council appropriated \$350,000 to do a feasibility study of the urban waterway plan.

## Tuskegee Airmen

Students who attend Central Alternative High School in Dubuque, Iowa, have been unable to succeed in a traditional school setting. Dubuque social studies teacher John Adelman designed an expedition to teach students about World War II. He began by choosing a compelling topic—the story of the Tuskegee Airmen, the famous all-black

air force squadron—which would act as a case study through which students would master curriculum standards related to World War II.

Students in John's class weren't much interested in the Tuskegee Airmen until they discovered that one of the airmen, Bob Martin, had attended the same Dubuque elementary and middle school that some of them had, and had graduated from Dubuque High School in 1936. Students wrote Martin and several other surviving airmen, asking many questions to get their perspectives on the war and their part in it. They followed up with an invitation to the airmen to come to Dubuque to be guest speakers at a public seminar in which the students would teach the community what they had learned about the extraordinary achievement of these courageous Americans.

Students conducted research on the war and the Tuskegee Airmen. They practiced public speaking before going into the community to raise awareness of the squadron's remarkable story. They spoke at various community and civic organizations, did live radio interviews, and orchestrated newspaper coverage to raise public awareness and generate funds. They brought four of the Tuskegee Airmen to Dubuque, sponsored a public seminar attended by more than 900 people, and donated \$5,200 to support the Red Tail Project—an effort to restore a P-51C Mustang fighter, the same make and model the Tuskegee Airmen flew over southern Europe.

John collaborated with English teacher Tim Ebeling to help students turn the firsthand information they gained from the letters and questionnaires into a book. The students wanted to tell the whole Tuskegee story, including the disturbing similarities between Hitler's racial policies and the United States' racial practices at that time. Their book, *The Tuskegee Airmen: Victory at Home and Abroad*, includes 230 pages of original research and has sold more than 1,500 copies. William Holton, the historian of the Tuskegee Airmen Oral History Documentation Project, has entered the book and the interviews conducted by the students into the national database as a resource for historians. John noted,

An interesting parallel between the perceptions the military had of the airmen 50 years ago and the public's impression of alternative students today was not lost on student Drew Brashaw. Drew commented, "These guys had something to prove. The world didn't believe that black men could fly planes, let alone protect bombers. Sometimes it feels like we have something to prove, too, just because we go to Central. Some people think we're lazy, and won't ever make anything of ourselves."

Not after this expedition.

## A World of Difference

These expeditions are not isolated examples of exceptional teachers and gifted students. Expeditionary Learning Schools Outward Bound works with 4,300 teachers and 45,000 students, many of whom are struggling to overcome racial and economic disadvantages. There is, of course, a wide spectrum of implementation as teachers like Laura learn how to design and manage expeditions, but there's one thing all our teachers have discovered: When student work culminates in a genuine product for an authentic audience, it makes a world of difference in student engagement, learning, and achievement.

At Expeditionary Learning, we have a growing archive of more than 400 authentic products, including biographies of nursing home residents, field guides to neighborhood flora and fauna, water study presentations to city councils, portraits of recent refugees from war-torn countries, geological guides to regional landforms, theme-based calendars on everything from fitness to civil rights heroes, and alternative energy reports to school committees, to name a few. These products show what students can accomplish when we give them meaningful projects and the right support. When students work on curriculum standards in the context of producing a genuine product for an

authentic audience, the result is enhanced achievement in content-area knowledge, literacy, craftsmanship, and character.

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# Part 7

Connecting with  
Students' Communities  
and Cultures



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# The Violence You Don't See

Grace L. Sussman

*A teacher in an inner-city school set out to understand the obstacles to learning that her students experienced, only to find that she was one of them.*

“I want to color the rectangles,” Ariella stated.

“No, I’m doing that,” Stacey insisted.

“Then I want to decorate the outside,” Ariella demanded.

“There’s no decoration on a graph,” Stacey corrected.

“You did the first part! Let me do this part!” Ariella cried out.

“I’m doing it!” Stacey shouted and pushed in front of Ariella.

Interactions like this happened every day in my 4th grade classroom. They interrupted learning. As struggling learners, my students were neither motivated nor engaged.

For years I had taught successfully in the suburbs at all levels. Principals had singled me out as a teacher whose students excelled. Student work had blazed on walls, door frames, and windows. My classrooms had hummed with students working. But not here at Clearview Elementary.<sup>1</sup> I had come here because I thought that I could make a contribution. But in this inner-city school in an impoverished area, only a chirp here and there signaled students on task.

Before the school year began, I decorated my classroom. Pictures of snow-covered wolves and splashing dolphins camouflaged the classroom's dingy walls. Blue, sparkling print on a banner proclaimed, "Math, the language of nature!" The classroom reflected who I was. I thought it reflected who my students were as well.

## From There to Here

Poor student behavior characterized Clearview Elementary School. Disruptive students crowded the main office. They sat in the chairs, lined the walls, and waited their turns with the school disciplinarian. Regular reports of students bringing in knives and guns, even at the kindergarten level, spread through the school. Classroom management dominated as a key issue. As a result, a worksheet culture prevailed: Sitting in desks in straight rows, students completed worksheets as their teachers patrolled the aisles. "The students don't care about education," the veteran teachers informed me.

It will come as no surprise that low achievement also characterized Clearview. Fewer than half of the students scored at the basic level on standardized tests, reflecting the national averages for impoverished, minority students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

A few teachers, mainly in the lower grades, strayed from the worksheet culture and embraced constructivist instructional practices that promoted learning centers and group work. Like them, I had always believed that students achieve more when social interactions and discovery accompany direct instruction (Cunningham & Allington, 2006; Delpit, 2006). I wanted my students speaking, listening, reading, and writing. I wanted literacy to empower them so that "social good and relative freedom" (Lankshear & McLaren, 1993) characterized their lives. But at Clearview, I wasn't achieving these goals. In spite of my efforts, I couldn't find the spark that would motivate my students. Besides, the classroom disruptions extinguished my attempts.

## Coming to School Angry

The social nature of teaching and learning demands that teachers have an understanding of their students to build culturally appropriate classroom climates (Gay, 2000; Smith, 2003, Webster, 2002). But I really didn't understand my students. New to the city, I was a white teacher in a mostly black school. I was also a parent, had owned and operated my own day-care center, and had taught in private and public schools at all levels. I expected that my life experiences as a middle-aged woman would prepare me to teach anywhere. Until I came to Clearview.

A student I'll call Jenny loved to learn and consistently earned A's on the work that she handed in. The problem was that she only turned in work that she thought was perfect. If she made an error while working on a math problem or writing a paragraph, she crumpled up her paper and started over again, getting more frustrated with each attempt. No amount of encouragement freed her to use an eraser. Eventually her frustration mounted to a fever pitch, forcing her to quit. She spent the rest of the time sitting amidst a pile of crumpled papers with her arms folded on her chest and her face flushed in anger. She struck out at anyone who even looked her way.

The rest of the class had learned to give Jenny plenty of room. They were used to her eruptions. She began most mornings with one. Arriving late, she would burst in with fire in her eyes and slam the door shut. Finding a nearby spot on the wall, she would slink down to the floor, dropping her coat and book bag. For 15 minutes, she would sit there sucking her thumb.

Gradually the frustration would lift. She would get up, calmly hang up her coat and book bag, walk to her desk, and begin her day.

## Violence Unveiled

My students were bright. Most of them bought groceries, cooked dinners, and supervised their siblings while their parents were out of the

house. But when they came to my class, they slumped in their seats and tuned out or became aggressive with one another.

I realized that I had to study my students to gain the insights that I needed to help them learn. To discover the strengths and weaknesses of their social dynamics so that I could build a better learning environment, I investigated six questions: What actions do you think are violent? Do you think that words can be violent? How do you handle constructive criticism from peers? How do you build mutually satisfying relationships? Do you touch one another affectionately? How do you perceive consequences?

We discussed the first two questions as a whole class. Afterwards, students wrote their reactions in their journals, which I collected.

In response to the first question, *What actions do you think are violent?*, students suggested a wide gamut of behaviors, from hitting to stabbing to just being grouchy. In response to the second question, which asked whether words could be violent, students called out the words they considered to be violent. I filled the chalkboard with these words. Visibly pained at the sight of them, the students fell silent. Their journal entries revealed later on that they feared the words, even if they didn't know what some of them meant. One student wrote, "What's a *bastard*? Am I a *bastard*? Nobody better be callin' me no *bastard*!"

To get an idea of how they handled positive criticism from their peers, I observed the students as they worked on projects in groups, and I took notes on their reactions to suggestions. Instead of coaching one another, students generally responded to constructive criticism with something like "Don't go changin' anything! It's fine!"

To see whether the students had ways of building satisfying relationships, I observed their interactions during free time and recess. Rather than saying, "Can I play with you?" students generally pushed their way into games and activities. On one occasion, a student politely requested to join a game. The other students ignored her. Those who established themselves as leaders gave orders; the others feebly protested, but then complied.

Although students rarely touched one another affectionately in the classroom, they regularly did so in the hall as they were walking single file, reaching out to stroke the hair of the child in front of them or rest a hand on another's shoulder. Perhaps the limited view of the single file provided them with a temporary escape from their apparent commitment to a tough persona. The students had a real problem with the last question, *How do you perceive consequences?*

Their responses revealed a deep ignorance of human interactions. One episode was particularly illuminating. One student approached another who was visibly upset by a previous incident and asked whether she could use her markers. When she didn't get a reply, she decided to take them. In a flash, the two girls were in a fight. Afterward, when they had settled down, I asked them how we can tell that someone is upset. "Their heart be beepin'," one student told me.

I asked her whether we could see a beeping heart. "No," she said sadly and shook her head. As students responded and told their stories during the six weeks of my exploration, a change occurred among us. We talked as a whole class, in small groups, and one-on-one. We ate lunch together. I walked with students to classes and talked with them out on the play area during recess, always watching, questioning, and listening with the six-question template in mind.

## A New Kind of Caring

Without planning it, I noticed that a kind of free zone had sprung up around us. Assured of my care for them because of my more obvious interest in their lives, students let down their guard. They were also free from my constant grammatical corrections. I didn't even think to correct them as I began to delight in the richness of their language. I released myself from the pressure to teach and allowed myself to let them teach me about their values, needs, and beliefs. I saw them spring to life.

Everyone wanted to tell his or her story. As they told them, I watched their slumped postures transform like just-watered trees after a long drought. One by one, they spoke to me and listened to one another. They watched for my response. I listened deeply, struck by the difficulties of their lives, inspired by their resilience.

I learned how one student watched an aunt die as a former boyfriend beat her, and no response came from dialing 911. Another student shared how he climbed up on his kitchen counter and pummeled an intruder with a baseball bat. The children spoke about their fear of drive-by shootings and robberies.

Layers of my unconscious assumptions lifted and fell away as I learned more about their lives. Their former lethargy in my class had called to mind images of a people paralyzed in life circumstances with little self-efficacy. Their stories depicted the opposite. I saw the students dealing head-on with what came their way—they were fierce, determined survivors. Their power shone. I felt raw, open, and more zealous than ever to learn how to teach these children. I wanted to discover the barriers to their learning.

## The Role of Violence

The violence of the neighborhood in which my students live often seeps into the classroom. Poverty, racism, neglect, unemployment, and substance abuse plague the neighborhood surrounding Clearview. Not even the normal community machinery of police patrols and trash removal exists there.

Violence plays a central role in my students' lives. It is not a last resort when people are frustrated or angry, but a primary instrument to negotiate human interactions. How tough one is and how well he or she can fight distinguishes one student from another. If my students do not engage in violence, they lose respect among their peers and imperil their own safety. Anderson (1999) calls this the "street code—it is better to be feared than to be loved" (p. 102).

