

Friday, October 31, 2008

Feature Article

Word Walls: a No-Brainer Choice for a Higher-Order Thinking Focus

Word Walls became a fad, and once they became ubiquitous, "faded into the wood work" as far as students' attention was concerned. A "Word Wall" is a "systematically organized collection of words on large display in the classroom." Words on worksheets or at the start of a story are collections, but not large. These collections of words are called "Word Banks."

Both large formats and small-scale displays are designed to promote learning; but, word walls, if used to their potential; promote learner sharing and interaction. Alphabetical Order: A Self-Limiting Choice Word Walls are most often organized in Alphabetical Order.

But, "dictionary order language learning" fails to match the holistic language abilities of the human brain. And holistic vocabulary and the building of conceptual knowledge is a prominent feature of the human learning system.

In fact, the term "building" is almost inappropriate.

The learning process is more like "magic" than it is like "construction."

The learning process for language concepts is more like "connecting dots, lines and spaces" into a coherent picture; the entire image.

For example: Imagine that each of an artist's brush strokes were filmed and recorded as the masterpiece was painted. Now, imagine that each of those strokes was digitized, and divided into separate "clips" of a few seconds each.

Next, those clips are scrambled in random order, and played back, as if in sequence. As they are played back, each image remains on the screen.

What would occur during such an experiment is that an image would begin to form with bits of color, lines, blocks, spaces. At first the design would be unintelligible. But soon, a pattern would emerge, and students would be able to guess what the complete image is.

At some point (depending upon the viewer's life experiences and power of visualization), the painting would begin to make sense.

The viewer would be able to guess the subject of the painting often very quickly, way before the image is complete.

The viewer will be able to guess the meaning of the picture long before the picture is completely rendered. And, if the playback were random, this figure-completion analysis might take a very small percentage of the total playback; the presentation of vague outlines might be enough of a clue for many learners to guess the subject of the painting.

This is because the human brain is genetically coded to fill in missing elements and make guesses. The Brain's Learning Capacity A corollary process to this model of picture completion is how people approach the solving of a jigsaw puzzle.

At first, many of the puzzle pieces appear to be "the same."

But, as the puzzle-solving mind pays attention to minor clues and specific shapes. Smaller and more precise discriminations become apparent. Concentration and attention strategies are used to solve the "mystery" of which pieces fit together. A picture on the puzzle box provides concrete clues. And subtle qualities inherent in each puzzle piece add to the learning required to solve the puzzle. So, How Should Word Walls be Organized? The implication and imperative for strategic organization of Word Walls: Use other Word Wall Organizations besides alphabetical order.

Consider Word Walls to be Large-Scale Graphic Organizers, and determine which Graphic Organizer models fit the specific words that your students are studying.

Large-Format Graphic Organizers Word Walls can be considered to be "Large-Format" Graphic Organizers while Word Banks can be considered to be "Mini-Organizers," or "Memory-Jogging" Graphic Organizers.

But limiting Word Walls to alphabetical listings stultifies learning. This is one of the least imaginative approaches to organizing Word Walls.

The Alphabetical Structure may be great for teaching dictionary skills, but comes up short on the "Conceptual Learning Scale."

In fact, Alphabetical Order is less conceptually relevant than; Cause and Effect

Timelines

Comparisons

Contrasts

Venn Diagrams

Ishikawa (Fishbone) Diagrams

Johari Windows

SWOT Analysis

Physical World-World of Imagination

Fact and Opinion Sorts

Past-Present-Future

Solid-Liquid-Gas

Rock-Paper-Scissors In addition, collecting words for a Word Wall that reflects (or mirrors) the concepts in sensory processes (or Multiple Intelligences) adds breadth and depth to the learning.

So, just how is this accomplished? Sensory Process Word Walls Sensory Processes are related to the five senses and include: Vision

Hearing

Touch, Sensations, Proprioceptive Stimuli

Smell

Taste Of course, vision, hearing and touch-feeling-sensation processes are most appropriate for a Word Wall.

But, a "Scratch and Sniff" model might create a novel twist if the words could be displayed at the nose level of the students. (Though we might have to consider sanitary and health-safety issues of such a system.)

The important issue is to match Word Wall organization to the preferred Learning Styles of students. Rules for Organizing the Word Wall Talking to students and listening to students' ideas about how to orient the Word Wall is more important than deciding on the "one best model" for building meaning and comprehension.

And, changing the model at least three times, to accommodate tactile-kinesthetic learning, visual learning and auditory learning might be a minimal approach. Other organizations for the same words might fall along Multiple Intelligence relationships and classification systems such as: Linguistic and Semantic Relationships

Logical and Mathematical Frameworks

Visual and Spatial Relationships

Bodily and Kinesthetic Relationships

Music and Art Relationships

Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Contrasts

Naturalistic Phenomena

Creative, Intuitive and Imaginative Relationships

Political and Religious Frameworks

Physical and World-of-Imagination Frameworks Many other relationships and frameworks are possible, but consulting students to determine which strategies that are meaningful (to them) is key to matching organizations that are relevant.

Another strategy might be to have individual students (or committees of students) present designs (and their rationale) for how the words of the Word Wall might be organized. Whether that design is accepted is less relevant than the Higher-Order Thinking that students engage in to fabricate their Word Wall designs. How Often Should the Word Wall Organization be Changed? The rule about when to change the orientation of the Word Wall is, "Change the Orientation as soon as the words begin to grow invisible to the students."

Once students know where the words are, their minds phase the words out of awareness. Sidebar This "fade out" of stimuli is the function of the Reticular Activating System (RAS) of the human brain.

This is the same system that allows a mother, sleeping in a room next to the street and subway, with airplanes flying overhead; to sleep undisturbed, but hear the cry of her infant in the next room.

This is also the reason that "sameness" limits students' attention, and the reason that students remember the first and last item and "go fuzzy" on just about everything in between.

This is also the reason that ads on a Google Search Results page are nearly invisible, and the reason that no one remembers what "elevator music" they heard once they step out the door of the elevator. Summary Word Walls present a marvelous strategy for making use of unproductive classroom wall "real estate." Commandeering walls in service of learning is a brilliant strategy.

But, an alphabetical order listing is minimally creative, and possibly the one of the least interesting methods of organizing Word Wall words.

Organizing methods that model Higher-Order Thinking Relationships and Multiple Intelligences modes of learning (Learning Styles) present ever-new and creative options, so developing a huge variety of unique Word Wall organizations is easy and productive.

Word Walls offer an excellent strategy for driving learning towards Higher-Order Thinking. Take advantage of students' thinking abilities and involve them as partners as you reorganize the classroom Word Wall at frequent intervals.

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Tuesday, September 30, 2008

Feature Article

Recess: Academic Time-Waster, NOT!

Recess may become a casualty of "teach to the test" initiatives in some schools, and a casualty of budget-cramped four-day school weeks in other districts. But, recess is an integral part of learning, and not a time-wasting drain on the school day.

Fun, letting off steam, changing the pace of the day, building and tearing down ad hoc relationships, implementing game rules, winning triumphantly and losing gracefully, or less so…these are only a subset of the lifelong lessons learned and practiced at recess.

And modern children need recess more than ever.

Gone are the days of students' after school "pick-up" games in the school playground, teaming up in friendly rivalry in vacant lots, or wild-and-woolly tournaments on a not-so-busy neighborhood street.

Free normal childhood interaction with lots of other childhood personalities is crucial for development of emotional and interpersonal intelligences. In addition, foundation and the values associated with teamwork, problem-solving, shared decision-making and project management are formed during childhood playtime.

But modern lifestyle and societal burdens prevent children from acquiring these skills outside of school, so recess is a critical need. A few of these influences include:

Unsupervised, Broadband Internet Access

Play Dates

Latchkey (Self-Imposed) Child Care

Bedroom Media Centers (Cable Television with Premium Channels, Stereo, Multiple Game Consoles

After-School Programs

Homework

Accelerated Block Programs

Behavior Management Programs that Seek to Keep Children Quiet, On-Task and Focused Upon Test-Taking Skills

Fear of Being Outside the Home and Unsupervised, Including:

Parents Driving Children to the Homes of Friends and Playmates

Sex Offender Registries

School Bussing or Parents Delivering and Picking Children Up at School

Centralized Schools with Extensive Physical Plants and Huge Student Populations (Instead of Neighborhood Schools within Walking Distance)

Looming Four-Day School Weeks will provide Less Opportunity for Children to Interact Teaching in an Era of Fear The No Child Left Behind Law (NCLB) and its effort to "root out" non-highly qualified teachers created a mentality of 1.) standards-based instruction, 2.) a loathing of any off-task, off-test school-day activities and 3.) higher-order thinking drill time focused upon improving high-stakes test scores.

