

Friday, October 31, 2008

## **Under-the-Radar Teaching Skills**

A Prosperous Mindset: When Learning is Like Farming

The "Gloom and Doom Boom" of bad economic news has a "tickle-down effect" upon the positive outlook of teachers. The "trickle" of dire budget predictions may really look like a "torrent" when punctuated by hand-wringing and commiserating statements by school district supervisors who accept their pay raises with a teeny twinge of guilt.

"Woe is us, Everyone will have to Do More with Less, and Make Do with what you already have."

"The products, supplies and support that you and your students need just aren't in the budget, and in order to protect jobs (hint: your job) you will need to grit your teeth, and swallow the bitter pill." (mixed cliches intended)

But, ignore this useless advice and keep focused upon the prosperity of learning.

Great teachers have taught with nothing but a tree&hellip;to provide shade and protection from a mild rain.

Just think what Socrates could have accomplished if he could have used the facilities of a modern classroom. Imagine what great teaching Piaget or Montessori could have accomplished with a single computer and Internet access.

You can reach great heights as a Master Teacher if you remember that learning is unlimited, unbounded, never scarce unless we wish it to be.

Learning capacity is never used up.

Unlike oil that took 185 million years to "percolate" and transform from decaying carbon into combustible sludge; the supply of leaning increases when used, strengthens when taxed.

Knowledge multiplies, bears fruit when fertilized by creativity, and gushes from a "cornucopia -like" fountain, spring, geyser.

Rules for Cashing in on a "Limitless-Learning" Mindset  
Intend to Adopt a "Limitless-Learning" Mindset and you make instant changes in your perception of what is possible for your students.

You begin to see learning success when your colleagues see failure. You expect your students to succeed.

The moment that you adopt a belief in your students and their capacity to learn, the moment that you adopt the belief that you can teach, the moment that you intend for your students' learning to accelerate&hellip;that is the moment that you unplug the flow of ideas and solutions appear everywhere.

Your change in perception and insight will alter your world and your experience of that world. Your changed perceptions will reflect out into the world as the learning that your students acquire.

And, holding to those beliefs causes you to adopt new self-talk habits to reinforce your new-found truth. You will see learning and student success where you once saw "failure and bleak prospects for achievement."

You will notice opportunities for learning that surround you, and you will find so many of these opportunities under foot, next to you, floating in thick clouds throughout your environment that you will have to sort through great ideas to pick the opportunities that you and your students like best.

These are opportunities for learning that you couldn't see before.

What changed? Your intention changed your perception.

Set Clear Learning Goals

Once you begin to see learning at every turn, see learning sprouting from every seat in your classroom; as well as from every nook, cranny and corner of your students' minds; you could feel overwhelmed.

What to teach first? What fields of study, what topics to investigate? Where to invest high-quality instructional time?

The difference is that now all investments in time and preparation look like winners&hellip;like every stock that you buy makes money.

Of course the similarity to making a lot of money  
Sidebar  
The Earth is rich and abundant. And, the options for wealth abound.

Fields planted, harvested, produce huge returns. Of course the return is not instant. You don't pick corn and tomatoes tomorrow if you plant today.

But, if you see what can grow during a three-month summer growing season, imagine what you could grow during a nine-month growing season&hellip;about 180 days of planting, cultivating and harvesting. But, this prosperity is deliberate, not accidental.

Holding a clear goal in mind and make the decision to be successful. Make the decision to share learning that is rich, lucrative and prosperous.

And, share this passion for learning with your student.

Never accept a "blank stare" when you ask your student, "What level of learning do you accept for yourself today?"

Students fail to achieve the spectacular levels of achievement that they are capable of because they don't have a clue what spectacular learning is.

Be free to share the diverse and relevant learning that you achieve each day&hellip;modeling the process of breaking learning out from the "closet of the curriculum and the jail of the test-coaching kit."

And work this learning into a number-based evaluation system. Something tangible, something that can be checked off when accomplished.

Unless you can track and measure progress, you cannot develop a specific strategy for achieving your goals. Create and Plan: Create a Plan Teaching without a plan is like a farmer plowing a field and scattering a mixture of seed around and about.

Pumpkins mixed with tomatoes and squash, beans mixed with carrots and potatoes.

This might seem like a great idea. Diversify. But, maintenance (i.e., weeding, cultivating) and harvesting (i.e., picking the crops when they are ripe) would be a logistical nightmare.

And, some crops need others of the same species close by so that they can pollinate by wind and breeze. Corn, for example must be planted in blocks. Otherwise, lacking pollination, the ears enjoy few, if any, kernels.

In the same way, productive learning requires a plan and concentrated effort in one area, at the right time.

And be sure that the goals that you plan for are ones that you want.

You have to remain focused. So, it helps to have a passion for what you will accomplish.

The plan keeps you on track. The plan focuses on the actions you will take, and the plan focuses on the performance skills that you will need to execute the plan.

The moment that you take action on your plan, you move from daydreaming to reality. Employ Strategies to Multiply and Accelerate Learning One sad fact, overlooked by the "teach to the test" crowd is that there are not enough days in the school year, yet alone enough class hours before the Grim Reaper's blade drops on the high-stakes test.

Facts and isolated information fail to stick in students' minds, and their minds flit and frolic on other engagements rather than pay attention to the boring teacher talk and inane test-skill exercise drills.

Learning opportunities abound and the potential for your students' achievement is unlimited.