The street code also supplies a kind of hope. Hope in its proven way of acquiring material goods. Hope in the connections woven among the toughest. Hope in the sense of self in a place that is not conducive to self-worth. Someone tough knows who he is and what he has to do. Knowing who you are and what you have to do in school, with its markedly contrasting culture of academic achievement, is another matter entirely. The school broadcasts that its ways and merits count, but the students believe differently.

### Roadblocks to Learning

From my conversations with my students, I expected to learn about the meaning that violence held for them, as well as about their social dynamics. I expected that I would then design new teaching strategies or include social skills as a curriculum piece. But the study held a surprise for me: It pointed out my ignorance of my students' lives, cultures, and values. I had assumed that my students were more like me than they actually were.

The first revelation came while administering a standardized achievement test. I read the title of the reading section: "Cross-Country Skiing in the Hills." I almost dropped the booklet. I felt like a traitor, encouraging my students to do their best while presenting them with a Sisyphus-like task: to score proficiently by grasping the nuances of an unfamiliar activity. Skiing was as foreign to them as navigating rough city streets would be to me. I looked at them, poised at their desks with sharpened pencils, ready to take the test, and I felt ashamed. Despite their intelligence and eagerness to do well, the deck was stacked against them. They would do poorly. Worse, they would be blamed for it (Ryan, 1971).

Later one of my students asked, "When are you gonna start teaching us?" Flabbergasted by her question, I asked her why she thought that I had not been teaching. "We ain't got one worksheet yet," she replied. The students were accustomed to teachers offering them content that

called for brief, right answers and that was easily transmitted, easily answered, and easily graded. This focus nullifies school as a place for the kind of learning that strengthens identity and prepares students for a full and satisfying life.

Everywhere I looked, I saw roadblocks to student learning. Instead of snow-covered wolves and splashing dolphins, pictures of cultural heroes and artifacts should cover my classroom walls. I read the titles of my favorite read-aloud books: *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, *Freckle Juice*, and *The Bridge to Terabithia*. Little in those books reflected my students' lives.

In the faculty lounge, some staff members ridiculed student speech patterns. Moreover, a walk through the school halls showed that the only student work displayed there was written in Standard English. The school seemed to ignore the potency of the students' home language, inadvertently sending a message to the students that their culture was inferior.

## A Surprising Complicity

I initiated my study because my students were not learning, and I didn't understand why. I expected the study to confirm neighborhood violence as the main culprit. Given my history of classroom success as well as my effort and commitment, I was shocked to find myself complicit in perpetuating my students' alienation from school.

As my students told their stories, I learned to listen with a better awareness of and appreciation for their diverse views and with a greater receptivity to their values and behaviors.

During a project that required the students to build a small model of a room with balsa sticks, one student placed three sofas in the room. When I asked her why, she replied, "One is for Uncle Leroy, the other is for his cousin, and the last one is for us." Other students talked about their families' commitments to family reunions, how they would some-

times travel across country either by bus or packed in their or their friends' cars. Their sense of community and sharing startled me.

Discussion has always been key in my classroom, but the “free zone” discussion that took place during this time awakened me to who and what the students were. I feel freer now to invite my students' lives into the classroom. The study also interrupted preconceived notions and such inhibiting behaviors as continually correcting student speech patterns. For example, Jesse Jackson's notion of cash English enables me to teach Standard English grammar in formal writing exercises as a skill the students need to put “cash in their pockets.” Their home speech patterns work just fine elsewhere.

Now the students trust me more. They're sure of my commitment to them and their learning. Their trust is reflected in a new peacefulness in class.

The same dialogic listening extends to the students' parents. As I visit their homes, the parents tell me about their children. We share our concerns and expectations, and I explain my teaching and grading styles. The parents also attend classroom luncheons just to chat, and I call each student's home monthly to maintain the connection.

To combat the cultural mismatch that exists between the school and students, I created thematic units with authentic purpose and audience. In one unit, students developed a survey that they administered to several 4th and 5th grade classes, which investigated possible changes in Clearview. Student representatives organized the data, wrote up a report, and presented it to the principal. “We hope you read it,” they said.

Not only did the principal read it—he also made the requested changes. Visitors to Clearview now wear I.D. badges. The restrooms have soap, paper towels, and doors on the stalls, and a custodian cleans these facilities more regularly. The school halls now have trashcans.

There are other changes as well. I now regularly look to drama, art, music, video productions, and tape recordings as means to effectively assess my students' learning. I more frequently model explicit

think-alouds because my students need to familiarize themselves with the processes that good readers use to comprehend texts. My read-aloud books include such culturally responsive texts as Christopher Paul Curtis's *Bud, Not Buddy* (Thorndike Press, 1999), the story of an orphan on the run from abusive foster homes, and, by the same author, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* (Thorndike Press, 2000), a story that deals with events surrounding the burning of Birmingham's Sixteenth Avenue Baptist Church.

I provide more practice time and construct more shared vocabulary in content areas to bridge academic speak and home speak. I display my students' work in both Standard English and their home language. And I've replaced the snow-covered wolves and splashing dolphins with pictures of African American heroes and cultural artifacts.

As a result of my conversations with students, I learned about the role that violence plays in their lives. But I also learned that cultural nonresponsiveness, which both the school and I perpetuated, causes another kind of violence, an invisible kind. This understanding—and the personal transformation that it led to—is helping me fulfill my commitment to my students.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>The school name is a pseudonym.

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# Family Partnerships That Count

JoBeth Allen

*How can schools meaningfully engage families  
in supporting student learning?*

Uptown High School's Mardi Gras Carnival, organized by the 21-person Parent Advisory Council, is a fun family event that raises nearly \$1,000 each year.

Midtown Elementary teachers reach their goal of 100 percent participation in parent-teacher conferences, in which they strive to convey all the important information about programs, test scores, and grades in only 15 minutes.

Downtown Middle School draws more than half of its families to Technology Night. Parents walk through impressive exhibits of student projects and then enjoy refreshments in the cafeteria, converted to a student-run Cyberspace Café.

Which of these endeavors to “involve parents” contribute to student learning?

To start a conversation about this question at your school, you might want to gather a group of educators, students, and family members to brainstorm a list of everything the school does to involve families. If you're like most schools, it will be an impressive list. Next, put each item in one of three categories: Builds Deep Relationships; Supports Student Learning; or Does Neither (But We Keep Doing It Anyway). Finally, examine the activities in the first two columns and ask, Which families are benefiting? Which families are not?

Contrary to the prevailing myth, when parents or guardians walk into school, their children's learning does not automatically increase. Mattingly, Radmila, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar (2002) analyzed 41 parent involvement programs. They concluded that some things we count as parental involvement—being room parents, signing behavior reports, attending PTA meetings, and so on—don't improve student achievement. So what does?

Henderson and Mapp (2002) examined 80 studies on parental involvement, preschool through high school, throughout the United States. They concluded that family involvement was likely to increase student achievement when that involvement was connected to academic learning. Let's look at three important approaches they identified: building respectful relationships, engaging families in supporting learning at home, and addressing cultural differences.

## Building Respectful Relationships

### Family Funds of Knowledge

Horses. That was the common thread Kathy Amanti noticed from home visits with three families in her multiage bilingual classroom. She learned that Carlos's father was teaching his sons how to care for and ride the family's three horses; that Fernando rode and cared for horses each summer when he stayed with his grandparents in Mexico; and that the Rivera family had gathered to watch a videotape of a relative riding in a horse race in Sonoyta, Mexico.

Surveying the rest of her class, Amanti found a great deal of interest in and knowledge about horses. Together, she and her students designed an interdisciplinary unit on horses, which included taking a field trip to Carlos's home, observing a parent shoeing a horse, and viewing the Riveras' video. Families were resources on individual projects as well, helping students study Spanish explorers; the history of saddles;

local horse ordinances; horse anatomy; measurement (converting hands to inches and feet); and horse gestation and evolution.

Amanti was one of a group of teachers and professors who worked with Mexican and Yaqui Indian families in Tucson, Arizona (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). These educators challenged the deficit model and developed a powerful alternative: learning about and incorporating family *funds of knowledge* into the classroom. Teachers studied the history of their border community. They visited homes and entered into conversations—*not* scripted interviews—centering on family and work history (border crossings, extended families, religious traditions, work experiences); household activities (gardening, home and car repair, caring for children, recreation); and parents' views of their roles (raising children, languages spoken at home, schooling).

The home visits enabled teachers and families to build *confianza* (mutual trust) and to create *reciprocity* (a healthy partnership in which teachers and parents give in ways that support one another and support the student). The teachers learned that all families have important experiences, skills, and knowledge that teachers can tap into. The teachers also became more knowledgeable about how their students learned outside school. For example, in many Mexican and Yaqui families, children are active participants and ask questions that guide their own learning, skills not always encouraged at school.

Throughout the year, teachers met in study groups to discuss what they learned and to create thematic units that built on their community's funds of knowledge. They learned that families had a wealth of knowledge about ranching, farming, mining, and construction. In the area of business, they knew about appraising, renting and selling, labor laws, and building codes. Household management acumen included budgeting, child care, cooking, and repair. Many had knowledge of both contemporary and folk medicine for people and animals. Religious knowledge included rituals; texts (especially the Bible); and moral and ethical understandings.

We've seen how Kathy Amanti incorporated family funds of knowledge into meaningful learning that went beyond the classroom. Here's another example of the way learning with and from families can support student achievement.

## Teacher-Parent Partnerships for Learning

Antonio was 13, had a broad vocabulary, and was fluent in oral Spanish and English. He had been homeless for five years, and his family frequently moved. He stopped reading specialist Paula Murphy in the hall one day, asking, "I need help in reading. Can I go to your class?"

Paula started making home visits to Antonio's family at the shelter, at a friend's apartment, and at other temporary housing. She learned that his mother and stepfather helped him with homework; his mother wrote short stories, provided emotional support, and encouraged him to do well in school. Paula designed a reading program that actively involved his parents. She engaged in regular communication with the family. She also intervened with the district so Antonio could stay in her school when the family moved. In one year, Antonio's reading and writing skills improved significantly. Paula reflected,

As a Puerto Rican . . . I felt that sharing the culture and the language of my Latino students was enough to understand their world. . . . I learned I know nothing about growing up poor, homeless, and in an environment of violence. . . . I learned of my responsibility to understand not only my students' ethnic culture, but their community culture as well. (Murphy, 1994, p. 87)

Although there is no substitute for the personal relationships and deep understanding of family knowledge developed in home visits, it's not always possible for teachers to visit every student's home on a regular basis. But there's another way of learning about a student's life outside of school—hand her a camera!

## Photographs of Local Knowledge Sources (PhOLKS)

I was part of a teacher study group in Georgia that used photography to learn about family funds of knowledge (Allen et al., 2002). The PhOLKS group served a culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse student population. Educators in our group were African American, Colombian, and European American; Christian and Jewish; originally from the Northeast, Midwest, and South; with childhoods from poor to privileged. This diversity was essential in mediating our understanding of cultural differences.

With a small grant, we paid for three 35mm cameras, film, and processing for each classroom. We invited students to photograph what was important to them in their homes and neighborhoods. Teachers prepared students by analyzing photographic essays, sharing photographs of their own lives outside school, and inviting parents who enjoyed photography to help students learn how to see through the camera's eye. English as a second language teacher Carmen Urdanivia-English read from her photo-illustrated memoir about growing up in Colombia and then invited a reporter from the local Spanish-language newspaper to show students ways to document family and community histories.

Students took cameras home on a rotating schedule, charged with capturing their out-of-school lives. Teachers invited students and family members to write or dictate stories about their photos. Parents and guardians contributed descriptions, memories, poetry, letters, and personal stories.