In addition, line up and wait your turn Physical Education Classes (begrudgingly scheduled to meet state requirements and to provide teachers with a planning/ conference period) fail to provide the unstructured, outdoor play time that children require.

And paring down recess to a one after-lunch time slot, where students have to choose between eating a pleasant meal in a quiet and relaxed atmosphere (at their leisure) or getting outside to play for the remainder of the half-hour lunch period Sidebar Forgive the sarcasm. A quiet, peaceful, unhurried luncheon where ideas can percolate and digest is the environment that builds healthy bodies and minds.

Most school lunch periods are the embodiment of the factory shop floor, foundry or automated trough-filling feedlots. The noise is horrendous. Is it a wonder that children dump the contents of their meal trays and seek escape outside, away from the clamor and din? But, even when teachers extend the after lunch recess period by ten minutes, a twenty-minute play period, once a day, fails to satisfy students' need for physical activity and play.

Un-Stress through Change-of-Pace Activities Stress researchers advise change-of-pace activities to decrease stress levels. This means that if students and teachers spend extensive periods focusing upon mental activities, the physical (preferable fun-filled) activity erases the effects of stress.

And, physical activity is more effective in decreasing stress than other, sedentary activities such as watching television during a break. Even eating fails to diminish stress levels…as large cohorts of obese children demonstrate.

Stopping academic activities for anything that is not content-based instruction, and believing that these in-seat "breaks" perform the role of recess is an indicator of unenlightened teaching, or the mark of following misguided administrative directives. Learning through Change-of-Pace Activities The "adult learning cycle" is 90 to 120 minutes long. This is the time that focused attention and concentration can take place. Of course, this focusing time varies by age and individual characteristics.

For children, the length of focus time is shorter.

Fortunately, longer study times can be sectioned into shorter periods. Just getting up, changing seats, indulging in a "rest room break" (if the pace of high-stakes test coaching allows) serve to rekindle attention. Sidebar Almost every teacher agrees that students that need to take advantage of the rest room facilities are unable to concentrate on much else. And that concentration diminishes in inverse proportion to the internal pressures that signal a need to leave the classroom.

Some teachers clutch to an aversion for allowing students to enjoy unsupervised time, even restroom time. Emphasis on this level of control is detrimental to learning.

Of course, there is a solid foundation for concern. Younger students might "play" in the bathroom, stop up sinks with paper towels, float sticks and debris and sail an imaginary navy. They might sing, talk to students of other classes, and otherwise amuse themselves at the cost of the teachers having to repeat a set of instructions.

Older students might smoke, take drugs, "tag" the stalls, or use the time to send text messages to their friends.

However, students that need to be away from the classroom that badly could be steered toward more productive outlets.

And we don't mean listening to the teacher drone about textbook content. In fact, saying words and acting out the behavior, the Total Physical Response (TPR) can erase some of the recess deficit that our students

experience. Sidebar For a description of how to employ the TPR Method, see the Classroom Toolkit articles, Total Physical Response: Building "Verbal-Physical" Connections that take Hands-On Learning to a New Level and Total Physical Response - Story: Integrating Storytelling into Instruction Even semi-aerobic activities such as singing, dancing or yoga can strengthen memory and learning. Sidebar The secret to yoga as a semi-aerobic activity is to breathe slowly, and imaging the breath flowing into the stretched body parts. The time for change of pace varies by the weather.

Bright, sunshine-filled days allow longer periods of concentration and allow for daydreaming.

Dreary, stormy days (with low barometric pressure) require more frequent diversions from study. And, during periods of high ("rubbing hackles and fur" the wrong way") wind, intense focus on academic tasks should be avoided altogether.

During certain weather conditions, students (and their teacher) become grouchy and irritable. (No we are not talking about gloomy high-stakes test days.)

Wise teachers break ranks with their lesson plans, shelf the schedule; and substitute games, art, entertaining videos, etc. Be sure to plan for these days and keep resources available for an instant launch.

For games on these days, choose games where everyone wins. Avoid pitting "Team Grouch" against "Team Wedgies-at-Every-Desk." Games with winners and losers add aggravation to the already irritated, and salvaging instructional goals would be better served with silent, free reading.

Of course, the longer the concentration period, the longer the change-of-pace activity needs to be.

So, a period of intense study either will be followed by recess (that the enlightened teacher schedules), or will be followed by a period of fidgeting, daydreaming and inattention (that the test-stressed teacher doesn't want). These off-task, off-focus reactions to intense and extended periods of study are normal responses that are set off by students' biological clocks and body rhythms.

The teacher who schedules the recess, break or change-of-pace improves instruction at accelerated rates as compared to the "taskmaster, rub their noses into the grindstone if they don't pay attention" teacher.

But, there are other ways of taking change-of-pace breaks besides exiting to the playground. Directed Daydreaming:

Recess in a Box (Box-like Classroom, that is) Daydreaming serves a vital and beneficial biological process. These benefits include a constellation of components that include: Relaxation

Stress Reduction

Memory Processing

Idea Incubation

Mental Processing using the Students' Most-favored Learning Style (Preferred Intelligence) Processing

But, teachers can harness this momentum-changing power with "directed daydreams."

Directed daydreams are narrated guided fantasies that ask students to imagine scenes, scenarios and other mental movies.

These teacher guided excursions can include all five senses; i.e., vision, hearing, smelling, tasting and feeling.

And during these narrations, teachers can work in suggestions for increased memory, ease of recall, integration of ideas and positive self talk.

Scenario content has unlimited possibilities, and is best conducted in an "ad hoc" manner instead of being read or taped in advance. With so many variables to choose from, these guided "mini-vacations" need never be repeated.

Sidebar The intent of not repeating scenarios is to expand students' perceptions and conceptualizations, and to connect students' thinking with as many of the Multiple Intelligences as possible.

Boredom is not an issue for most children because relaxed fantasy and directed daydreaming are intrinsically self-rewarding

However, some emotionally disturbed children may reject this activity, possibly because they lack comfort with more intimate association with their thoughts, images and imagination. What are these variables? Multiple Intelligences

Senses

Locations

Situations

Associations

Modes of Experience

Modes of experience include: Behaviors

Feelings

Sensations

Symbols and Mental Imagery

Thoughts and Beliefs

Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Experiences

Self-Talk

Ideal, Values, Personal Meaning

As long as the guided imagery proceeds at a slow pace and is spoken with a rhythm based on relaxed breathing, the content is seldom relevant, so it is easy to work subject matter content into the narration. Not only will students remember the content-based associations, but many students are likely to respond with creative ideas and novel associations. Allowing students to write or draw in personal journals following a guided imagery session also pays integrated learning dividends. **Sidebar** Some teachers like to play background music when they conduct guided imagery sessions. This practice is beneficial, but the conducting teacher loses the ability to slow the pace of the narration to deepen students' relaxation because the students' rhythms will entrain to the beat of the music.

On the other hand, playing soft but lively music after a guided imagery session, such as quick pieces written by Mozart, can gear (rev up) students' attention to the pace needed to focus and concentrate.

If school administrators question the use of so many guided imagery sessions (or if they happen to walk in and observe, simply float the directions toward test-taking scenarios, and you will be evaluated as a "hero." It is easy to waft in references as to how this interlude leaves students relaxed and better prepared to focus as they enter the "garden of test-taking delights." **Summary** So, rather than cave in to the demand that you "scrub recess and other time-wasting activities" in favor of high-intensity academic inquiry and focused test-taking drill; instead, serve liberal helping of recess and change of pace activities during each school day.

The math of recess and change of pace activities is "addition and multiplication" … adding memory, idea integration and creative thinking into each student's learning.

And ignore the rants of anyone who would "subtract" recess from the school day. These folks are experiencing "clouded thinking," possibly due to the stress of intimidation (and vigilance) from the test-taking gestapo.

Remember that harmony with the basic biology of human development and synchronization with the natural mental processing of students' mental capacities yields superior results to pontificated political mandates.

The rhythm and learning requires change of pace activities to keep focus and concentration in tune. Recess is necessary for maintaining the delightful melody of learning success and accomplishment.

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Sunday, August 31, 2008

Feature Article

Total Physical Response - Story: Integrating Storytelling into Instruction

The Total Physical Response - Story (TPR-S) strategy provides teachers with extraordinary tools for integrating storytelling into all aspects of instruction. The TPR-S strategy provides a framework for taking instruction to the proverbial "next level."

TPR-S tools give teachers potent and powerful methods for: Increasing students' memory of concepts by overcoming the tendency to remember only the first, last and different in a lecture

Building natural mnemonic devices for teachers' lectures

Engaging students' imagination and creativity for even the most boring topics (the standards-based curriculum that you are ordered to teach.)

