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Feature Article

First Day Confidential: Time to Gear up for your Observations and the Dreaded High-Stakes Test
The First Day of School It's the first day of school, and you must launch some high-priority initiatives. You're already behind. But, these are two high priority strategies that you have to "keep underground." They are: Practicing for your Classroom Observation Teaching to the Test The reason that these priorities have to be kept "confidential" is that you can't tell anyone, not even colleagues that you trust, what you are up to.

This means that you will be developing "No Help, No Share" tactics and tricks on your own.

You can't tell anyone that you are meticulously focusing on these two pillars of job survival because... You aren't supposed to be doing them

They are professional "No-No's"

You and your colleagues were taught that engaging in these strategies is not proper teacher behavior

If you 't clue your "colleague-competitors" they will start doing the same thing, and you will loose your advantage

You are supposed to be more interested in your students than you are supposed to be interested in yourself

You are supposed to be a skilled, competent, know-it-all expert who doesn't have to resort to such tactics
Stealth Operations So, how do you keep this "big deal" "stealth operation" quiet?

For sure you can't tell anyone, and swear them to secrecy.

Sidebar Swearing colleagues to secrecy is the method that you use to communicate stuff that you want the school administrators to know, but don't want to (or can't) tell them yourself. Swearing students to secrecy is the method that you use to tell the entire community something that you can't tell them yourself.

But be careful, and try to keep your statements positive because the recipients of these "secrets" have mysterious ways of sleuthing sources.

Your goal is "Double-Two-Squared," that is, complicated... Two goals: 1.) Teaching to the Test and 2.) Rehearsing for an Outstanding Observation Performance

Two goals for yourself: 1.) Practice, Practice, Practice and 2.) Over learn and Build a Positive Repertoire of Instructional Delivery and Class Management Habits

Two Goals for your students: 1.) Build a Repertoire of Test Sophisticated Attitudes, Knowledge and Skills; and 2.) Build a Movie Director's Level of Classroom Management for an Orchestrated Performance when you and they are "on stage" during your observation(S).
Sidebar Note: During these times of highly paranoid school administrators, you have to be "on alert" all the time so that any time that they meander past your classroom door, they "catch you" orchestrating and managing your class as you teach to the test. For insurance, you could list the times that you know that your observer saw you teaching to the test in an elegant manner, and bring that up in an off hand manner when you are discussing something else. Find a way to weave the fact into your conversation in such a subtle way that mentioning your students' progress toward measurable test score improvement results seems natural. Another strategic practice is to leave your classroom door open as long as the halls are quiet. (Of course, if you are relegated to a portable building, other rules apply.)
Targets for Yourself For yourself, you have to remember that the first minutes of class each school year begin your test practice sessions. And, at the same time, you are beginning the intense practice that is required to excel as an "Classroom Observation" star.

And, every class session for the rest of the year provides focus and follow-up for these dual-action goals. No let up. No excuses for missed practice sessions. No letting your guard down.

Your mission, should you accept it, is to craft a classroom response to the high-stakes test and to the challenge of a classroom observation that is clearly and unequivocally outstanding.

Consider each class session one step in your "maestro training" in classroom orchestration.

You will spend so much time visualizing and practicing the specific steps to success that these become habits. Then, in the moment of stress (like a pop-in, surprise observation visit - if your union contract allows such an animal), you just do what you and your students have been practicing. Targets for your Students For your students, you have to use every trick of motivation and marketing, performance persuasion psychology and coaching craftiness.

You have to position learning in such a way that students like and enjoy the challenge and avoid the minefields of boredom and irrelevance.

Dealing with the Shame and Guilt

You might have to carry the burden of shame and guilt for what you are up to. But if you told anyone that you are teaching to the test and practicing for your observation; and addressing curriculum objectives when you can squeeze them in, you might be ostracized.

You might find that you carry such a self-defeating attitude because: Your "ivory tower" professors "bad-mouthed" the practice for years, "brainwashing" you against using these survival skills

You believe that teaching is above such trickery and subterfuge, and that teachers should never stoop so low as to sully

their hands (or reputations) with such practices

You are uptight about your observation and your students' performance on the high-stakes test

You are concerned about keeping your job, and that fear has driven you to be this compulsive

You are so competitive that you can't let your colleagues gain even the slightest advantage over you

You are so suspicious that the campus administrators lavish high evaluation scores to their "fan-club-cliques," so that there are no high evaluation scores remaining for the "out-crowd"- like you
Rationalizations of Consolation
In light of these issues, you have several choices. Obtain mental health counseling or therapy from community professionals who are sworn to maintain confidentiality

Accept the behaviors because "everyone is doing it"

Abandon these strategies and fly for the rest of the year by the "seat of your pants (or panties)"

Deal with the stress of your guilt by adopting other, worse habits such as over eating, smoking, imbibing in spirits or wild and uninhibited sex. The strategy here is that you will be so overcome by worse behaviors that the teaching to the test and orchestrating for a high observation score will seem insignificant and trivial
Or, you could consider that teaching to the test and orchestrating for a high observation score are components of a master teacher's repertoire.

In this way, you could reframe your thoughts and decide that for a limited time, say the next three years, you will focus on these skills.
Sidebar
This is a trick that creative and success-driven people use in many fields.

For example, a fisherman may decide to only use lures for a year, instead of using live bait.

Or, a golfer may decide to use only one kind of club to perfect the intricacies of using that club. The great golfer, Sammy Snead, is reported to have gone to county clubs and bet their best golfers that he could go into the woods, cut a stick to use as a club and beat them. The story goes that lots of overconfident golfers took this bait, but that Sammy Snead beat every one. Just imagine what he could do with real golf clubs if he could out play talented amateurs with a crooked-stick golf club that he fabricated on the spot!

Real Teaching
Teaching to the test and orchestrating classroom routines to practice for the teacher's observation have some positive side effects that you can hope might happen.

For one thing, this approach requires that the teacher become super-observant and vigilant of what students do and say. This strategy involves figuring out what students might do, and involves finding ways to circumvent problem behaviors before they erupt or solidify. Master teachers do that as a matter of course.

This approach also involves communicating classroom policies, procedures, routines and expectations in clear and unambiguous ways, another stock in trade for the master teacher.

These strategies also call for training students in successive, small steps toward complex behavior patterns; ensuring students' feelings of success along the way and diminishing confusion, stress and frustration. Master teachers also are big on this kind of structure.

Structure is also required in the hands-on, engaged, cooperative group learning activities that you will train students to participate in and manage. And, you will train student in the use of self-evaluation and group evaluation tasks using rubrics. Yet other strategies that master teacher employ.
Self-Confidence on AutoPilot
Here is what you can expect…

You and your students will be so well trained and so meticulously practiced that neither your students or you will be phased with the arrival of the "all seeing administrator" or the "all enveloping" high-stakes test.

Everyone will know what to do, and everyone will just carry on with "business as usual."

No one will do anything special when the observer stalks in, no one will notice, and no one will make overtures, engage in grandstanding, or stoop to pandering to the power figure.

The teacher will maintain a "cool, calm and collected" demeanor; indicating that success was only natural. (Natural when it was practiced every minute up to the time of the observation, that is.)

And, when all students exceed their previous personal best on the high-stakes test, exceeding everyone's expectations; the teacher can nonchalantly point out that it was the students' great love of learning and their thirst for achievement and mastery of the curriculum that made the difference.

Taking no credit, looks like modesty and humility.

But we know, it is just a compulsive and strategic teacher being "tight mouthed and secretive" about a strategy that started with the first minute of class.

And, even though we know what you're doing, we'll never tell.