Cyndy, a white teacher, worried about Kenesha, a black student who often slept in class. Other teachers at the school said her mother was never involved and had been in special education when she attended the school. When Kenesha took her photo journal home with an invitation to write about the pictures, her mother wrote,

My daughter name is Kenesha. . . . She is very sweet all the teacher and people love her because she is understanding and nice, polite, sweet, listen, smart. She have her good days &

bad days but she is the sweetest child you like to spend time with. . . . Members of the church love to hear her sing she sings so good you love her. She like to read and talk a lot. She loves dogs. She like to play with dolls. She love her new baby brother. (Allen et al., 2002, p. 317)

Cyndy and Kenesha's mother began communicating frequently through notes and phone calls. Mom wanted to know how Kenesha was doing. She promised to make sure Kenesha got more sleep.

One photograph, one invitation, and one letter did not change Kenesha's life. The family still struggled, and so did Kenesha—but now there was a partnership working together to teach her.

## Engaging Families in Supporting Learning at Home

The parental support that made a difference for Antonio and Kenesha did not involve parents coming into the classroom, yet the parent-teacher-student relationships affected not only the students' participation in the classroom community but also their learning. That was also the case for the students of two primary-grade teachers with whom I worked in Georgia.

### School-Home Reading Journals

I learned about genuine family-school partnerships from Betty Shockley and Barbara Michalove, 1st and 2nd grade teachers (respectively) who invited parents and other family members to join them in teaching their children to read and write.

Betty, Barbara, and I are European American, middle-class, experienced educators who joined in partnership with families in a high-poverty, predominantly black school. To connect home and school literacy learning, Betty and Barbara designed family-school connections including, among other practices, school-home reading journals.

Teachers and families exchanged reading journals all year. Children took home these spiral-bound or sewn notebooks two or three times a week along with books from the classroom libraries. Parents or others in the family sustained a remarkable commitment to read with their children, talk about the books, and write together in the journals.

Betty and Barbara honored the families' investment of time by responding to every entry, as we see from these excerpts from the journal of Lakendra's mother, Janice:

*Janice:* In the story "I Can Fly" Lakendra did very good. Her reading was very good. And maybe she's ready to move on to . . . a book with a few more words. If you think so also. (9/30)

*Betty:* I agree. She can read more difficult books but like everybody, young readers enjoy reading things that are easy for them too. (10/1)

*Janice:* In the story of the Halloween Performance, Lakendra seem to have some problems with many of the words. Maybe she get a story with too many difficult words for her right now. But still I enjoyed her reading. Thank You. Janice (10/2)

*Betty:* When you get ready to read together each night, you might begin by asking Lakendra, Do you want to read your book to me or do you want me to read to you? Sometimes after you read even a more difficult book, she may ask to read it after you. Let her be the leader. One of the most important things about sharing books together is talking about them together. Thanks. (10/3)

*Janice:* Lakendra was very excited about the books she chose to read to me. So excited she read them over and over again. And I was so pleased. Maybe last night she did want me to read the story to her I don't know but I will ask her from now on. Because she was a little upset that she didn't know a lot of the words. And I don't ever want her to feel pressured.

Thanks. Janice (10/3) (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, pp. 42–43)

This kind of extended written communication, which did not involve enlisting parents to solve discipline problems or to sign reading logs, established deep relationships that supported emerging readers and writers at home as well as at school in ways neither teacher nor parent could have accomplished alone. Without ever entering the school, parents became members of the classroom community.

## Addressing Cultural Differences

We are all cultural beings shaped by time and place, religion and race, language and gender, and a host of other ongoing influences. In my work with educators, we use a number of strategies as a springboard for conversations among parents and teachers of diverse cultural backgrounds.

For example, drawing maps of childhood neighborhoods, or *memory maps* (Frank, 2003), might take place during a home visit, or in a classroom, or during a whole-school event such as a family night. Each participant draws an annotated map of his or her childhood neighborhood(s). Next, in small groups that include both teachers and families, participants walk one another through their neighborhood maps. Participants at one school had had very different childhood experiences: One of us made daily trips to the corner grocery store in Philadelphia; one rarely left the farm until he was in high school; one moved from a small town in Mexico and learned English at the Boys and Girls Club. We were amazed at the differences as well as the similarities (for example, “Back then it was safe for a child to go to the store alone”).

Neighborhood maps may lead to stories of schooling. Each teacher and parent writes down or draws two memories of schooling, one positive and one negative. The sharing of these stories is often

quite intense. It's important for parents to know that teachers have both kinds of memories; many parents may believe that all teachers had only positive, successful school experiences. Conversely, teachers need to learn about parents' positive memories as well as the "ghosts at the table," Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2003) expression for those memories from their own schooling that haunt parents and hover over the conference table when parents and teachers try to talk about a student.

A third and potentially deeper exploration of cultural understanding occurs through developing cultural memoirs. Family members—including students—and teachers can ask themselves, Who am I as a cultural being and what are the influences in my life that have made me who I am? These are some ways to approach this project with families:

- *Read and discuss cultural memoirs.* A great place to start is by reading and discussing memoirs deeply contextualized in time and place, such as *All Over But the Shoutin'*, by Rick Bragg (Pantheon, 1997), or *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros (Vintage, 1989). Busy parents and teachers may appreciate shorter memoirs from popular magazines, television biopics, or radio broadcasts such as National Public Radio's StoryCorps.
- *Gather photographs and other cultural artifacts.* Go through those boxes, albums, and digital files asking, What were my cultural influences in terms of race, social class, gender, ethnicity, geographic region, religion, nationality, language/dialect, sexual orientation, schooling, physical or mental health or ability, and family structure?
- *Share cultural memoirs.* Create a form to represent your multicultural self, such as a poem, scrapbook, telenovela, photo essay, iMovie, or picture book. Some teachers and parents create classroom coffee house atmospheres and invite families in during the school day, in the evening, or on Saturday to

share memoirs. Find out from parents what works for them, and consider holding two or three events so everyone can participate. You might plan one meeting for adults only, but remember that students love hearing their parents' and teachers' stories, too.

Educators and family members begin to understand cultural differences when they share their lives and make connections that build a foundation of respect and trust. When we make culture central to creating family-school partnerships, we acknowledge differences with respect, marvel at similarities, and open up dialogue about how to support each student as a unique learner.

## A Starting Point

We've examined funds of knowledge, home visits, photography, reading journals, and other ways teachers have engaged families in creating positive learning experiences for students at home and in the classroom. Any of these practices could be a starting point. But let me suggest another logical place to start. Go back to that list you made of your school's parent involvement activities: Builds Deep Relationships; Supports Student Learning; Does Neither (But We Keep Doing It Anyway).

What are you already doing that you can build on? What might you do with your equivalent of Uptown High School's Mardi Gras Carnival—that fun tradition that doesn't really build relationships or support student learning? In addition to striving for high parent participation in conferences as Midtown Elementary does, what if you held student-led conferences, focusing only on student learning? How could you involve parents in the preparation for a Technology Night event? Perhaps students could interview their parents and grandparents about changes in technology in their lifetimes, how they use technology in their jobs, and the pros and cons of various aspects of technology. Parents might

engage with students in studying the effects of technology on global warming by surveying their home, work, and community settings to assess how much energy is used to run computers, cell phones, and other technologies.

How will you create opportunities *with* families that really improve and deepen student learning?

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# Engaging African American Males in Reading

Alfred W. Tatum

*By providing meaningful reading material and encouraging honest debate, teachers can help African American adolescent males embrace the power of text.*

The field of education is saturated with studies documenting the poor performance and achievement deficits of African American males throughout their school years. National reading achievement data continue to indicate that as a group, African American males—particularly adolescents in middle and high school classrooms—are not performing well.

Researchers have examined several factors that serve as barriers to achievement for African American males. Internal factors include self-concept and identity issues. African American male students often exhibit various cultural-specific coping mechanisms—such behaviors as acting tough, failing to retreat from violence, avoiding self-disclosure, and dissociating from school. These students are often subject to disproportionate and sometimes unfounded grade retentions and suspensions because teachers and administrators misinterpret these behaviors and find them offensive.

External factors include structural racism, community patterns, parents' education attainment, and socioeconomic status. These adolescents must also deal with negative stereotypes in and out of school, a scarcity of positive role models, and a lack of culturally competent

instruction and direction. Moreover, many of them experience problems associated with low socioeconomic status and high-risk neighborhoods. Students in such neighborhoods are often too consumed with concerns about mortality and safety to think seriously about either schooling or their uncertain futures. Converging in multiple sources of stress and dissonance, these factors characterize the experiences of African American males as they begin the tumultuous adolescent work of self-definition (Fashola, 2005).

Several solutions proposed over the last 10 years specifically address the literacy needs of African American adolescent males. They include providing culturally responsive literacy instruction that links classroom content to student experiences; developing character development programs, rites-of-passage programs, comprehensive literacy programs, and academically oriented remedial programs; and establishing all-male academies or alternative schools and programs designed specifically for African American males.

All the proposed solutions emphasize a meaningful curriculum reflective of student experiences. Yet the most vulnerable African American adolescent males remain in public schools in which literacy instruction is not responsive to their needs.

## The Missing Piece

A review of research that I recently conducted on the education of African American adolescent males revealed a glaring omission: the role of text in literacy development. Although curriculum is often a significant consideration for improving education outcomes for African American males, specific texts and text characteristics that should inform curriculum selection are strikingly absent.

This is problematic because educators who are seeking to identify ways to engage African American males in reading-related tasks have little guidance in doing so. For example, a high school administrator recently e-mailed me on behalf of a 9th grade teacher. They were both

“looking for a piece of literature that may teach [respect and civility] without doing so in an explicit fashion.”

By selecting appropriate reading materials, teachers can engage African American adolescent males with text, particularly those students who have not mastered the skills, strategies, and knowledge that will lead to positive life outcomes. This productive shift in literacy takes into account students’ four literacy needs—academic, cultural, emotional, and social—and relies on instructional practices that have proven effective with African American males.

Modifying curriculum on the basis of such texts and creating a responsive environment can foster meaningful discussions among students against an education backdrop of standards and accountability. African American adolescent males currently have limited exposure to this kind of quality literacy instruction in school. A meaningful program should include texts that shape a positive life trajectory and provide a roadmap that can help students resist nonproductive behaviors.

### Recommended Books

#### Middle School Level

- *With Every Drop of Blood: A Novel of the Civil War*. James Collier and Christopher Collier. (1992). New York: Laurel Leaf.  
A 14-year-old white boy from Virginia, attempting to bring food to besieged Richmond, is captured by black Union soldiers, one of whom is a former slave his own age. The boys ultimately become friends.
- *47*. Walter Mosley. (2005). New York: Little, Brown.  
The narrator remembers himself as a young slave named “47,” living in Georgia in 1832. A mystical runaway slave called Tall John inspires him to fulfill his destiny and lead his people to freedom.
- *Handbook for Boys: A Novel*. Walter Dean Myers. (2002). New York: HarperTrophy.  
A 16-year-old is given the option of participating in barber Duke Wilson’s “community mentoring program” instead of serving time in a youth rehabilitation center. The teen’s gradual change in perspective shows the value of adult mentoring.

(cont.)

- *The Beast*. Walter Dean Myers. (2003). New York: Scholastic.  
A young man leaves his neighborhood in Harlem to attend a college prep school and confronts his anxieties about his future when he returns for winter break to discover that his girlfriend has become addicted to drugs.
- *Nightjohn*. Gary Paulsen. (1993). New York: Laurel Leaf.  
Nightjohn, a new slave on the Waller plantation, sacrifices his chance for freedom and risks punishment to empower other slaves by helping them learn to read and write.