Involving students in their own learning

Easy integration with the Mutual Storytelling Technique for promoting mature student mental health and emotional wellness

Added opportunities to map other content-area concepts (especially math and health) into any lesson

Added opportunities to provide positive, indirect suggestion for a positive student mind set TPR-S is an instructional strategy that is so natural that we wonder why we never thought of it

Besides these benefits, TPR-S requires only the props and learning materials that are on hand, meaning that implementing TPR-S strategies requires minimal "out-of-personal-pocket" expense.

There are some downsides to implementing this strategy, even if the TPR-S strategy sounds like a teacher's "dream come true answer and antidote" to many of the issues plaguing modern instruction. Sidebar (Teaching to the test being only one of those distractions.) A Strategy that Time Forgot Actually, it is only modern education that has forgotten about the TPR-S strategy.

In eras past, before print (books) and electronic memory systems (computers, Internet); the most common instructional practice was to both narrate and act out communication…signal, punctuate, pantomime…with gestures, facial expressions and body movements.

And as teachers digressed (they didn't have rigid schedules and a timeline for coaching students for the high-stakes test), stories of past experiences, related to the item of study, naturally

Olden-times-teachers (or tutors) prided themselves in their personal wisdom, and prided themselves in their ability to communicate that wisdom with stories.

What modern, output-focused factory educators consider to be "time-wasters, tangents, bird-walks" can serve academic goals once a teacher understands the power of TPR-S and employs the strategies in a focused method.

And, storytelling is seated deep in humanity's collective consciousness, probably predating words and the development of a spoken language. This means that stories seep into the unconscious regions of the human mind and affect learning in multiple ways. Far-Reaching Benefits Although TPR-S can be used to enhance the memory and experience of literature, and to activate active learning before a story (or novel) is read; TPR-S is usable for every subject. For example: Convert the steps of a complex math operation into a story, connect the vocabulary with specific physical actions (TPR)…or better yet, allow students to devise and share their own stories related to this operation

Map out the names, features and functions of multiple areas of the brain, create characters and a fantasy-type story of magic and intrigue with the action associated with countries, towns or villages with the names of these areas of the brain

Change the components of a complex economics formula to characters with traits that represent the relationships of the formula

Learn the actions, sounds, vocabulary and rules of a foreign language by extending basic TPR with story lines and natural interaction Sidebar

TPR, TPR-S, and the Mutual Storytelling Technique represent a full-bodied, comprehensive approach to accelerate learning.

These approaches build high-level, stress-free, creative capacities in our students. And, these methods decrease the amount of work, effort and stress that teachers experience in delivering instruction. Fables, Fairy Tales. Tall Tales and Folk Tales for a Modern Generation Fables are stories about animals that teach moral lessons.

But, stories can be about anything and teach lessons.

For example, the "Ant and the Grasshopper" fable could be about the "Hard Drive" and the "CPU." The "Wolf in Sheep's Clothing" could be about safe files on the hard drive and about Trojans (similar to computer viruses).

Fairy Tales contain some bit of magic and some bit of reality. Fairy tales can be worked into all manner of topics, especially ones that relate to human behavior…history, government, economics, business and politics.

For example, a political campaign exemplifies most (or all) of the characteristics of a fairy tale.

Sidebar We'll skip the obvious relationship to the "Tall Tale" and Myth because the satire is too easy, uncreative and

obvious. For example: The Story of the "Three Pigs" could refer to 1.) weak, 2.) better and 3.) solid methods taught in an economics class that describe how businesses insure themselves against loss.

Tall Tales are stories where the main character or hero possesses uncommonly beneficial traits. Paul Bunyan is a huge lumberjack with a colossal blue ox, Pecos Bill ropes a tornado with a giant rattlesnake turned lariat, John Henry pounds a hammer on a steel drill pin faster than a machine.

An Example of a teaching tall tale might be a scientist that can invent plenty of marvelous, labor-saving devices including the light bulb and the phonograph. Point out that the scientist tried 20,000 experiments before creating a light bulb that functioned. Sidebar To discover that Thomas Edison was not the inventor of the light bulb, and that he even lost a patent infringement lawsuit in Great Britain concerning the light bulb examine a real-world timeline.

Non-Tall Tale Light Bulb Invention Timeline What Edison developed was a complete, affordable and practical lighting system. Folk Tales are extracts from the culture of primitive (and not so non-modern) peoples. A story that is a fairy tale for one group may transform into a folk tale when exported to another group.

An example of a folk tale adapted to a teachable moment might be the story of the Dutch Traders purchasing the Island of Manhattan for \$24 worth of beads. In fact, some scholars believe that a "sale" never occurred because what the indigenous tribes were trading away was the right to use the island, their vocabulary had no meaning for the concept of selling land because all lands belong to the Great Spirit. This might be a case of renters overpowering the landlord and stealing the land.

A saga or Odyssey are arduous exploits or journeys that require perseverance before a goal is achieved.

The saga of a political or a human rights campaign, with setbacks, treachery, lies and promises, elation and let down fits this story model.

Nursery Rhymes are ditties that children learn. For example: "Three Blind Mice."

Three Blind Mice can become Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin; and Hitler can become the farmer's wife in a TPRS teachable moment. And such a moment, Hitler in old-fashioned peasant farmer's wife attire chasing a cigar-smoking, bald mouse, a wheel-chair mouse doing "wheelies" as he escapes, and a mouse with a red star on his oversized military hat makes the issue memorable. And, this could all be happening underneath the table as the real characters dine on English fish and chips, Russian Caviar, American hamburgers with German sauerkraut. You get the idea. Sidebar If you catch the concept of mental pictures associated with a storyline as driving attention, memory and retrieval of information, you understand one of the keys to Master Teacher performance. Summary Total Physical Response - Story (TPR-S) forms the backbone of effective teaching, whether the strategies are intuitive or learned.

TPR-S weaves its way into so many other "theoretical approaches" that the rock-solid underpinnings of TPRS can be lost in the buzz, flash, and hand-waving by the proponents of each "fad-de-jour"

"new-innovative-magic-bullet-obsolete-all-others" re-packaged teaching strategy.

But, understanding the simplicity and power of TPRS brings Master Teachers to masterful communication and effective instruction.

But, don't keep this learning method a "secret." At least share the power of the strategy and the ease of the process with your students.

Your students will appreciate how this one idea streamlines their study; while strengthening their memory and recall.

Perhaps the decreased stress and increased positive student outcomes that result from implementing TPRS will make each workday seem like a "too good to be true" Fairy Tale to you.

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Thursday, July 31, 2008

Feature Article

Total Physical Response: Building "Verbal-Physical" Connections that take Hands-On Learning to a New Level
Total Physical Response (TPR) is a strategy that was "borrowed" from Speech Therapy, Special Education and Foreign Language Instruction. These folks use the technique on "harder-to-teach-than-ordinary" student populations because the technique is effective. Because the technique is effective in teaching "higher maintenance" and "riskier" students (they are considered "At Risk" aren't they), the methods might seem "elementary," "less than sophisticated," and a notch or two below highest academic standards.

But professional teachers, confident, alert to any strategy that gives students an edge in learning seem unafraid to adopt the TPR Technique.

Of course, strategies that are delivered "one-on-one" or with a pair of students for one or two periods a week by a Speech Clinician need a bit of adaptation if they are to be effective with 22 Fourth Graders or 27 Eighth Graders. And, what about some "ultra-sophisticated Twelfth Grade "know-it-alls?"

These feeble and flimsy excuses (from recalcitrant teachers) for not employing TPR strategy fail to "hold water" because students at top-named colleges, studying under renown professors in accelerated language courses are more "sophisticated" than than the high school crowd. And these students learn by the use of TPR methods.

The TPR Strategy can be connected to other high-profile teaching strategies including: Higher-Order Thinking Skills
Multiple Intelligences

Hands-On, Project-Based Learning

The Mutual Storytelling Technique

Creative Drama

Community Service Learning TPR fits or dovetails into many models, including: Partners in Learning

Meta Cognition and the Construction of Knowledge

Role Playing

Basic Thinking Skills

Enhancing Creativity

Learning from Presentation

Learning Styles
Sidebar See the Classroom Toolkit article that describes the Mutual Storytelling Technique in greater detail. Not a "Cookie-Cutter" Strategy
A strategy that consistently delivers productive learning outcomes from Kindergarten to adult learners in formal settings; a strategy that appears to be part of the process that toddlers and preschoolers use to acquire language; must look different for students in each age group.

So, what would we expect to see happening in a classroom that was being lead by an "ordinary" (non-special populations) teacher? Well, a lot more than choral reading or "Listen and Repeat" group chanting.

We would see props, physical action; as in acting out a behavior that exemplifies the words, meaning or concepts that are being learned. For example: I ride.

I ride a horse.

I ride a bicycle.

I ride a train.

I ride a tornado (like Pecos Bill). Or; I paint a glorious sunset on a canvas.

I paint my bedroom with Gothic Black paint.

I paint gang slogans on rest room walls.

I paint word pictures of a sunset to impress my sweetheart.