But, capitalizing on that potential takes focus, effort and dedication.

Many teachers become discouraged when they discover that their big dreams of students' success and their initial efforts fail to demonstrate immediate gain.

This is similar to the novice investor that puts a large chunk of their savings into the stock market.

The investment may lose money in the short term; may earn money for awhile, then lose value; but eventually, overall, the investment can gain money.

If your goals for your students' success materialize slowly, understand that this is how the learning process develops.

Teaching is like farming. A knowledgeable farmer doesn't expect to plant today and harvest and cook produce tomorrow.

There is a natural rhythm and a season for learning. Trust that your students possess an innate capacity to learn, and possess the innate capacity to integrate that learning into meaningful, actionable information.

It is important that you integrate and leverage those learning tasks so that one learned attitude, knowledge or skill meshes with and supports other skills.

**Manage your Time and Reduce Wasted Efforts**

This is where keeping records and measuring, counting or analyzing outcomes plays a crucial role.

Many teachers assume that because learning opportunities abound that learning automatically happens.

Sidebar Actually, your students are always learning, just as you are.

But, growing uncontrolled, erratic, random knowledge is not efficient. There needs to be an underlying logic, theme, method that ties the chunks of learning together.

This is the reason that thematic units produce better learning outcomes than "every day brings new worksheet" strategies. Of course, planning themes with students is a marvelous way to align the curriculum content with students' interests. The opportunities for weaving curriculum-based content into almost any theme are endless. This approach takes more effort than reading the "teaching prompts" from the "annotated teachers' edition" of the adopted textbook.

But, students will respond with eagerness and excitement. Besides, teachers who read, word for word, from the Teachers' Edition are just as boring as students who read their report to the class. Many teachers think that just by increasing the amount of work that students perform that learning will automatically accelerate.

This is similar to investing. People can earn a lot of money, and still be in debt. Others live within their modest salaries, live comfortably, retire peacefully.

Students' activities must be managed in the same way that take home pay must be managed.

If the learning is not practical, can't be applied in some way, can't be shared; then the learning is being squandered.

**Grow Learning by Planting High-Yield Crops**

By increasing students' interest and attention, by involving students and adapting curriculum content to their interests, and by building attitudes, knowledge and skills toward outcomes that students want; learning acquires depth and breadth.

It is this matrix of meaningful experiences that provide connectors to curriculum content that integrates knowledge with meaning.

This process is similar to the way that interest compounds, so that, year after year, the investor earns interest on the original investment, and earns interest on the interest.

The return is not "get-rich-quick" speedy, but the returns are amazing over time.

**Protect your Investment in your Students' Learning**

Once you see your students' learning blossom and flourish, "insulate" your students learning success against loss. You never know what events can subvert or sabotage your success.

So, keep up your guard, remain proactive, and insulate your students from "learning loss"

The way that you protect important learning attitudes, knowledge and skills from erosion and backsliding is to use a structured and modular approach to instruction.

Graphic Organizers, Rubrics, Reproducible Modules

The power of a prosperous learning outcomes mindset comes when fields of learning are fenced, plowed, seeded, cultivated and harvested. This requires the help, support and partnership of the students that are prospering because of that learning.

Profitable instruction (even creativity) does not benefit from an "wide open range, wild west, no fences" strategy. Instead, reusable, repeatable structures raise instruction to higher levels of application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation; the Higher-Order Thinking Skills.

And complexity must be controlled.

Complexity early in the attitude-knowledge-skill cycle leads to stress and confusion because complexity pushes boundaries of how many discrete items one can hold in conscious awareness at the same time.

Graphic Organizers, Rubrics, Reproducible Modules act like the fences and gates that define the fields, orchards, meadows, pastures, wells and barns of the learning environment.

Then, once themes, trends, associations, connections, collections are sorted out in the learner's mental and imagination systems (Multiple Intelligences); created knowledge is "chunked," and complexity is relished by learners. In fact, advanced learners are bored unless the complexity level of the learning is increased.

For an explanation of the Magic Number, see the Classroom Toolkit article, Rules for Helping Children Write  
For a complete selection of Graphic Organizers, and strategies for profiting from them in your classroom, explore Classroom Toolkit's online EBook, Graphic Organizers Summary  
Planned and focused learning produces huge returns because students' minds are so fertile.

So, expect a huge harvest once you plant relevant seeds of thought in the meaningful environment of your students' lives.

Your student enjoy amazing powers of creativity, thought and learning. Expect them to produce in abundance when you partner with your students to plan, plant, fertilize and cultivate high-yield learning.

Questions to Keep Learning on Track and Profitable

Here are generic questions that can keep most learning on track;

What's good about \_\_\_\_\_?

What's bad about \_\_\_\_\_?

What background information is important?

What steps did you take to build this knowledge?

What steps did you take to learn these attitudes and skills?

What are the three things that everyone should know about \_\_\_\_\_ to be successful learner?

What is the best way to learn \_\_\_\_\_?

How long will it take to really master \_\_\_\_\_?

What advice can you give to someone wanting to learn \_\_\_\_\_?

What study methods for \_\_\_\_\_ will work for anyone?

What has your experience with \_\_\_\_\_ taught you?

What real-life examples can you share about \_\_\_\_\_?

What is one secret about \_\_\_\_\_ that almost no one knows?

What is one of the most common problems associate with \_\_\_\_\_?

What are the three best ways to overcome that problem?