### High School Level

- *Yo, Little Brother: Basic Rules of Survival for Young African American Males*. Anthony C. Davis and Jeffrey W. Jackson. (1998). Chicago: African American Images.  
In direct, down-to-earth language, this book offers advice for African American youth from their older counterparts.
- *Reallionaire: Nine Steps to Becoming Rich from the Inside Out*. Farrah Gray. (2005). Deerfield Beach, FL: HCI.  
A self-made millionaire and philanthropist at age 20, the author tells his personal story of growing up on the South Side of Chicago and rising to success.
- *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in the Other America*. Alex Kotlowitz. (1991). New York: Anchor Books.  
A *Wall Street Journal* reporter tells the true story of two brothers, ages 11 and 9, who live in a violence-ridden Chicago housing project.
- *Workin' on the Chain Gang: Shaking Off the Dead Hand of History*. Walter Mosley. (2000). New York: Ballantine Books.  
This essay about Americans' enslavement to the economy describes a nation ruled by a small power elite and shows what liberation from consumer capitalism might look like.
- *The Pact: Three Young Men Make a Promise and Fulfill a Dream*. George Jenkins, Sampson Davis, and Rameck Hunt. (2002). New York: Riverhead Books.  
This true story tells how the first three authors grew up in poverty in Newark, New Jersey, became friends at a magnet high school, and made a pact to attend college and become dentists.
- *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League*. Ron Suskind. (1999). New York: Random House.  
A *Wall Street Journal* reporter follows an African American through his last two years of high school and his freshman year at Brown University.
- *Rite of Passage*. Richard Wright. (1994). New York: HarperTrophy.  
Set in Harlem in the late 1940s, this book tells the story of a bright 15-year-old boy who suddenly learns that he is a foster child and is being transferred to a new foster home. He runs away and struggles to survive in a harsh world.

## Texts That Matter

Historically, texts have been central in the literacy development of African American males, with the connections among reading, writing, speaking, and action eminently clear. The literacy development of African American males, both self-generated and school-rendered, connected to larger ideals, such as cultural uplift, economic advancement, resistance to oppression, and intellectual development. The African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass recalled how reading two books set him on his life's course: the political essays and dialogues in *The Columbian Orator*, edited by David Blight (New York University Press, 1998), which Douglass read in early adolescence; and the piquant documents of the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison.

*The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press, 1963), an important anti-colonial text written by Caribbean-born Frantz Fanon, became a blueprint for many African American males in the 1960s who were trying to define themselves without embarrassment, apology, or external constraint as they embraced the *Rights of Man* ideology put forth centuries earlier by Thomas Paine. According to Van Deburg's comprehensive account of the rise and fall of the Black Power movement,

Every brother on a rooftop could quote Fanon, and [African American males] acknowledged that something uniquely their own—their distinctive Afro-American culture—very well might turn out to be the most essential weapon in [their struggle]. (1992, pp. 60–61)

History is laden with these kinds of enabling texts for African American males. An *enabling* text is one that moves beyond a sole cognitive focus—such as skill and strategy development—to include a social, cultural, political, spiritual, or economic focus.

During the last 30 years, however, the kinds of texts that African American males as a group encounter in schools have been

characteristically “dis-abling.” They lack that broader perspective and largely ignore students’ local contexts and their desire as adolescents for self-definition, focusing instead on skill and strategy development. This shift is largely influenced by policy decisions to measure reading output using psychometric instruments.

These instruments, the use and misuse of the data resulting from these instruments, and the associated education practices that these instruments influence—such as academic tracking, retention in grade, and remedial curriculums—have had dire effects on African American adolescents. These practices have created an oppositional identity in students, a resistance to school-related tasks, and a diminished sense of self as an academic being. Many experience school as an assault on their identities and on their masculinity. They believe that their existence simply doesn’t matter. Disproportionately referred for disciplinary actions and assigned to special education placements, they see little reason to navigate this path of humiliation. Many end up dropping out of school.

## Reshaping the Trajectory

We need to shore up the resilience of African American adolescent males, particularly struggling readers attending public schools in low-income areas. Identifying texts that can shape positive life outcome trajectories for African American males—who constitute 7 percent of the school-age population (4 million of 53 million)—is a significant challenge.

Must-read texts have four characteristics: They are intellectually exciting for both students and teachers, they serve as a roadmap and provide apprenticeship, they challenge students cognitively, and they help students apply literacy skills and strategies independently. More specifically, must-read texts should

- Engage students in authentic discussions in which they can analyze their realities in the context of the curriculum and discuss strategies for overcoming academic and societal barriers.
- Address students' cognitive and affective domains, taking into account students' cultural characteristics.
- Connect the social, the economic, and the political to the educational.
- Acknowledge that developing skills, increasing test scores, and nurturing students' identities are fundamentally compatible.
- Resolve the either-or dilemma of focusing on skill development versus developing intelligence by offering challenges that satisfy both requirements.
- Serve as soft role models in the absence of physically present male role models by providing motivation, direction, and hope for the future and suggesting what is worthwhile in life.

Identifying reading material is not sufficient, however. Teachers need professional support to help them mediate texts with students, such as WestEd's Reading Apprenticeship framework. In addition, the students themselves should provide input about the value of these texts. Their voices are noticeably absent in conversations about their literacy-related successes and failures in middle and high school classrooms.

## Making Reading Relevant

To shore up resilience in my own African American students, I introduced a wide variety of texts. As part of my 8th grade social studies curriculum, my students read extracts from David Walker's *Appeal*, arguably the most radical of all anti-slavery documents. Published in 1829, it called for slaves to revolt against their masters. Wanting to

focus the students on one central question that would resonate with them, I asked, “Do you think African Americans should integrate or separate?”

Some students argued that African Americans should separate. Others insisted that people needed to move beyond that narrow perspective, that “we’re all human.” One student commented that what might have been a good idea 200 years ago was no longer valid. Another wondered aloud why we even needed to focus so specifically on things “black.” We then studied a text written by Martin Luther King Jr. that promoted a contrary thought—the necessity of integrating. Students argued the merits of both perspectives, using the texts to support their points of view.

I also introduced James Baldwin’s “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation” (Dial Press, 1963), giving my students the opportunity to critique society and examine their place within it. We explored such comments as “You were not expected to aspire to excellence; you were expected to make peace with mediocrity” (p. 7). I asked students to consider the relevance of this essay, not just to young African American men growing up today, but to young men everywhere. Finally, I wanted students to consider the role they played in constructing their own “dungeons,” as well as the roles their teachers, schools, and community played. They might begin to consider why they are in low-level reading tracks or why they are in low-achieving schools.

## The Power of Text

We need to take an honest position with regard to the literacy development of African American adolescent males. Neither effective reading strategies nor comprehensive literacy reform efforts will close the achievement gap in a race- and class-based society unless meaningful texts are at the core of the curriculum. In addition, educators need to

ground literacy instruction of African American males in larger ideals and take students' present condition into account (Tatum, 2005). In his novel *Convicted in the Womb*, Carl Upchurch (1996) writes,

The [texts<sup>1</sup>] taught me how to look at myself. [They] told me regardless of my condition, regardless of the circumstances I came from, I was a legitimate human being and a child of God. But I also learned that society considered me inferior because of my color—and considered any rights and privileges I have as a black man to be the gift of white men. I decided that I had the responsibility to stand up for people who hadn't yet learned to think of themselves as human beings. (p. 92)

The texts Upchurch read gave him capital. Unfortunately, he did not come in contact with them until his imprisonment. And that is much too late.

Introducing enabling texts is obviously not the only panacea for addressing the literacy needs of African American adolescent males. Ample precedent suggests, however, that when they are discussed in caring, supportive, and cognitively challenging environments, these texts can provide students with the capital they need to be resilient in environments in which they were previously vulnerable. Not only can this practice improve the reading outcomes of African American adolescent males—but it can improve their life outcomes as well.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>The texts referred to included Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, writings by Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, and *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan.

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## Connecting With Latino Learners

Eliane Rubinstein-Ávila

*The key to reaching Latino English language learners is teaching to both their strengths and their needs.*

*Just because I talk with an accent doesn't mean I think with an accent.*  
—Alberto, in the movie *A Walk in the Clouds*

Blanca is a bright-eyed, outgoing middle school student from Mexico. Like those of many working-class Mexican families in search of better jobs and living conditions, her family's trajectory to the United States began in her rural hometown. The family first moved to a larger Mexican city to be closer to Blanca's father, who was working as a gardener "*en el otro lado*" (on the other side) and supporting the family through regular remittances. After crossing the border and reuniting with him in the United States, Blanca's family moved several times before settling a year later in a midsize southwestern U.S. city.

During these two years, Blanca attended school intermittently. Although she had only completed the 4th grade in Mexico, in the United States, at the age of 13, she was enrolled in 7th grade. Consequently, in addition to the demands of learning a new language and adapting to a new system, Blanca also needs to make up a several-year gap in content knowledge.

Blanca's monolingual English-speaking teachers in the United States may not realize that she is an avid reader in Spanish. Studies show that middle school students who are fluent readers in Spanish can tap into their first-language literacy skills when reading texts in English

(Jiménez, Garcia, & Pierce, 1995, 1996). With teacher support and a rich, multimodal learning context, Blanca's knowledge of her first language and her comprehension skills in Spanish can function as a solid bridge to English literacy.

What is likely to happen to students like Blanca? As a result of the English-only initiatives sweeping across the United States, English language learners (ELLs) are being "reclassified," transferred from English as a second language (ESL) classes into the regular program within a single year. Ready or not, Blanca will most likely be mainstreamed into content-area classes designed for native or fluent English speakers, with little, if any, English as a second language support (Jiménez, 2001). Several studies have found that English language learners in mainstream classes rarely utter more than a few words, a situation that ends up stunting their English language development (Miller, 2000; Rubinstein-Ávila, 2001; Valdés, 2001).

Although Blanca's content-area teachers are sympathetic, they may not realize that acquiring and developing the "register of schooling" (Cummins, 2000) in a second language is a complex process that requires a great deal of institutional support. Most likely, the process will take several years. Given the lack of professional development available to secondary teachers with regard to second-language development issues, Blanca's teachers probably have limited awareness of the funds of knowledge that she brings to school. They may assume that she is unable to read the textbook, comprehend their lectures, participate in group projects, or complete class assignments until she becomes fully proficient in English (Valdés, 2004). Some teachers may even assign her exercises to complete from an ESL workbook during their class periods (see Egbert & Simich-Dudgeon, 2001).

In many ways, Blanca is typical of today's ELL student population. Spanish speakers increasingly predominate among students from non-English-speaking homes (Ruiz-de-Velasco, Fix, & Clewell, 2000). Moreover, because most programs for English language learners are implemented at the elementary school level, late entrants like Blanca

do not benefit from them. In fact, in several U.S. states, 40–50 percent of Latino students, many of whom are English language learners, are not graduating from high school (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000). This alarming statistic is a testament to our failure to educate this population. The miseducation of Latino English language learners is a ticking social and economic time bomb.

## The Challenges of Educating Latino ELLs

Although large enrollments of K–12 English language learners have been common in some metropolitan areas of the United States, most school districts across the country are unprepared to handle the changes in student population that have occurred during the last three decades. For example, jobs in the poultry plants of North Carolina and in the carpet industry in Dayton, Georgia, have drawn a growing number of Mexican families to these states. National Public Radio (NPR) broadcasted a five-part special report titled *Educating Latinos* that focused on the challenges that rural midwestern and southern towns face as a result of the increase in ELL student enrollment in their K–12 schools. A major challenge is the shortage of teachers qualified to meet the needs of this new population. In fact, nationwide, only 2.5 percent of teachers of English language learners have received special preparation to work with these students (Ruiz-de-Velasco et al., 2000).

For students like Blanca, time may be running out. As the NPR report bluntly stated, “The window of opportunity for academic success begins to close for most students by the time they leave middle school” (National Public Radio, 2002).

Educating secondary Latino ELLs in the United States is indeed a complex endeavor in need of immediate attention. ESL teachers are not likely to have “the disciplinary background, pedagogical training, or sustained content experience necessary to work effectively with increasingly demanding grade-level content curricula” (Bunch, Abram, Lotan, & Valdés, 2001, p. 29). Conversely, content-area teachers in

mainstream programs are not likely to have a background in second-language acquisition or second-language teaching methodology (Bunch et al., 2001).