I paint the sky with a magic brush attached to an airplane. The actual content is not important. What is important is the pairing of ideas and concepts with words and pantomime action.

Other techniques include skits, mini-dramas, plays. But, the more that the TPR process retreats from active individual participation to passive group observation; the more diluted the learning effects and measurable outcomes. Engaged Brains at Work
Even oppositional-defiant students who resist following directions that are given by a teacher have to be so disturbed as to be unteachable if they cannot accept instructions given by themselves.

In other words, students that innately desire self-mastery and personal competence self-reward learning with intrinsic payoffs, and these self-rewards are built into the TPR process.

Besides, auditory and speech sensation channels are activated when students talk out words and descriptions for what they are doing, while they are performing or mimicking the action.

And, making normally invisible thinking concrete and tangible assists teachers in assessing their skill in teaching. Sidebar See for a Graphic Organizer that represents the progression from; Physical Models to Abstract Words
This means that students have to talk during class. And, this talk needs to be about the curriculum.

The flaw in the "Be quiet and listen to the teacher pontificate" tradition (that was launched with the advent of factory

schools during the last century) is that most students "hear" only the first and last words that the teacher sprouts; unless those words are humor, sexy, angry, lewd or obscene. (Students pay attention to the bad stuff, and learn inappropriate content with magnificent, one-trial learning ease.)

The uniform voice of a lecture or academic discussion; passive absorption; fails to activate the alert centers of the human brain. Uniform stimulation (input) deactivates the brain at the "Reticular Activating System" (RAS) level. Sidebar For a discussion of the "Reticular Activating System" (RAS) and its effect upon learning see; A Language Learning Secret: Reset your Brain's Filter... TPR strategies are one antidote to the learning brain's RAS Filter because the student is providing lots of changes in the the learning environment, and the student's brain remains alert. Fear of Disorder, Disapproval and Public Censure Modern, lockstep instruction thrives upon physical control and an unnatural silence that is only broken by the incessant droning of "teacher talk."

So, while a teacher may agree, in theory, with the concept of students repeating words and commands aloud to themselves; the thought of a score of students (more or less doesn't matter) converting from "subtle, whispering in the ear" coaches into championship game cheerleaders sends ice-daggers through a teacher's spine.

"What if the students get out of control?" is the main fear. "Will I be able to settle them down afterwards?"

Answer: This depends upon the teacher, depends upon whether the teacher communicates expectations, communicates student benefits and how the teacher solicits positive student cooperation.

Dictatorial teachers, rule-enforcement-only teaching attitudes; and a belief in the "Students should be seen, herded, and not heard" mentality are strategies fraught with landmines and doomed to failure.

Careful rapport building with students, selling students on the idea that learning will become easier, more enjoyable, telling stories of other students or other classes that accelerated learning by means of the TPR method work well.

Another strategy: Pick several students, even single these students out for a reward. What you are interested in is connecting TPR activities with fun and reward. This is an application of the "Hawthorne Effect". Sidebar The Hawthorne Effect is often referred to as the "specialness-feeling" that develops when a group of individuals is singled out for special treatment. Classroom Toolkit referenced the Hawthorne Effect in several previous newsletters; Classroom Layout and Design: It's not too Late "We've Lost that Lovin' Feelin'" "Staying Well with Guided Imagery" But the goal is not to make the "volunteered" students feel special or even to them to learn more (although both should occur), the goal is to get other students to want in on a "good thing." Another goal is to allow the "singled out students" to deliver "unscripted testimonials" to the other students.

When students are telling each other that the TPR classroom procedure is rewarding, then the social group convinces any "prone-to-stray" student to "Not Mess Up!"

When students ask to participate, and when students convince others to cooperate, then teachers maintain a positive influence upon the class, and order is maintained at a high level of cordiality and freedom. Summary Once teachers recognize the power, flexibility and effectiveness; not to mention the positive learning outcomes that come from implementing Total Physical Response (TPR) strategies; they can develop plenty of creative ways to use the technique for delightful and imaginative instruction.

Develop a strategic plan for adding TPR to your dynamic instructional "bag of tricks."

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Monday, June 30, 2008

Feature Article

The Case against Open Source

The Case against Open Source is really a case against the "Free and Cheap" mantra that some Open Source Advocates chant when they solicit action (and wrong-headed decisions) from school district leaders. This is a case against folks (who know little about instruction and even less about the needs of teachers); who, despite their lack of knowledge, pitch this "save-money fantasy (delusional) strategy" to school district executives (who should know better than to listen, but don't). Sidebar Open Source Advocates who pitch the "Free and Cheap" strategy could even be well-meaning educators who love technology and want to see technology solutions available to students at any cost. (See the irony here?)

These folks could even be school district employees, Techies, who have used Windows®; Open Source software (the most prevalent kind); but, most of these folks are "outsiders" that… Don't know how teachers work Don't understand what teacher want or need

Don't sympathize with, empathize with, or relate to the plight of teachers

Don't comprehend the compatibility issues that are associated with running software within a school district "technology ecosystem"

Don't realize that Technology Integration is a failed concept… unless an entire program is funded to an adequate level, with additional funding contingency funding

Don't have a clue about how software costs add a minor (almost trivial) expense in the overall success of a technology program

Don't mind blaming teachers for the failure of Technology Programs to show a Return on Investment (ROI)

Forgot to do the basic research that would show exactly what Technology Tools, applied in exactly what way, result in exactly what measurable students curricular outcomes

Never pitch the one Open Source Solution that meets many (but not all) of a school district's needs, i.e., Novell®; Enterprise because Novell®; Enterprise is neither "Free nor Cheap."

Fail to recognize that Apple®; computers provide better solutions to their arguments for "Free and Cheap Open Source" than Open Source software does Classroom Toolkit documented the case against Open Source in a series of articles. These articles represent the rationale for requiring school districts to "do their homework" before dumping (dissipating, diffusing, wasting) huge amounts of money (which they claim that they don't have) on failed Technology Integration programs.

Technology Integration must be focused, solidified and shored up before Open Source software, or any other technology strategy can become effective.

This article clarifies the Classroom Toolkit position on what it would take to make an Open Source project successful.

Hint: it would take plenty of money, and would be neither "free" nor "cheap." "Straw Man" Argument: Only a

Distraction… with no Heart There actually isn't an argument against Open Source software in our schools because Commercial software, Freeware, Bannerware, Pirated software and Open Source software are only tools.

For example: While it might be patriotic to buy a hammer or screwdriver that were "Made in the USA," the origin of the tools (or the raw materials that they are made from) does not matter to the nail or the screw. Neither does the origin of the tool matter to the "home fixer-upper" that needs to build or repair a home furnishing that is broken before company arrives.

This analogy holds exactly for school districts that implement a software tools initiative. Sidebar Software tools are only tangentially related to Technology Integration. Note the meaning of the entire phrase: Integrating transparent technology use and skills into the Curriculum

Integrating the use of technology by teachers into instructional delivery and instructional management

Integrating the access to rich materials, including the Internet, into student research

Integrating thinking skills, problem solving and decision-making skills into student assignments so that students analyze, evaluate and discriminate authentic sources from the plethora of sources available in libraries and through the Internet

Integrating communication skills including speaking and writing into person-to-person and person-to-group interaction, whether that interaction is local or world-wide

However, the failure of the Technology Integration movement and the failure of an Open Source effort of marketing to teachers reflect issues that more extensive than simple "hammer and screwdriver-type home repairs." If either Technology Integration or adopting Open Source software were singular issues that assured that students and teachers received benefits, both ideologies would be further along on the trek toward making inroads into our schools… and progress would have been made.

Rather, the Technology Integration movement is more like attempting to build apartment buildings and high-rises by only

providing hammers and screwdrivers to the carpenters and electricians

Many more tools are needed, and these tools (training and professional development; Back-End programming; compatibility, scalability, interoperability) are very expensive. Programs that implement quality technology tools do not come "cheap." Teachers a.k.a. "Scapegoats" for Technology Integration School districts perform an "under-budget-and-blame-teachers" slight-of-hand ritual, every time they pretend that they are implementing Technology Integration projects. The "fall-guy teachers" are blamed for laziness (slacking off and not working hard enough), or blamed for incompetence (working in a slip-shod manner, just being there to collect a paycheck), or blamed for failing to use technology to produce measurable student outcomes (i.e., in increasing test scores).

Sidebar The classic "blame-game" dialog goes like this: We gave you a computer and installed a computer lab (shared by 48 classrooms), why haven't our students' test scores risen high enough to satisfy our critics. When will we recoup the major investment that we made in the computers and infrastructure? **The Role of Software in the Budget Formula** Software plays only a minor role in the Total Cost of Ownership (TCO) of a Technology Integration program. Infrastructure, equipment, technical support and refresh rates (how often equipment is replaced --should be every three years) are one; but not the most expensive "cost center."

A second cost center, training and professional development, should be at least 30% of project cost.

For example: If a project costs \$30 million USD, then training and professional development costs should run about \$10 million USD. But, school districts seldom allocate more than single-digit percentages to training and professional development; funds for stipends, trainers, follow-up support, release time, software and equipment for teachers to use at home, etc. School districts skimp and under fund in this area, and the results (as observed nation wide) is technology that is un used, under used and under utilized.

The third cost center, and perhaps the most expensive of all is the funding that must be allocated for the "Back-End" technical support, software programming and development, customization; compatibility, scalability and automation. This is the "behind the scenes" work, produced by highly-paid computer professionals (project managers, software engineers, database developers, database managers, server specialists, analysts, programmers, Web designers, Web Masters, etc.)

Without the Back-End support, technology (whether Commercial or Open Source) remains too difficult to use, lacks compatibility, lacks interoperability with other programs and lacks scalability. **Sidebar** Compatibility: Data files from one program should connect with, load, be read by other programs

Interoperability: Data that is captured in one program should be available to every other program to prevent duplicated effort (teacher labor) and to ensure that data input errors are minimized

Scalability: Technology integration requires that computers be added anywhere in a school district network. But, costs matter if you add 1 computer or 1,000 computers to a network. Every computer must function.

However, as the complexity of the network increases, costs skyrocket. Network administrators and managers know this. But, most software-only Open Source advocates don't understand IP Addressing, Super-Netting, V-LANS, DHCP Servers, or device priority; such as when IP Telephones operate on the same network as video, and data; where telephone conversations must be given a higher transmission priority than video, and video must have a higher-transmission priority than computer data. (Note: when computer data is resent, the network just appears slow. If telephone message packets have to be resent, the call is garbled.) The size of the Back-End programming, customization, support and automation components of a Technology Integration package dwarfs the size of the training and professional development costs. **How a Real Budget (i.e., Having a Chance for Positive Measurable Outcomes) Plays Out** Even if school districts skimp on the Back-End costs, these should approach 30% of the total Technology Integration program budget. For example: For the \$30 million project, \$10 million for hardware, software and infrastructure, \$10 million for training and professional development and \$10 million for Back-End programming, interoperability, automation, development and support.

But, school districts spend little or nothing on the Back-End programming, automation and support.

And, it is this lack of Back-End integration that diminishes the actual value of outcomes from any expenditure on Technology Integration, bringing the ROI down to the lowest common denominator; i.e., whatever sheer personal (and uncompensated) efforts that teachers put out; mostly on their own time. Another way of framing the issue, if teachers put in "above and beyond the call of duty type " efforts to compensate for the minimal funding of Technology Integration programs, then the Technology Integration initiative can be salvaged. **The "Zero Funding Option" for Real Technology Integration** If IT Directors (and other folks in the know) understood how teachers work, and how learning takes place, these folks would explain the full (actual) costs of a successful Technology Integration program to school district executives and meddling politicians.

Then, most enlightened school district executives would propose a "Zero Funds" Budget. In-the-know education leaders would decide to allocate "zero" expenditures for a "not ready for prime time" Technology Integration effort because they would reason that the school system could not afford to waste money by launching a "partially funded, minimal chance or return, only for show" project. Enlightened school would allocate Zero funds because they would understand what a "real chance of success" (a real Technology Program) would cost.

These enlightened leaders would also understand that IT folks failed to dialog with teachers and that It folks failed to demonstrate the direct connection of technology expenditures to measurable improvements in student achievement.

(You can only control what you can measure.) **Sidebar** If you lack adequate funds for the successful implementation of a

program; the sane, rational and competent approach is to cancel the program, rather than launch a "sham, pretend that we are addressing the issue" initiative. Technology Project Intelligence Myopia The problem is that people know what they can see, and everybody sees the computer.

If a computer system could be purchased for \$400 USD, and Open Source software were free, the cost of purchasing, installing the computer is: Computer: \$400

Installation: \$60

Three Year Warranty: \$125

Network Drop (to connect the computer to a Switch): \$130

Cost of Port on the Network Switch: \$125

Analysis: The cost for the computer connection to the server about doubles the base cost of the computer.

But, computers with "Free and Cheap" software will continue to sit idle unless teachers are trained. And, the professional development that teachers require is not software training, but specialized curriculum training, geared to the subject and age level of the students that they are teaching. Another miscue of the Technology Integration movement was to deliver software training when subject matter professional development (with the transparent use of technology) was required.

Sidebar Curriculum training using transparent technology skills is the Technology training that few school districts engage in because delivering useful training of this type is too expensive. A cadre of (extra) teachers (from each content area) would need to be assigned to assist (mentor, support) every teacher. A program like this might require 20 times the number of trainers that the district now employs. (And, trainers are looked upon as cost-centers, i.e., overhead. (Note: teachers are profit centers, because school districts are paid for the warm student bodies that sit in classrooms under the watchful eye of teachers. How to calculate how many trainers are required? Four or five grade for the elementary grade levels (Do you count Kindergarten?), trainers for each middle school content area subject, trainers for each high school subject, etc.

And, trainers must be teachers that have proven their expertise by actually demonstrating positive student improvements in learning by the use of the Technology Integration that that they are presenting. (School districts that deliver software-only training without a focus upon exactly how every teacher can apply the curriculum lessons deserve to be punished.)

A transfer to the Training Corps is the last place that mediocre and under skilled teachers should be assigned. (And, avoid promoting these folks to principal, too.)

The guideline of allocating 30% for professional development breaks down with small Technology Integration budgets.

Until expenditures reach "critical mass," i.e., large amounts of money for hardware and infrastructure, training and professional development costs will actually be fixed costs. (This means a larger percentage of the Technology Integration budget must be allocated for smaller project. This also means that large numbers of real teachers will need to be hired as trainers, curriculum developers and learning specialists so that teachers can be trained by folks that actually know and have successfully implemented technology integration projects where real student achievement has been measured. And, this training cannot be a "one session- no follow-up" "one-script-fits-all" wonder. Training sessions must contain follow-up, and be tailor-made for each teacher.

This training and professional development must also include: Release time for teachers

Substitute pay (to cover the release time)

Corresponding training and professional development for campus administrators

Facilities for training students, by their teachers, or by training specialists

Parent training and support (evenings and weekends) Back-End System, Programming, Connectivity and Compatibility:

The "Sin of Omission" But by far the most expensive cost of a Technology Integration program that really delivers is the crucial (mandatory, keystone, "It-will-never-be-effective-without-this,"

"Don't-do-this-and-Technology-Integration-efforts-wither-on-the-vine") Back-End programming.

But, this part of the Technology Integration piece almost never gets done.

Why?

Answer: Because…The professionals with the technical knowledge to do this work earn more than most school district superintendents, and are worth every penny of their salary (Note: some of these professionals are billed for their services at from \$150.00 to \$300.00 USD per hour!)

There are not enough of these professionals residing in the US, and the US Government will not grant more H-1B Visas so that we can get the talented professionals we need from India, Russia and China

The ramp up time where those talented professionals learn the "Educational Process" (Educational Intelligence, Business Intelligence) so that they can integrate and automate Back-End processes is lengthy (think months and years)

The ramp-up and hiring of these talented professionals would "bid up" the salaries and make programs like this even more expensive

The only database product that can scale to the level required for this level of complexity is Oracle™ (Note: SAP™ also has this capacity, but SAP implantation projects take one or more years of planning and require huge start up budgets (Think tens to hundreds of millions.)

Project Managers capable of managing the required Back-End projects earn (and are a bargain at) twice or three times what an average school district superintendent earns

For school district budget managers, the costs of building out a Technology Integration program…training and

professional development, infrastructure, and Back-End support system are inordinate, excessive and budget-breakers. To fund a "Real" (i.e., guaranteed to pay off) Technology Integration program would require that all school district funds be funneled into the Technology Integration arena. Then, school district would need to hire 25% more teachers to provide the training and professional development, 400% more technical support staff members, and a large cohort of highly-paid computer professionals (programmers, database developers, project managers, Web designers, graphic artists, etc.) would need to be added to the district's staff. Sidebar Note: Just hiring this large technical staff is inadequate because these folks require time to learn the basics of "Teaching Intelligence" before they can create the Back-End infrastructure and conduits required to integrate all the systems that are connected to the school district's network. In addition, all of these folks require high-end computing equipment, development servers and office space. Training facilities would need to be built, and at least 25% more office space would be required.

Bottom line, school district will fund hardware and infrastructure projects, refresh computers at a painful rate, and blame teachers for the lack of students' progress from using the equipment.

Bottom line for teachers: Speak out and let everyone know that Technology Integration is a failed, fabled, fantasy unless major awoken and a major funding commitment "gets real." Real needs of Teachers Teachers need transparent computing. This means computer systems that are easy to use, and this means computer systems that fit with how teachers work.