Like Blanca, many low-income Latino ELL students have experienced gaps in their formal schooling. They are more likely to attend overcrowded urban schools with limited resources and fewer certified teachers (Orfield & Yun, 1999). They are also more likely to live in enclaves with few occasions for interacting face-to-face with native English speakers, limited opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities, and little access to such resources as private tutors or computers connected to the Internet at home (Suárez-Orozco & Todorova, 2003).

It is important to keep in mind that English language learners vary widely in background, prior education experiences, range of linguistic repertoires, and academic strengths and needs (Jiménez, 2001; Rubinstein-Ávila, 2003). In the United States, the term *Latino* includes Mexicans, Central Americans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and South Americans. This is not a homogeneous group. In fact, Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) warn educators against pigeonholing individuals.

Despite what many teachers may believe, an English language learner's IQ, country of origin, ethnicity, or culture does not determine the rate at which he or she develops academic English. Although socioeconomic status is likely to influence students' opportunity structures—the neighborhoods in which they live, the schools they attend, and their interactions and participations in particular activities—Gutierrez and Rogoff (2003) remind educators that students' circumstances should not be viewed as “traits.” Rather, educators should help students build on what they know. This requires a broader view of what counts as knowledge.

## Building on Funds of Knowledge

Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) present numerous examples of how teachers have incorporated into their curriculums Latino families' funds of knowledge—the lived experiences and informal bodies of information that exist in homes, communities, and the families' social networks. These funds of knowledge can be extensive. They may include knowledge about building construction, which entails measuring (conversions), masonry, welding, and carpentry; knowledge about gardening, soils, and medicinal herbs; or knowledge about owning and managing small businesses, such as day-care centers, restaurants, and house-painting services. Among immigrant families, older children are likely to function as the household's cultural and linguistic brokers (see Rubinstein-Ávila, 2004). Orellana, Reynolds, Dorner, and Meza (2003) have shown that Latino immigrant children and youth often translate and explain even complex medical and legal documents for members of their families.

Therefore, rather than viewing low-income Latino ELL students as *alinguals*—proficient neither in English nor in Spanish—it is important to recognize these students' strengths. Latinos in the United States have purposely transformed some of the linguistic behaviors that they bring from their countries of origin and created new ones to represent their bicultural and bilingual identities (Zentella, 2002). These linguistic behaviors may include code switching (alternating between English and Spanish) and using anglicisms. Such “borrowings and crisscrossings”—as exhibited in popular phrases like *los biles* (the bills) and *el cheque* (the check)—are only some of the ways in which Latinos creatively manifest an evolving hybrid identity through language (Zentella, 2002).

Several studies have also pointed out that older Latino English language learners rely on their reading strategies in Spanish to make

meaning of texts in English that are beyond their comfort level (Jiménez et al., 1995, 1996). Readers who skim a long text as a way to preview its content before they read or who use context clues when they encounter unfamiliar words in their first language continue to do so in their second language. Moreover, Moll and Dias (1987) found that peer discussions in Spanish (the students' first language) about texts read in English yielded more meaningful understanding of the texts. Unfortunately, some teachers feel threatened by the idea of allowing students to use their home language in the classroom.

## Developing Academic English Across the Content Areas

Those of us who are bilingual or multilingual or who have a background in second-language acquisition know all too well that “fluency in the hallway does not necessarily mean proficiency in the classroom” (Ernst-Slavit, Moore, & Maloney, 2002, p. 118). Although many English language learners may have acquired everyday English proficiency to handle their own and their families' day-to-day needs (see Rubinstein-Ávila, 2004), it takes four to seven years of sustained institutional support for students to develop academic English proficiency, or “access to and command of the oral and written academic registers of schooling” (Cummins, 2000, p. 67).

Valdés (2004) provides a sobering sense of what the “register of schooling” may entail. For students to do well through secondary schooling and college, they will be required to do the following in English: follow oral and written directions; request and provide clarification; negotiate and manage interactions; obtain, process, construct, and provide subject-matter information in written form; retell; compare and contrast; persuade; argue, justify, analyze, synthesize, and infer; hypothesize and predict; and understand and produce technical vocabulary.

Therefore, rather than dismiss their knowledge of Spanish, educators should encourage Latino English language learners to rely on their

home language to develop these daunting skills in English. The following strategies can help scaffold content-area instruction for students who are in the process of developing academic English. Some are likely to be helpful to all students.

## Content-Area Cognates

Cognates are pairs of words in two or more languages that are similar in form and meaning, such as the English word *bank* and the Spanish word *banco*. English monolingual teachers can easily become familiar with content-specific English/Spanish cognates, many of which have Latin roots. Making secondary ELLs in particular aware of cognates across content areas would be most helpful because studies suggest that older students are more likely to consciously apply their knowledge of Spanish vocabulary when reading English (Earnest Garcia & Godina, 2004).

For example, a geometry teacher can point out to Spanish-speaking students an array of content-related English/Spanish cognates, such as *angle* (*ángulo*), *triangle* (*triángulo*), *sphere* (*esfera*), and *parallel lines* (*líneas paralelas*). A geography teacher can point out such cognates as *peninsula* (*península*), *gulf* (*golfo*), *arid* (*árido*), and *volcanic* (*volcánico*). One way for English monolingual content-area teachers to apply this strategy in their classrooms is to invite their English language learners to find content-related cognates as they read in pairs. Students can then compile an ongoing list of cognates found across content-area texts.

However, teachers should alert students that they cannot apply this strategy indiscriminately because some word pairs are false cognates—the words may look and sound alike, but they do not share the same meaning. Some false cognates are *embarrassed* and *embarazada* (pregnant), *exit* and *éxito* (success), *pie* and *pie* (foot), and *large* and *largo* (long).

## Graphic Organizers

Students like Blanca, who may be fluent readers but who may not be familiar with content-area structures common in expository texts, are likely to gain from having such structures explicitly pointed out to them. However, content-area teachers don't generally address the text structures that students are likely to encounter in their textbooks, such as chronological sequence, compare and contrast, and cause and effect.

Graphic organizers can help. These are visual devices that help students quickly access knowledge, tap into prior knowledge, discern relationships, establish a hierarchy among concepts, and review information. When English language learners can simultaneously hear and read content-related information—and see it displayed visually—it helps them decipher the text structures commonly found in textbooks. For example, a flowchart can illustrate for students the major events or problems described in a longer text and show the various steps leading to a given outcome or resolution. Another kind of graphic organizer can help students visualize the events occurring within a cycle and the directionality of these events. It can help students ascertain—through the use of font size or boldface text—the importance of particular events.

## Incorporating Multiple Modalities

In addition to the strains of tackling the linguistic gap, English language learners may also feel culturally and socially isolated from particular curricular topics (Townsend & Fu, 2001). For example, secondary students who were not schooled in the United States may have had little, if any, prior exposure to the U.S. Civil War, abolitionist movements, or the Wounded Knee Massacre. Townsend and Fu suggest that teachers introduce students to unfamiliar topics and help them build a broader knowledge base by incorporating books on tape or CD,

documentaries, education programs, or movies that relate to the topic, all of which are available in many public libraries.

Because input from multiple modalities benefits most students, especially English language learners, teachers should turn on the English captions when viewing education programs. Combining visual, verbal, and print cues enables English language learners to cross-reference and make meaning using an array of modalities. To help secondary ELL students and striving readers more fully understand a given topic, Heydon (2003) also advocates providing students with a wide variety of texts and genres. These may include picture books, song lyrics, magazines, fiction and nonfiction books, Web sites, graphic novels, newspaper articles, photos, illustrations, and actual objects.

## Language Face-to-Face

Although teacher-centered, whole-class instruction serves a purpose, it should not be the primary mode of instruction, especially for English language learners. Teachers should encourage students to engage with one another face-to-face to develop oral and written academic language.

Alvermann and Phelps (2002) suggest several cooperative learning techniques that encourage peer interaction. In Student Teams Achievement Division, teams of four or five students are encouraged to interact following a teacher presentation; ideally, the teams are made up of students with varying academic experiences and levels of English language proficiency. In Teams-Games-Tournament, groups of students compete against other groups in various instructional games. In Jigsaw, students research specific topics in small groups, with each group member responsible for one piece of the “jigsaw puzzle.” When groupwork involves students assuming particular roles or taking on specific tasks, it minimizes unequal participation among members of the group, clarifies accountability, and facilitates assessment (Bunch

et al., 2001). Group presentations are also a great way to integrate the contributions of English language learners.

## Putting It All Together

The near-demise of bilingual education programs at the secondary level and the growing number of recently mainstreamed English language learners in content-area classes call for increased communication between English as a second language and mainstream teachers (Valdés, 2004). Rather than discouraging students from using their existing linguistic repertoires, teachers should encourage Latino students to rely on their funds of knowledge and build on their bicultural and bilingual experiences as a bridge to developing academic English proficiency.

As we explore students' strengths, we must not lose sight of the need to continually assess and reimagine the contexts of teaching and learning. More than ever, all educators are responsible for the achievement of all students.

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## Cultures in Harmony

Elise Trumbull and Carrie Rothstein-Fisch

*Effective teachers make sure that their strategies  
are in tune with students' cultures.*

In a 2nd grade classroom, Mrs. Blaine is conducting a discussion and asking her students questions. Some of the students are whispering to one another. Mrs. Blaine stops the discussion. “I have heard people whispering, and I really don’t like it . . . Why? They need to learn by themselves, and you really aren’t helping them learn” (Isaac, 1999, p. 34).

In another classroom, Mrs. Pérez is conducting a discussion and posing questions to a small group of her 3rd grade students. She notices that one student seems to be volunteering to answer most of the questions. She stops and says to the student, “Why don’t you whisper the answer to a friend?” She later explains that this practice “lets both children feel successful and work cooperatively” (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 147).

Mrs. Blaine’s belief about how children learn reflects a mainstream approach to education in which learning is largely an individual matter. Mrs. Pérez’s belief about how children learn reflects her—and her students’—Mexican American heritage in which learning is a group process. These two different views lead one teacher to chastise students for a behavior that another teacher encourages.

U.S. classrooms are increasingly places where different cultures meet. There's the culture of the school and the teacher, which is usually the "mainstream" culture reflecting European American values (Gay, 2006; Hollins, 1996). And then there are the cultures of the students. Cultural differences often bring with them different notions of how students learn best; how they should behave; what kinds of interventions can help them meet the school's expectations; and what roles teacher, student, and parent should play.

In light of these differences, how can teachers make their classrooms work better for diverse groups of students? By becoming more aware not only of their students' cultures but also of their own culture and by tapping into the strengths of each culture represented in the classroom.

## Understanding Cultural Differences

In a research project called Bridging Cultures, we partnered with fellow researchers Patricia M. Greenfield and Blanca Quiroz to document how teachers can use their understanding of student cultures to make schools more harmonious (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). We worked with seven elementary teachers in culturally mixed classrooms where Latino immigrant students were in the majority, and these teachers generated countless innovations.

The individualism-collectivism framework captures perhaps the most fundamental difference between U.S. mainstream culture and the cultures of many immigrant and minority students. This framework describes idealized models of two cultural value systems that implicitly shape people's worldviews and parents' developmental goals for their children. These models have been called *individualism* and *collectivism* or *independence* and *interdependence* (Greenfield, 1994; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

Individualistic families encourage independence, individual responsibility and achievement, self-expression, and self-esteem. In contrast, collectivistic families emphasize interdependence of the family, responsibility to the group, group well-being, group success, respect for elders, and personal modesty.