These computing needs must mesh with the over-worked lifestyle and the economic realities that teachers face. These include: Teachers have spouses

Spouses work for business and industry

Teachers do not have money for more than one computer in the household

Teachers do not have the skills to develop virtual or dual boot computers, not the time to waste in learning these technical skills

Most of the planning and lesson development that teachers perform is conducted at home

Most of the technology materials, test banks, auxiliary software provided by textbook publishers is Window and Mac compatible

Therefore:

Until Open Source software is compatible with the Industry Standard operating system, the Windows operating system is the logical choice for school computer systems.

"Tip of the Iceberg" Needs for School District Technology But teachers' needs are just the "Tip of the Iceberg" when it comes to compatibility requirements for Open Source software.

The choice of an operating system must be based upon the software programs that must be used do the jobs that are required. The choice of operating systems always depends upon the applications that must be run to perform mission critical work. Then, hardware and peripherals with the required capacity to run the applications and Operating System are chosen. Only the uninformed, the folks with a moneymaking conflict-of interest and Open Source Zealots fail to follow this "industry standard" decision-making practice. Applications that School Districts must Support The applications that a school district operating system must support include: Business Office Software (Payroll, Accounts Receivable, Accounts Payable, Purchasing, Reporting to State and Federal Agencies

Food Service Menu Planning, Free and Reduced Lunch Eligibility and Reporting, Point of Sale (POS) systems

Transportation Systems, Route Planning, Student Population Density Mapping, School Boundary Analysis and Reporting

Library Automation - Card Catalog, Book Loan and Tracking, Bar Code Generation

Grade Reporting

Reading Motivation and Student Performance Tracking

Test Score Analysis

Administrative and Counselor Access to Dashboards for all Student Achievement

Student Online Portfolio Software - With Administrative Review

Textbook Inventory, Tracking, Management and Cost Recovery Software

Test Bank Software

Master Schedule Software, and Wireless Student Schedule Queries using Handhelds

Special Education Individual Education Plan (IEP) Generation and Tracking software

The Operating System must be compatible with these and countless other applications. For example: First Grade through High School Mind Mapping

Geometry Software

Science Probeware Software

Scientific Calculators Software

Primary Grade Reading Testing and Test Scoring

Reading Motivation

Math Improvement Tracking

Remedial Reading Software

Grade Recovery Software

Computer Aided Instruction Software

The argument that the Open Source Desktop has superior specifications is mute.

And, teachers don't need a free office application program. They need seamless compatibility with mission critical applications, one-click ease of use and interoperability so that data does not have to be re-entered from one application to another.

There is a movement to provide this interoperability. This is the Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF). Microsoft, Apple, big-name and educational publishers are involved. The only Open Source vendor to be SIF certified is Novell. Other Open Source folks don't appear to understand this school district need for interoperability, and the issue is ignored. One possibly the reason that Open Source Advocates ignore the only Open Source Product that is ready for prime time, Novell, is that Novell is neither "Free or Cheap." But, Novell has done the homework that other Open Source vendors need to do, i.e., build a Back-End system. First Step Fundamentals But, building an infrastructure, training teachers and developing a Back-End support system only makes sense if there is absolute, irrefutable evidence and solid proof of a direct connection between Technology Integration and positive, measurable student instructional outcomes.

And, these connections to instruction must be super-substantial. The instructional outcome connections to Technology Integration must show that not only can Technology Integration obtain results, but those results must be better than the results that less-costly methods produce.

These connections cannot be vague and tenuous; or open to alternate explanations.

Of course, after billions in spending on hardware and infrastructure, asking for this connection between instruction and technology is past due.

If only school folks had attended to "First-Step Fundamentals" and had discovered the direct connection between technology and student achievement; instead of spending 15 years "chirping the tune" that "Technology assists learning, but we can't prove the fact."

It has been this failure to prove the exact role of technology in supporting student achievement that is responsible for so many "easy target Ed Tech" funding cuts. Open Source Strategies for the Real (Teaching) World To gain traction in US schools, Open Source Advocates must learn how teachers work and learn how teachers think. This requires that Open Source Advocates; Focus upon compatibility with school district mission critical software Move to full SIF Compliance

Make the software "one-click easy"

Standardize the software interface, institute a version control and upgrade system that matches the school district yearly (summer) hard-drive-imaging and upgrade cycle

Provide the conduits to full data interchange between application and conduits for back end automation Implications for Open Source The primary call to action for Open Source Advocates is to "Cease and desist" in the "misinformation" campaign that confuses "already budget-distressed and stressed" school district executives by offering them false hope of technology savings.

The current "Free and Cheap" persuasive dialog is similar to sending travelers on a cruise; then leaving them to discover that the ship didn't take on fuel, that the ship is dead in the water; and, if they don't want to die upon the deep, they better figure out a way to start rowing.

Promoting a "Free and Cheap," "easy-way-out" strategy to over stressed, under involved, uninitiated; "Only give me a summary, not the specifics, because I can't get my mind around details" mindset is unethical. Of course, the Open Source Advocates are well-meaning and sincere; but "majorly uninformed." Open Source Advocate: "The Must Do" What Open Source Advocates need to do to gain mind-share and market share in our schools is to go to schools, discover what teachers want, make sure that the technology component of the software is transparent (i.e., invisible) and make sure that each Open Source software product runs on Windows, Apple and Linux.

The amount of work that our teachers are (asked, requested, badgered) into doing is incredible. Teachers have zero frustration tolerance for tinkering with software before the software will function and perform real work. And, the skills that teachers need to perform an effective job of teaching parallel what employers say about high school and college graduates; technology skills come in near the bottom of what teachers need to be effective teachers.

Until Open Source Advocates develop Open Source software applications that are "one-click-easy" SIF Compatible, and interoperable with the industry standard Windows Operating System, these Advocates need to do their homework. Summary and Call to Action Open Source Advocates should not feel insulted or defensive when they learn that Open Source is not ready for Prime Time in our schools.

Open Source software is not ready because Open Source Developers have not gone into our schools and studied what teachers and students need. They can't be expected to know what is required in the educational arena if the executives and managers in our schools don't know, haven't figured it out, and don't ask teachers, either.

It may be difficult for Open Source Advocates to accept that their clamor for "Free and Cheap" software for our schools is detrimental.

But, what they need to be advocating is... Research to show exactly what technology results in exactly what measurable student achievement

Back-End Integration and Database Development

Adequate budgeting that includes:

30% for training and professional development

30% for Back-End programming

30% for technical support

Seamless automation

Compatibility with School system Mission Critical Software

Compatibility with Microsoft's Office

The use of Open Source software for Microsoft's Windows

Note: Most of the Open Source software that is in use in the world is Open Source software that runs under the Windows's Operating System.

So, Open Source Zealots must put aside their disdain for Microsoft's; and build a loving, caring and concern for the needs of teachers.

And the best way to do that is to stop filling school district executives with false hope that the magic of Technology Integration can be solved with one quick and easy fix, i.e., by adopting of "Free and Cheap" Open Source software.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 08:00

Saturday, May 31, 2008

Feature Article

Newbie Teacher Bailout: Stopping the School District Talent Leak

As school winds down, many teachers contemplate…consider, anguish about, worry over…changing jobs or "jumping ship" from the teaching profession. For many teachers, this represents the culmination of a stressful year of challenges. For teachers in their first five years of classroom work, this is "par for the course." But, what kind of "course" are new teachers playing? Maybe well manicured fairways; level, slick greens; or……woods, roughs, sand traps, water hazards…or, if conditions are really "bad……coyotes in the woods, roughs designed by Mr. Magoo, sand traps "hopping with fleas" and water hazards slithering with alligators. Teachers leaving the profession in droves are on par with our epidemic student-leaving (dropout) problem. Of course, bureaucratic, one-program solutions miss the fact that school teacher leaving is not a "single problem requiring a one-trick, slight-of-hand solution." Some teachers leave the profession because…

They are inadequate teachers, and efforts to upgrade their skills for three or four years failed to bring their skill set to an acceptable level of performance. (This is a slim number, and these folks are "statistical outliers." Our job here is to discover the reason that these folks entered the teaching profession in the first place.

The teachers' spouse was relocated on their job. This is a "forced move, and no solution is possible.

The teacher took a better paying job in another school district, or the teacher took a job with a school district closer to home. (As gasoline prices skyrocket, this motivation for job relocation will continue to rise and finding employment closer to home becomes imperative.) Again, no solution unless the school district builds gasoline subsidies into its pay scale.

Teachers have families and children. A female teacher staying home to raise their children, or to home school their children because the local public schools are inadequate is a rarity. Teachers cannot afford the luxury of a one-earner household because their meager beginning salary fails to provide a financial safety net. The most likely scenario for this issue is the male teacher that must secure better pay to afford the expenses of medical care and the daily upkeep of the children. The possibility of a solution here, with the current bureaucratic mentality that manages our school districts: near zero

Teachers leave because the urban, inner-city school district is mismanaged, corrupt, inept incongruent or grotesque. This problem cannot be resolved because the management system is in disrepair or collapse, and it will take years of solid leadership to shape up the mess

Teachers leave because the campus principal is so inept, incompetent or emotionally ill that campus morale bottoms out. Or, the principal overstresses on test scores and mounts a campus purge to rid the campus of "low-performing teachers that contribute to minimal campus productivity."

Or, the campus administrator is so dictatorial-authoritarian, flimsy-willed laissez faire, or "politically correct-democratic" that no one supports campus teachers. School system bureaucrats seldom figure out that many of the "teacher problems" that they believe they are addressing are actually symptoms of campus or district administrator ineptitude. Of course, this misfeasance is difficult to discover because campus principals "talk-the-talk"; and campus staff in the know; i.e., teachers, are afraid to talk. Campus principals "butter the political bread" where it counts, i.e., to further their careers. Teacher retention plans seldom identify the principal as the underlying cause of a "teacher-out-migration." And, "chain-of-command pampering& tends to support "upper-lings" (principals and executive staff) in favor of the "underlings (teachers). The chance of a bureaucratic solution to the administrative causes of the teacher-leaving problem: Slim to less-than-slim

Teachers leave because the campus administrators change. And the change of administrators brings in "new blood," brings in new ideas that include new implementation directives and new cliques. Change-resistant teachers (that don't fit in), bail out. The chance that a bureaucratic solution to resolve this teacher-leaving issue: Slim to none

School District Response Some school districts welcome the emigration of teachers because leaving teachers also abandon local leave and local personal days that are funded by the district. In addition, many school districts encourage teachers to retire, sometimes even offering retirement incentives; so that newbie teachers can be hired as substantial salary savings. (And, half of these Newbies will be gone within three to five years.)

However, ridding the teaching profession of Master Teachers serves no interest of the common good. **Inner City Teacher Exodus** The teacher exodus from Inner City schools drives the teacher leaving number to the heights that they attain. And, this is a source of national shame.

Unfortunately, the executives and administrators of these districts cannot solve the problem because they cannot see that "they are the problem." Who wants to teach in a "low-performing" school? Who comes to such a school with a satchel of enthusiasm and idealism; only to flee, yelping, tail between their legs? The surest way to ensure that 90% of new teachers leave the teaching profession is to place them in a "no-can-do, no-help-for-you" school. These schools that accelerate the profession abandonment rate require a solution that "money cannot buy." The lack of adequate funding may be a problem, but budget shortfalls are not the cause of the instructional and societal catastrophe that these

schools perpetuate. Even the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), focuses its efforts on these school districts. Of course, the NCLB motivation is to show that public education is sub-standard so that our government can fund church schools with tax money. But the plight of the students in these schools is only used to bolster the political case that our public schools are "dens of inefficiency, inept management and absent learning." Unfortunately, teachers are blamed for the problems in management and performance of these school districts, and that is the reason that they are "bailing out." Out of one of those districts and into the suburbs, or out of the profession altogether. Why would a teacher want to "tough it out" with students that need the best teachers when they can show better test results with less work, with less stress and with greater safety. The challenge for those inept school districts is to produce better instructional results, get student behavior under control, pay more (super-much more in the way of incentives) for Master Teachers who will be amply rewarded for taking on these classes. Schools also need to turn the management of campus programs over to teachers, then have school administrators reporting to both teachers and the community. Of course, the communities that need this huge infusion of educational resources have deteriorated taxing ability and low property values. So, these are the districts least able to "do what it takes" to get the instructional job done.

And what does it take? Here are some starters:

Policemen at the doors and Texas "Road House" bouncers in the classrooms, working as Teacher Aides in tranquil moments

Drug-sniffing dogs as mascots stationed at every school entrance way…and periodic, random sweeps of all school facilities at least three times a day

Individual tutoring for every student whose teacher requests one-to-one help

Part-time, during-school and after-school jobs for students in tutoring younger students

Teams of curriculum developers that tailor-make materials for classrooms, groups of students and individual students

Partnerships with local businesses with subsidies for work study students' salaries, so that students earn full

professional pay for the quality work that they do

Anything else that works or fits in to local conditions

Of course, the folks who are in charge of these school systems will continue to blame teachers for substandard student performance, but these folks are the ones that should be leaving, not new teachers. No New News. The clamor for "doing something" about the teacher-leaving problem is decades old and seldom addressed. As "baby boomer" teachers retire, the problem of finding qualified, remaining-in-the-profession teachers will increase. This is because these Master Teachers are providing the only support that most Newbie teachers receive. When Master Teachers leave, they take more "institutional knowledge" with them than Newbie teachers do. When both Master Teachers and Newbie Teachers leave, the school is left "dead in the water" for three to five years. Of course, bringing these Master Teachers back as part-time "teacher support consultants" at lucrative salaries and full benefits (that don't diminish retirement checks) is an obvious, but expensive option. Otherwise, schools will be flooded with a larger crop of Newbie teachers that bail out in three to five years. This will further fuel the mistaken perception that there is a "teacher shortage." Actually, the number of certified teachers in the workforce exceeds the number of teacher job vacancies at any one time. This probably means that certification is an inadequate measure for vetting the folks that enter the teaching profession. This fact leads to the conclusion that the quality of pre-service training is inadequate. But, actually, it is the post-employment support that is inadequate. So, blaming teachers and building strategies to "bring teachers up to snuff" is wrong-headed and off target…even though that seems to be the approach almost every school district with a teacher-leaving problem embarks upon.

These non-functional proposals include… Saving money on teacher support, and spending the money on teacher recruiting and teacher retraining

Miscalculation (and under reporting) teacher turnover costs, including advertising, recruiting, human resources paper work and training

Failing to connect NCLB compliance costs for "low performance" with the teacher-leaving problem

Attributing the teacher-leaving problem to problems inherent in the sub-standard teachers that were hired. A Targeted Teacher Retention Strategy. What school district need to do instead is provide for teacher empowerment, teacher job security, teacher morale (from being valued, participatory problem-solvers), and from providing whatever help the new teacher needs. Of course, the first step is for the school district to realize that there is a problem. The second step is to realize that the problem lies with the school district executive and management staff, not the new teachers. The third step is to decide to spend money that would be wasted on the teacher-leaving cycle, and become proactive. This means spending the wasted money on teacher support before it is "poured down the rat hole" of advertising, recruitment, paperwork and indoctrination of the replacement teacher. Unfortunately, costs for replacing teachers remain hidden, while the costs associated with retaining teachers (although absent) seem glaring and excessive. Again, wrong-headed thinking by executive and management (bureaucratic) types contributes to this myth that teachers are to blame. Unfortunately too, solutions require funding for support programs that cross campus and departmental jurisdictions. Solutions require creativity, shared problem-solving, shared decision-making, flexible action plans, and test-as-you-make-progress action steps. There are too few school damaged school districts that can turn the corner, and implement a change strategy that will salvage the next crop (cohort, battalion) of teachers. And, teachers approaching this challenge are like foot soldiers charging into a reinforced line of enemy pillboxes. Expect to take casualties. Realizing the Teacher-Leaving is a Symptom. Wholesale teacher-leaving of the profession is a symptom, not the problem. And this