Of course, no culture or individual is completely individualistic or collectivistic. Each differs in the relative emphasis placed on individualistic or collectivistic values. And there is overlap in values, even between societies whose cultures are at the extremes of the individualism-collectivism continuum. Mexico and the United States are about as far apart as two societies could get, with Mexico being very collectivistic and the U.S. being very individualistic (Hofstede, 2001). But both U.S. mainstream culture and traditional Mexican culture value personal responsibility. The former emphasizes taking responsibility for oneself; the latter taking responsibility for the group.

The distinct values of the two cultures can work in concert, as with Mrs. Pérez's whispering strategy in our opening illustration, which shows how a collectivistic behavior (sharing) can support an individualistic behavior (self-expression). Cultural strengths of collectivistic students can strengthen overall classroom harmony and productivity. Such skills as the ability to collaborate and to take responsibility for the group are skills that most teachers would, no doubt, like to see all students develop. So how can teachers capitalize on these cultural skills in the classroom?

## Collaborating to Learn

At home, Latino immigrant children have likely learned that helping their parents and siblings is a priority; thus, they readily collaborate to help one another learn, without regard for individual roles or achievement and without competition (Hollins, 1996). Teachers can tap into this tendency in a variety of ways.

## Group Writing

Like many California teachers, 4th grade teacher Ms. Altcheck uses a process approach to writing in which students go through the steps of brainstorming, drafting pieces of writing, doing peer review, and editing, but she takes the process one step further, by having students write stories together. The resulting stories are “group” stories, and the writing process draws directly on students’ inclination to help one another. They pool their skills to produce a story that some could not produce alone, giving them a direct sense of what is possible and allowing them to see their peers model the skills that they need.

## Competing or Collaborating?

We now revisit the classrooms of Mrs. Blaine, a non-Bridging Cultures teacher and Mrs. Pérez, a Bridging Cultures teacher. Isaac (1999) videotaped many hours of instruction in Mrs. Blaine’s classroom, and viewing these tapes points up the competitive nature of her teaching practices.

In one mathematics activity, Mrs. Blaine divided the class into two groups, and a representative from each group came up to the board to work the same addition problem. As each student representative approached the board, the students shouted, “Ooooh,” indicating the pressure this activity evoked. Some even positioned themselves as if praying. The two students at the board competed with each other without any help or support from their teammates. Isaac’s notes mention “signs of great stress” among the students. This seemingly collaborative activity in which students were grouped as teams was actually highly individualized and competitive.

Mrs. Pérez, in contrast, used ideas from her students to develop a truly collaborative strategy that motivated her 3rd graders to master the multiplication tables. Students paired off as “math buddies” who studied together in preparation for an individual test. When each student felt ready for the oral timed test, he or she would sign up for testing.

During testing, each student came forward, bringing his or her buddy for moral support. While the buddy watched silently, the student was tested orally, and most succeeded. Successful students would ring a bell and receive applause from the entire class (Rothstein-Fisch, Trumbull, Isaac, Daley, & Pérez, 2003).

## Defining Cheating

In classrooms where students are encouraged to help one another learn, one may wonder what differentiates helping from cheating. Students from nonmainstream cultures often have different definitions of cheating than their teachers do—a situation that can lead to painful misunderstandings (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008). So teachers need to make it clear what cheating is. In many Bridging Cultures classrooms, students know that helping is always appropriate except during tests.

## Students Managing Their Own Learning

During our observations in Bridging Cultures classrooms, we saw many instances in which students took responsibility when the teacher had to attend to an emergency or unexpected event.

## A Hallway Conference

Ms. Saitzyk and another 1st grade teacher needed to talk about how to handle recess on a rainy day. As Ms. Saitzyk conferred with her colleague in the hallway, she heard her Spanish-English bilingual students continuing the lesson she had begun. They didn't miss a beat, and no one was interrupting the lesson. At the same time, the monolingual English students of the other 1st grade teacher erupted into noisy commotion. Ms. Saitzyk wondered whether the difference was related to the expectations of cooperation and group responsibility her students encountered at home (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008, p. 108).

## Student Storytellers

Students with a collectivist mind-set are often willing to guide their classmates in learning. When Ms. Daley prepared to read *La calle es libre* (The Street Is Free) to her 2nd grade students, some of the students informed her that they already knew the book. “Could you tell the story?” Ms. Daley asked. While Ms. Daley used this opportunity to fill out some forms for the office, six children—self-selected—lined up in front of the class. Each child told part of the story. One girl walked around and showed the pictures in the book to the rest of the class. Other children in the group in front of the class corrected the story as needed. The seated children in the audience seemed genuinely content to be observer-learners rather than leader-participants (Rothstein-Fisch & Trumbull, 2008).

## A Cultural Starting Point

If we wish to establish in our classrooms “an inclusive, supportive, and caring environment” (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006, p. 267) that facilitates students’ learning, then we must attend to culture. The examples we use here are from classrooms of mostly Latino students—those whose families came from Mexico or Central America. But students with African, Asian, and American Indian roots often have much in common with these Latino students: Their cultures are in general far more collectivistic than the mainstream U.S. culture (Greenfield, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994).

The individualistic-collectivist framework can be a starting point for teachers’ observations and is just one example of a cultural difference that can influence teaching and learning. Teachers can learn more about their students’ cultures by asking family members about their goals and expectations for their children, visiting students’ neighborhoods, participating in community events, and working closely with parent volunteers. Such experiences can help teachers learn what

values and learning styles are embraced in their students' communities, which can help them design learning experiences that work with, not against, student cultures.

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*Authors' note:* The seven elementary teachers in our Bridging Cultures Project are Marie Altchech, Catherine Daley, Kathryn Eyler, Elvia Hernandez, Giancarlo Mercado, Amada Pérez, and Pearl Saitzyk. Mrs. Blaine is a pseudonym.

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# Life Ain't No Crystal Stair

Susan Danoff

*Young authors find their authentic voices by  
listening to powerful stories.*

When I worked as a teaching artist at Martin Luther King Middle School in Trenton, New Jersey, I brought two things with me, one visible and the other invisible. I carried 100 pens, because students rarely brought pens or pencils to class, and I brought stories—folktales from around the world and literary tales. For more than 25 years, I have been using storytelling and creative writing to teach at-risk students, operating from the belief that oral tales can inspire, motivate, and teach reluctant writers.

The Martin Luther King (MLK) school sits in a neighborhood marked by poverty and violence. In the 2005–06 school year, only 21.6 percent of MLK's students achieved proficiency in language arts on standardized tests, and no student scored as advanced proficient. Math scores were even lower, with only 7.7 percent scoring as proficient. And yet, the 6th, 7th, and 8th graders I worked with from 2004 to 2006 did not fail in poetry writing and storytelling. Rather, they succeeded beyond my wildest expectations. Although at first they were hesitant to take risks in writing, they became easily the best writers I have ever worked with.

## Finding Clear Images

I started my time with MLK students by sharing Langston Hughes's short story "Thank You, Ma'am," published in 1933. It's about a boy who steals a woman's purse. Luella Bates Washington Jones, however, is no ordinary woman. She grabs the boy, drags him all the way to her house, and—once her anger cools off—tells him, "I have done things too, which I would not tell you, son—neither tell God, if He didn't already know. Everybody's got something in common." She shares her dinner and sends the boy home with \$10 to buy the shoes he wants and a warning: "Shoes got by devilish ways will burn your feet." Every word of this story is carefully crafted, and I don't read it, I tell it. As they listen, students hear the voices of the powerful Mrs. Jones and the unsuspecting Roger.

After I looked at these students' first writing samples, I could see how much they needed a model like Hughes. I was dismayed by the lack of life and detail in their writing: It was general and sentimental. I needed to get them to clearly picture something they remembered and put it into writing. To give students a model, we considered the first few sentences of "Thank you, Ma'am":

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, dark, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. (Hughes, 1933/1996, p. 223)

I asked students what they knew about this character from these lines. They realized that they knew Mrs. Jones's general shape, where she was, what she was doing, and what she was carrying.

Next, I asked them to think of someone they knew well and to imagine—and jot down a description of—that person in a place where

he or she would often be found. "Picture something this person is holding and imagine something this person might say, and write it down," I told them. Suddenly, the room was filled with energy and a whole bunch of characters. Students generated such descriptions as these:

My grandma is a small woman with a round, squishy belly and small black moles on either side of her nose. In her hands, stiffened with age, she holds a wooden spoon and metal tongs. "Eisha, your brains, you're walking on them," she says.

My mother, a tall stocky woman, holds a child the size of her arm. "It was just the grease, hold still," she says, as she straightens my hair. One time she told me, "Never bring any babies home."

It's not difficult for anyone to imagine a person at a specific time and place. Details drawn from these imaginings give the writing life, and students' individual perceptions give the writing flavor. Reading these descriptions, I felt as though I had entered my students' kitchens and living rooms.

## The Cameos Come Alive

We now had cameo portraits, but I wanted students to further develop their writers' voices by imagining how these individuals in their lives might speak. We again looked to Langston Hughes as our model, this time to his poem "Mother to Son," which begins

*Well, son, I'll tell you:  
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.  
It's had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up . . .*

The mother goes on to encourage her son to persist despite the hardships of the climb. After discussing who is speaking in the poem and what the metaphor means, I asked my students to think of someone in their lives who might want to give them advice as this mother does. I suggested they write a poem in that person's voice, beginning the same way as Hughes ("Well, \_\_\_\_, I'll tell you"). I stressed that this must be a real person whose voice they can hear in their own minds.

Powerful poems emerged from this exercise. The 8th grader who wrote the following poem told me that he did not read or write much, but he was consistently one of the strongest writers in the class.<sup>1</sup> When I read his poem to the class, some students cried.

**MESSAGE FROM MY BIG BROTHER**

*Dear little bro,  
Well, let me tell you,  
Sometimes you have to accept  
The fact that mom doesn't have a lot.  
You can't just get mad at her.  
It's hard enough on her that I am gone.  
Life isn't all about the best clothes  
Sneakers or jewelry  
Cause when you're gone  
You won't have it any more.  
Trust me, I know.  
So the next time she says  
I don't have any money  
Just bear with it.  
And who knows  
Maybe we'll see each other  
In the next life.  
P. S. I'll be waiting.*

—W. H.

An 8th grade girl captured the rhythm, tone, and color of her uncle's speech:

**UNCLE TO NIECE**

*Well, Niece, let me tell you.  
Life ain't no picnic.  
You stumble through school  
Hoping you don't fail  
Then work hard all your life  
And what do you have to show for it—  
A social security check and a retirement plan  
a squirrel wouldn't want.  
Maybe that's why I chose the life I did.  
Maybe that's why I did the things I did.  
But what do I have to show for it?  
Just do the best that you can do  
And be the best that you can be.  
Work hard and be somebody, E.  
Maybe in the end you'll be proud of yourself.  
Just promise me you won't be the person  
I have become.*

—E. T.

This 6th grade girl was one of the few students whose poem didn't focus on hard times:

**FRIEND TO FRIEND**

*Well, Ke-ke, I'll tell you  
That blood wouldn't make us any closer.  
Some people say blood is thicker than water  
But this water that's between us  
Is like blood.  
Like we say this friendship will never end  
And we will be like sisters from *The Color Purple*.  
We will be like a ring:  
You don't know where it starts*

*And you don't know where it ends.*

*It just goes around.*

—K. J.

Asking each student to write in the voice of someone who was familiar yet had a perspective separate from that of the student elicited authentic voices. There is a powerful, stark honesty in these poems. Many depict images of a hard life; the voices get right to the heart of compelling concerns. One 7th grade boy hears his father telling him, “My feet hurt. My hair is falling out. I did time in jail. Sometimes I have to walk to work so I can put food on the table for you.” Another girl recalls her father’s axiom, “A woman with an education counts as two women.”

I compiled two anthologies of student writing while working at MLK; these collections included many poems written during my workshops. School district personnel were delighted by the student writing from this project because the results belied the test scores, revealing the real learners and writers we knew were sitting in our classrooms. The students, too, were astonished at the results. My 8th grade class was not a chummy group, but as we read these poems aloud, the class applauded spontaneously after every poem.

## What Helped Writing Emerge

Although the writing these middle schoolers at MLK produced was astounding, I think what these students achieved could be replicated with any group, no matter how reluctant or struggling the students initially seem. Several key elements of my approach helped my students’ voices emerge.

### Storytelling, Emotion, and Risk Taking

Beginning with an oral tale is key to helping students open up as writers. I usually choose a folktale that is compelling to teens. A story

one person tells another orally captures both intellectual and emotional understanding. Recent studies tell us that the brain cannot easily absorb information without an emotional connection, and listening to a story provides such a connection.

This connection is essential in writing. Beginning with a story opens up channels of feeling and imagination that enable learners to connect to their own memories and experiences. Stories and poetry are an exploration of where we come from, what our world looks like, how people around us talk, and what all that means to us. When students write, they must tune in to the sound and rhythm of the language they speak and pay attention to daily concerns that define who they are. Without this opportunity, students have no voice.

Something else happens when I share a story: I transmit the message, "I'm telling you something important to me." The emotional investment a storyteller makes in dramatically telling a tale makes it a gift and forges an emotional connection between teacher and student that creates welcoming conditions. A storyteller takes an emotional risk—and models how to take a risk. Before I taught the lesson using "Mother to Son," I wrote a poem modeled after this format and shared it with the students. A teacher who becomes fully engaged in the classroom writing process says implicitly, "This is who I am. Tell me who you are."

Another reason that the MLK students wrote well is that they were free to do so. I held no particular expectations about what they would say. Much of what students must write in school is predetermined by the teacher. Writing becomes a guessing game as to what the teacher wants. A writer's voice may become completely blocked if the student senses that the teacher is looking for something in particular, something that "isn't me." We can encourage good writing in school, but we must also allow it.

If teachers want students to write well, we must believe that they have something worth saying. Students have radar for authenticity. They won't talk if they don't think we're listening.

Our students have a great deal to say if and when we give them the opportunity and the confidence to express themselves. We can teach them how words can shape meaning and possibility out of struggle and chaos. As James Baldwin writes in his story “Sonny’s Blues”:

For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn’t any other tale to tell, it’s the only light we’ve got in all this darkness. (Baldwin, 1978/2005, p. 41)

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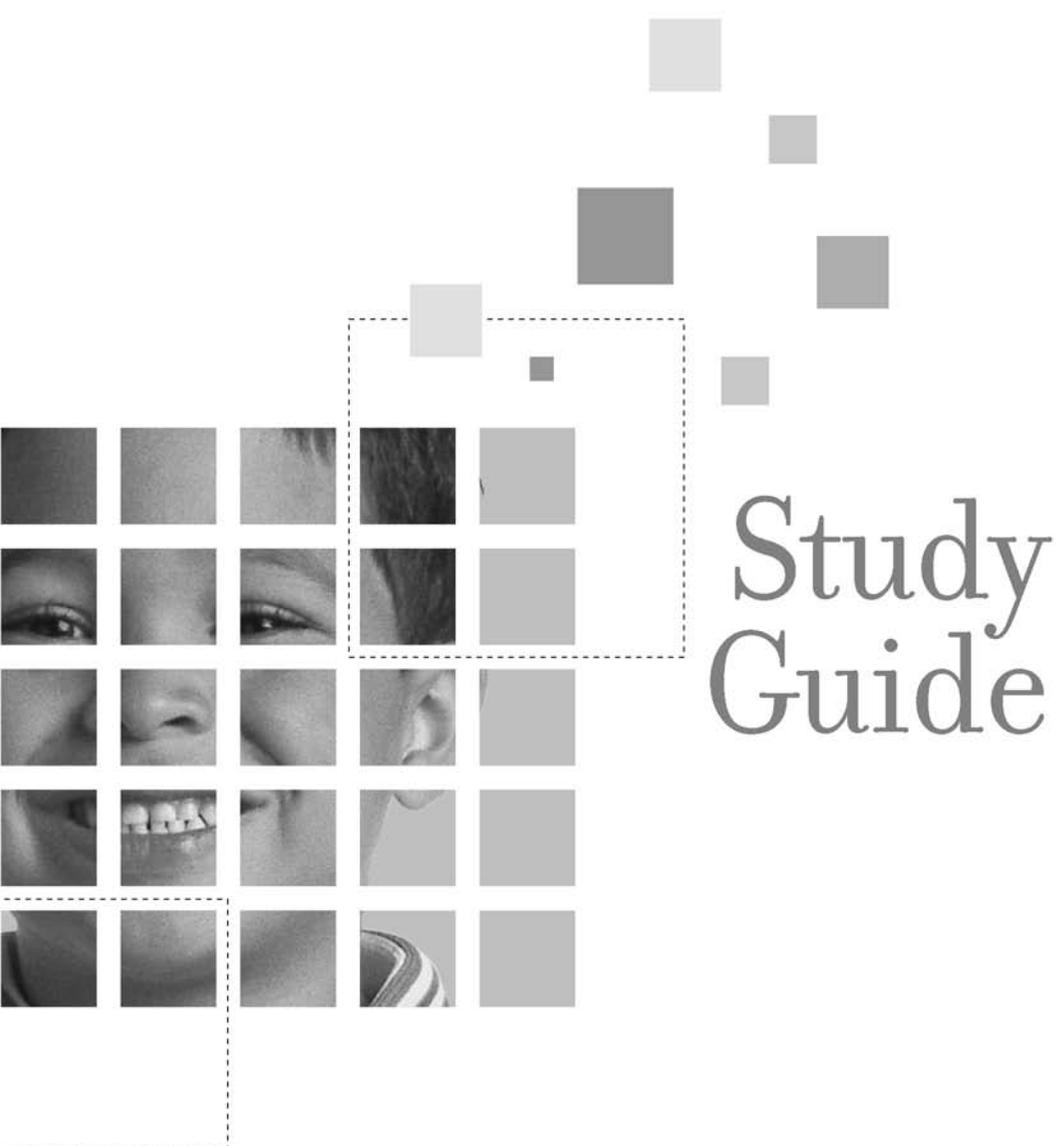
## Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Students’ initials are used in this article to protect their privacy. Student work is used with permission.

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# Study Guide

Engaging the Whole Child



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# Study Guide for Engaging the Whole Child

Naomi Thiers and Teresa Preston

## PART 1: Engaging the Whole Child: Heart, Mind, and Soul

Joy in School, September 2008

The Moral North Star, October 2008

Teaching as Jazz, May 2007

Engaging Students Around the Globe, March 2008

Stephen Wolk (“Joy in School”) charges that schools unwittingly take the joy out of learning for many kids. He quotes John Goodlad’s 1984 assertion that “Boredom is a disease of epidemic proportions . . . . Why are our schools not places of joy?” and adds

Now, a generation later, if you were to ask students for a list of adjectives that describe school, I doubt that joyful would make the list. The hearts and minds of children and young adults are wide open to the wonders of learning and the fascinating complexities of life. But school still manages to turn that into a joyless experience.

Discuss in your group:

- Not everyone would agree with Wolk’s statement that “The hearts and minds of children and young adults are wide open to the wonders of learning.” Do you agree?

- When young adults aren't—or don't appear to be—open to the wonders of learning, what might be going on?

Reflect on your own teaching:

- Webster's College Dictionary defines joy as "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune." Think of specific times when you saw students exhibiting joy. What experiences seemed to lead to this "emotion of delight"? Was it lively group interactions? Challenging projects? Field trips?
- What made these experiences joyful rather than merely fun for learners? (see Wolk's distinction between joy and fun).
- Review Wolk's 11 suggestions for injecting more joy into school. List five things you could do in the first weeks of school to make sure that each learner experiences joy.



In "The Moral North Star," William Damon says that students will pursue their learning more ardently if they understand why the knowledge schools require is important.

- How do you respond when students ask, "Why do we have to do this?" How might your responses to this question instill in students a sense of purpose?
- Think of a lesson or unit you're currently teaching or preparing to teach. Ask yourself why this unit is relevant to students' present and future lives. If it isn't relevant, how could you adjust your objectives to make it more relevant? (See the suggestions in Damon's article for ideas.)

- Damon emphasizes the need to encourage students to pursue moral excellence, as well as academic excellence. Do you agree that teachers have a role in fostering moral excellence in students? Which moral and ethical principles should teachers attempt to instill in students? How can teachers address ethical and moral issues in a pluralistic society?

## PART 2: Inspiring Trust and Confidence

Cultivating Optimism in the Classroom, March 2008

The Teacher as Warm Demander, September 2008

Conversations That Matter, September 2008 online

Help Us Care Enough to Learn, February 2006

The Wounded Student, March 2008

Richard Sagor “Cultivating Optimism in the Classroom”, points out that it is “easier to acquire faith [in oneself as a powerful learner] when one’s immediate environment regularly shows concrete evidence of return on investment.”

- Consider the practice of student-led conferences that Sagor describes in his daughter’s preschool. How did showing her parents her learning help this child get immediate “return on investment” for her efforts at mastering skills?
- Discuss how you could arrange for your students to take the lead in parent conferences on student learning. Do you think this would help students see their learning as important and view themselves as efficacious? Might it increase their optimism?
- Try some form of student-led conferences or presentations to parents this semester. Report back to your group on the effects on students’ motivation.



Students in low-income, urban high schools whom Kathleen Cushman interviewed (“Help Us Care Enough to Learn”) indicated that they were hungry for teachers to give them challenging work connected to their passions. A major resource these students felt their schools lacked was listening:

Talk to us about the classes that we want to take, not just the ones you want to give. We know what we need to take, so respect us by asking us what is on our mind . . . Listen to what we have to say.

Next time you introduce a unit in your one of your classes, set aside time a few weeks ahead to talk with your students about what they most want to know and what would make the content come alive for them. Challenge them to brainstorm projects that would make this subject fascinating. Trust their suggestions and work those that you can into your planning.



According to Kirsten Olson (“The Wounded Student”), if trust begets enthusiasm, lack of trust can deflate it. Formerly enthusiastic students may become reluctant after being exposed to a negative school environment. Marie, for example, lost interest in math when her teacher told her she “couldn’t keep up with her peers in advanced math.”

- Look back at your own schooling. Which teachers inspired you to learn more, and which teachers caused you to shut down and lose interest? What might you learn from these teachers about your own instruction?
- What common education practices might lead students to believe that their teachers don’t care about them? How might schools reverse these practices?

- Think about a student you've encountered who seems to have been wounded by a past experience in school. How did this past injury manifest itself in the student's behavior? What might help this student recover from these wounds and get back on the right track?

## PART 3: Deepening Students' Thinking

All Our Students Thinking, February 2008

Balance in the Balance, May 2007

Energizing Learning, February 2008

Of Whales and Wonder, March 2008

Learning in Depth, November 2008

Clash! The World of Debate, February 2008

Consider these aspects of what it means to engage students in thinking more deeply.

In "All Our Students Thinking," Nel Noddings notes,

For centuries, many people have assumed that the study of certain subjects—such as algebra, Latin, and physics—has a desirable effect on the development of intellect. These subjects, it was thought, develop the mind, much as physical activity develops the muscles.

John Dewey rejected this notion, arguing that any subject can lead to deep inquiry and reflection. Discuss as a group:

- Do you agree that some subjects—such as algebra and philosophy—spur deep thinking more than others—such as French or business administration? Or can any subject engender critical thinking if taught well and studied passionately?

- What makes a course challenging in terms of thinking: The amount of content included? The fact that the course is college-prep? Or some other factor?
- Observe a class in your school's vocational/career education program. Notice how teachers impart information and what kinds of activities students engage in, keeping in mind Noddings's criteria for what constitutes true thinking (using facts to plan, order, and work toward an end; seeking meaning or explanation; reflecting; and using reason to make judgments). Does thinking seem to be part of these students' training? Are they being challenged to think as they learn job skills?



In "Balance in the Balance," Richard Rothstein, Tamara Wilder, and Rebecca Jacobsen ask,

What if schools were held accountable, for example, not for whether students could recite historical facts, but for whether they actually registered and voted as young adults? This would establish incentives for creating a curriculum that balanced history instruction with service learning projects, mock elections, and classroom debates of contemporary and controversial policy—just as Benjamin Franklin urged.

- Do you agree that schools should be held accountable for their students' future civic participation, or lack of it? If Rothstein and his colleagues' idea is reasonable, how might it be practically carried out? Would it spur schools to help students think more deeply about the needs of society and their roles as citizens?
- These authors explored what a sample of adults think are the essential goals of education; what do *students* think are the goals of education? Give your classes a list of the eight goal

categories from the article. As Rothstein did, ask each student to assign each of these categories a number from 1 to 8 representing how important that goal category should be in schooling, relative to the other seven goals. Average the results and report back. How do these students' priorities compare to those of the adult sample?

Look at Thomas Jefferson's six goals of schooling:

- To give citizens the information they need.
- To enable citizens to calculate and express their ideas, contracts, and accounts in writing.
- To improve, by reading, their morals and their mental faculties.
- To understand their duties to their neighbors and country.
- To know their rights; to choose with discretion their elected representatives and monitor their conduct with diligence, candor, and judgment.
- To observe their social relations with intelligence and faithfulness.

Discuss whether these seem like appropriate goals for education today. How do Thomas Jefferson's six goals match up with the five tenets around which the whole child initiative is constructed?

- Each student enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle.
- Each student learns in an intellectually challenging environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults.
- Each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and broader community.
- Each student has access to personalized learning and to qualified, caring adults.

- Each graduate is prepared for success in college or further study and for employment in a global environment.



What do you think of Kieran Egan’s proposal (“Learning in Depth”) that students study one topic in depth and from all angles throughout their 12 years of schooling? Would this kind of scheme deepen students’ knowledge and their sense of ownership over learning? How could you try something like this even on a small scale in your classes?

## PART 4: Instilling the Desire to Achieve

Students at Bat, November 2008

Feedback that Fits, December 2007/January 2008

Springing into Active Learning, November 2008

They Can Because They Think They Can, February 2006

The View From Somewhere, December 2007/January 2008

Schools may not be the only place students gather where following a program laid out by adults is the norm. Look over Thomas R. Guskey and Eric M. Anderman’s article “Students at Bat.” What do you think of this statement:

Both in school and in the neighborhood, children today have few opportunities to learn about sharing, establishing rules, fairness, and responsibility. They seldom experience the challenge of resolving disputes through compromise and consensus.

- Think about how you make decisions and resolve problems in your classroom. Do you encourage—or require—students

to come up with ideas, or do you package things for them and just ask them to approve your proposals?

- Look over the options for student choice that Guskey and Anderman offer. Which of these options could you imagine giving your students? Try giving your students one or more of these options over the next week, and report back to the group.



Susan M. Brookhart, in “Feedback That Fits,” offers an example of flawed feedback on a writing assignment. How might a rubric help this teacher provide more useful feedback? How might a rubric prevent a teacher from providing the helpful sort of feedback in the figure with Allison Zmuda’s article?



In “The View from Somewhere,” Maja Wilson discusses the problems of using rubrics to assess student writing, although many educators find rubrics to be valuable tools for student self-assessment.

- How have you used rubrics in your classroom? Have you found them to be useful? What do you see as the benefits and drawback of using rubrics?
- What role do students have in developing and using rubrics? Have you ever had students use rubrics for self-assessment? If so, describe your efforts and how students responded. If not, discuss how well you believe this method would work with your students.
- Wilson tells the story of a group of teachers who give the highest score possible to a paper that one teacher believes is vacuous and deserves a lower score. Do you believe that this is a valid criticism of rubrics? Could a better-designed rubric solve

this problem, or is Wilson correct that the type of objectivity that rubrics impose on writing assessment is inappropriate?



The first step in sparking the desire for achievement in students, according to Allison Zmuda (“Springing Into Active Learning”) is to push students to be less passive. After many years of schooling, passive habits—and the “common misunderstanding about learning” that Zmuda refers to—may be so deeply ingrained that we have to intentionally disabuse students of these notions.

- Look over the “misunderstandings” Zmuda lists. Do you think your students believe things like “Classroom rules are based on what the teacher wants?” or “Once I get too far behind, I can never catch up”? What behaviors do you notice that show your students hold such ideas?
- Try this: Gather your class and write one of Zmuda’s misunderstandings on the board. Ask students to discuss it, making clear you’re not fishing for any one conclusion. Keep out of the discussion and notice what thoughts students come up with. Prod their thinking if necessary by asking, “Is this statement true of your learning *outside* of school?” “What might be another way to look at this”?
- Now ask yourself how the checklist for an active curriculum that Zmuda provides applies to your teaching. Identify characteristics of your learning environment that may be rewarding passivity more than curiosity and ownership. Identify one thing you might change. Discuss with the group.

## PART 5: BUILDING ON STUDENT INTERESTS

The Music Connection, September 2008, online

Turning on the Lights, March 2008

A (Pod)cast of Thousands, April 2007

“You Should Read This Book!”, March 2008

Fifth grade teacher Andrea Antepenko (“The Music Connection”) found that with pressure to get students to meet state standards, “it’s easy to forget that my most important goal is to create an environment in which every student is involved in meaningful learning. Music helps me accomplish that goal.” She found that incorporating music into class increased students’ inspiration and confidence as writers and enhanced their ability to appreciate writing in content areas.

- Try this: Gather several struggling writers into a small group and have them free write for 10 minutes with music playing in the background. Try several sessions alternating between choosing music yourself and giving each student a turn to choose an instrumental piece that inspires that student. Does writing become less stressful for them? If so, how could you build on this positive experiment to get students comfortable with composing for longer stretches?
- Antepenko found that playing music associated with historical periods in social studies units pricks her students’ interest in historical content like nothing else. Using the resources listed in her article, find a song that connects to key content you are teaching. Listen to the song as a group, studying the lyrics as you do, and notice students’ reactions.
- Reflect on whether the experience helped students understand elements of this content in a way that textbooks or other resources have not, and report back to the group.



In “Turning On the Lights,” Marc Prensky argues that many students today learn more from their technological devices than from teachers who rely on traditional methods. He encourages schools to use technology to engage students in learning and to help them connect with the world.

- Do you agree with Prensky’s notion that requiring students to “power down” in school actually impedes their learning? How might allowing students to use technological devices in class help or hinder their learning? What place do you see in the classroom for laptops, cell phones, mp3 players, social networking sites, Wikipedia, and other technologies?
- What is your school’s policy regarding technology in school? How was this policy developed? What role did teachers, students, and parents have in the creation of your policy? Do you believe your policy meets the needs of your students? If so, why? If not, what changes would you make?
- Patrick Welsh, an English teacher at an Alexandria, Virginia, high school, notes in a February 10, 2008, *Washington Post* article ([www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/08/AR2008020803271.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/08/AR2008020803271.html)) that some teachers, and even students, question the value of their school’s many high-tech “gizmos.” He writes,

Science and math teachers, for instance, have been told that they can’t use traditional overhead projectors to present material to classes, even though the teachers say that in many cases, they’re far superior to computers for getting certain concepts across.

When might the traditional method be the best approach to teaching? How can teachers and administrators balance the desire to stay up-to-date with the need to always make sure that teachers can use the techniques and technologies that best suit their students?

## PART 6: EMPOWERING STUDENTS

Footprints in the Digital Age, November 2008

Amplifying Student Voice, November 2008

Working with Tech-Savvy Kids, November 2008

The Power of Audience, November 2008

According to Will Richardson (“Footprints in the Digital Age”), to help students take charge in life as well as in school, we need to familiarize ourselves with the learning tools students will reach for—social networking tools like Facebook, blogs, and photo sharing sites. Teachers, Richardson says, need to “help students create, navigate, and grow the powerful, individualized networks of learning that bloom on the Web . . . . Our teachers have to be colearners in this process, modeling their own use of connections and networks.”

- Do you agree that teachers owe it to their students to try social networking tools so that we can guide students in using them?
- In a noncritical way, discuss in your group how much you use the social networking resources Richardson describes. If you have never used these tools, or feel reluctant to try them, what stops you? What would help you take the plunge?
- Consider using a group session to explore activities like blogging, with teachers who are experienced with digital applications guiding those who are less experienced.



In “The Power of Audience,” Steven Levy describes several student projects that were created for an authentic audience.

- Levy says that the audience for 99 percent of student work is the teacher. What is the problem with this? Why might having an authentic audience motivate students to do their best?

- Look at your course objectives and ask yourself how students can demonstrate their mastery of these objectives for an authentic audience. What sort of projects could students create? Who would the audience be?
- What are some of the logistical challenges involved in connecting students with their audience, and how can you help overcome these obstacles?

## PART 7: CONNECTING WITH STUDENTS' COMMUNITIES & CULTURES

The Violence You Don't See, Summer 2006 online

Family Partnerships That Count, September 2008

Engaging African American Males in Reading, February 2006

Connecting With Latino Learners, February 2006

Cultures in Harmony, September 2008

Life Ain't No Crystal Stair, March 2008

In "Family Partnerships That Count," JoBeth Allen shares how teachers and schools have made parents part of the learning process.

- As Allen suggests in the opening paragraphs of her article, brainstorm a list of everything your school does to involve families and put each item in one of Allen's three categories: Builds Deep Relationships, Supports Student Learning, or Does Neither. How can you ensure that more families benefit from activities in the first two categories? How can you adapt the activities in the third category so that they build relationships or support learning?
- Consider the families of your students. What "funds of knowledge" exist within these families? Choose an upcoming unit of study you're planning and generate a list of ways to incorporate this family knowledge into your plans.

- Discuss how and when you communicate with parents. What are the typical topics of conversation? How might you deepen these conversations so that parents truly become partners in supporting student learning? Which of Allen’s ideas have the most potential for enhancing your relationship with parents? What other ideas do you have? Try out one of these ideas for a month or two and share the results with your colleagues.



In “Life Ain’t No Crystal Stair,” Susan Danoff writes about her experiences using storytelling and creative writing to reach at-risk students.

- Danoff describes how she gives students models to emulate in creating their own writing. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of such an approach? How can teachers encourage students to find inspiration from model writings while also helping them find their own voices?
- Danoff uses the work of Langston Hughes to inspire her students. Who are some writers your students might enjoy emulating? Try sharing a sample or two from those writers with your students and asking them to write their own piece.
- Often, according to Danoff, students’ voices become blocked because they sense the teacher is looking for something that may not match the students’ authentic voices. Teachers, of course, do need to ensure that student writing meets certain standards. How can teachers balance the need to assess writing based on specific objectives while encouraging authenticity?
- Examine the student writing samples in the article. Given the assignments Danoff describes, how would you assess these

samples? What strengths do you see in these students' writing? How might you encourage these students to build on these strengths?

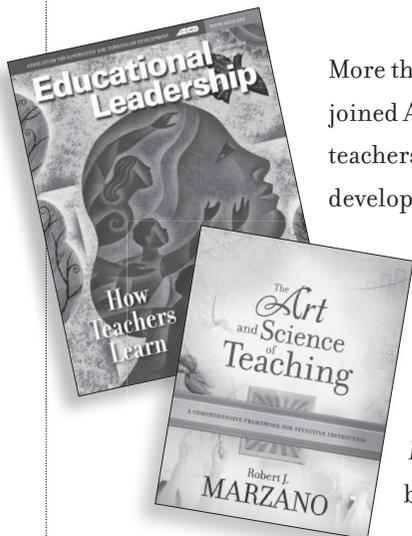
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