is a symptom of our school systems' stagnation with bureaucracy and with the factory-based Industrial Age school model. Of course, everyone who signs on as a teacher wants to succeed. And these folks know that teaching is one of those occupations that pays back plenty (in non-monetary ways) in personal satisfaction, self-development and positive emotional well being. Teachers can consider themselves blessed by their relationships with students. But, the working environment holds negative "slings and arrows" that fate most new teachers to an early exit from the profession, often blaming themselves for a miserable situation that just wasn't their fault. Sadder and wiser, teachers who jump off the school district "mule train" find themselves looking back at all the potential that never was. Real Support for New Teachers School districts are lulled into a false sense of security because, for most teaching jobs (except Math, Science and Special Education), there are more applicants than there are jobs. Of course, many of these applicants are the same folks who are bailing out from one "frying pan district" to take a job in a "what they hope is a greener grass pasture," but is actually a "deep fryer or a roaster." Rather than low pay, it is the lack of teacher support by supervisors and administrators that fails the new teacher. And, the cause of supervisor and management support is, the folks "can't, won't, don't know how" to fund what is required to help teachers. Sidebar Teaching is often considered a self-funded profession. US teachers spend an estimated \$1 billion USD each year to acquire the resources and materials that the school districts that they work for fail to provide. This is another face of our national teacher-support disgrace. But, how are school districts to offer support that makes a difference in the working lives of teachers? These support programs would require flexibility, the employment of additional tiers of professional support staff, and less administrators. These support programs would require less bureaucratic administrators and supervisors; but many more "action-taking, can-do, no excuse leaders" who accept accountability. Real support also erases departmental lines of jurisdiction. Especially when the problem is the campus administrator. Teachers must feel free (of retribution) to get inept supervisors removed, and removed quickly. However, the current "chain of command" practice of school district executives supporting faulty supervisors in the district's "Administrators' Club" torpedoed teacher support efforts at removing administrative causes of teachers leaving the profession. And outside researchers seldom finger campus administrators as the cause of so many teachers (new teachers and long-time veterans) seeking employment elsewhere. Poor campus administrators sink many teaching careers. The reluctance of researchers to expose the raw nerve of campus pain and discontent (terrible administrators) means that school districts (and the public that funds them) receive less-than accurate evaluation data about the teacher-leaving issue. This leads to the (traditional, most parroted) misperception that the problem lies with teachers. Sidebar Paradoxes of a just plain bogus issue? There are more trained and certified teachers in the job force outside teaching. Most of the teachers that leave the profession within five years received positive teacher evaluations. What does this mean? Anecdotal evidence, observation and candid discussion with teachers reveals that inept and incompetent campus administrators are a major cause of teachers leaving the profession. Unfortunately, it is safe to predict that teachers will continue to be blamed as the cause of this symptom. Hard-Hitting, "Tell-it-like-it-is" Analysis It's time for hard-hitting, tell-it-like-it-is analysis to "get to the bottom," or is that "get to the top?" of the teacher-leaving issue. Blaming teachers for the "whole kit and kaboodle" distracts us from examining the real causes of early and mass teacher-leaving (especially during their first three to five years of service). A practical and realistic problem-solving approach might be to...

- Identify new teacher support models
- Identify sources of additional revenue and funding
- Implement these models with enough funding and enough testing to ensure success
- Document the approach and share successes with other school districts

Of course, nothing is more difficult for outsiders to detect than administrator indifference (or sabotage) of an improvement project. What would happen as soon as the model project begins to identify... The need to ramp up huge amounts of additional funding?

The incompetence, misfeasance, or malfeasance of principal and administrators; and a need for personnel changes in those positions?

Past, stupid administrative decisions, edicts, policies and "innovations" and other catastrophes that are currently being covered up?

Under-the-rug sweeping" and "around the lawsuit dancing" in dealing with criminal behaviors of teachers and principals?

New models must reject the traditional belief that pre-service teachers require better career counseling so that they learn that they are not "cut out" to be teachers before entering the rigors of classroom work. (There should not be any "rigors," and if these really exist, teachers should receive lucrative "hazardous duty pay" incentives.) Sidebar If there is more work than a teacher can perform during a normal eight hour workday, then the management answer is clear, "hire more staff!" No other requirement is reasonable. For example, if paperwork and useless documentation is really required, then hire secretaries that perform that work for teachers. And, make those secretaries accountable to those teachers. For example, teachers hire and fire their own secretaries, without the interference of the campus administration. Another option: Pay teachers overtime pay for any work over eight hours per day/ 40 hours per week. Of course, is the "instant solution" because, if school district administrators had to pay teachers for the "Mickey Mouse" work that they require, hours of non-essential, trivial tasks would disappear instantly from their directives. If anyone can show that data analysis improves instruction in any way, then the district could hire data entry clerks, statisticians and computer programmers to process that data and deliver updated dashboards that indicate precise, high-priority strategies that are identified by the data. But, there are a number of factors that will likely maintain the status quo, and maintain a lack of teacher support.

These include: Teaching remains an activity of supervisor and colleague isolation, and a lack of meaningful collaborative opportunities

Joint (dual relationship roles) for supervisors (supervisor, evaluator, coach, confidant) hampers honest communication between supervisors and teachers. (Teachers are reluctant to reveal real issues and shortcomings to the person that will evaluate them.)

The academic and theoretical content of in-service programs relates more to the philosophy of campus administrators than to teachers' real needs. Teachers require specific, rather than theoretical answers. The Streamlined Solution To focus upon the real causes of teacher-leaving, school boards could implement strategies that make top level executives and administrators accountable for the problem (since their actions are a major cause of the problem). Tangible ways to get school district executives and administrators to pay attention to their culpability in the teacher-leaving problem would be to

Reduce their pay

Shorten their contract year

Reduce their rank or position level

Open their personnel evaluation to community observation, rather than the current, behind-closed-doors method of employment action

Summary The cost of recruiting, hiring, and training teachers should be reported to the community along side the actual expenditures for teacher support. This will highlight the fact that "failing to support teachers"

actually costs the district more than the absent support would have cost (if support had been provided).

Non School District Teacher-Leaving Issues As gasoline costs skyrocket, more teachers will choose employment that is closer to their home unless

Four-Day Work Weeks are implemented (Parents and Community Members will object because the cost of child care and babysitting would drive many parents into bankruptcy)

Driving-Distance Stipends are provided for new teacher that cannot afford to commute otherwise

Business as Usual Clearly the "Business as Usual" strategy of letting new teachers flounder is too expensive for our school districts.

This is true in the sense that the cost of our students leaving (dropouts) is too costly for our society to bear. Maybe it is time to sound the alarm and address the real issue, i.e., bureaucratic inefficiency, teacher "unimplemented"

Industrial Age management models and "Top-Down" Chains of Command. It's time to show our communities the actual cost of teachers leaving the profession, its time to hold school district executives and administrators accountable (because these folks seem to be the major cause of the problem), and its time to own up to the responsibility of funding our schools at a level that compensates our teachers in a far more lucrative way.

Besides providing real-time, confidential, and answer-focused support for our teachers, it is time to come to grips with the major myth that allows school district managers to place the blame on teacher-leaving upon teachers. That myth, that "Teachers receive such rewards from their interactions with students that teachers should be glad to work long extra (extra long) hours without additional compensation" needs to die a quick and ignominious death.

An accurate antidote for blaming teachers, "If school district executives, administrators and managers were doing their jobs, teachers would not be forced to work huge numbers of hours without compensation." And new teachers would receive the support they need to build solid skill sets and become the Master Teachers that they are capable of becoming.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 08:00

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

Feature Article

Delivering Lessons that get Heard, get Remembered, and get Acted Upon

You already know that serving up memorable lessons is in your job description. So, delivering lessons that are heard and remembered is your target.

Creating memorable lessons helps your teaching, establishes you as an expert in your content area and demonstrates your intellectual authority.

These high-impact lessons also create a deep connection and a solid trust with your students.

Your students are begging (hoping, wishing) to trust your knowledge and skill level, but dry, dispassionate, academic lecturing fails to resonate with them.

How do you "Pull Off" a Memorable Lesson?

The question is, "How do you build and deliver a great lesson? (A great lesson is one that your students actually take interest in, connect with and remember.)

But, maybe you still wonder how much work and effort it will take to fabricate such a lesson.

Well, creating and delivering a memorable lesson is a huge subject. There are countless ways to pull off such a feat.

But, this article will focus upon a simple formula for you to practice with. The formula involves three imaginary props…images to help you remember the creative pattern. These are:

A knot hole in a fence

The district championship game and a Celebration (or Consolidation) Pep Rally

The Knot Hole in the Fence

Old-time movies show kids with no money watching a baseball game by peering through a know hole in the fence.

By watching the game through a knot hole, you only get to see a small piece of what is happening in the game at any one time.

The "knot-hole-view" is far less reveling than the panorama that folks who paid for tickets got to see. And, there is always a danger that the either a policeman or bigger kids might come by and drive our heroes away.

In the same way, the issue you face in developing a memorable lesson is that you know a lot about the lesson contents. You know what is happening in the whole stadium…as if watching from box seats or the radio announcers' booth. You want your students to know as much as you do about the lesson's content. And, it probably pains you that you must leave many aspects and nuances of the information out of view.

But, consider how long it took for you to learn all that you know about the subject. Months, multiple college classes if the subject was in your major, years of outside-of-class study, seminars and workshops. So how could you compress your months, years, or decades of experience and knowledge into a single lesson, or even a unit?

Your approach: Pick a single student and pretend to be giving them the kind of description that one friend would be giving of the game when several of them are vying for a glimpse through the knot hole. Focus upon the essential action. Describe as if it were a "play-by-play" of what is happening.

For example, as you introduce the lesson, entice your students with crucial information…but only as much as you can see through the knot hole in the fence.

The introduction should be an appetizer, not a buffet. Dramatize Next: Engage your students' imagination and sensory processing (learning styles, learning modalities) with drama. This means the kind of drama that tells a story, but with the importance and energy of the championship game, not the boring practices and team drills that got the team into the playoffs, finals, tournament, etc.

But, take a tip from broadcast television, keep the plot simple and uncomplicated.

The drama can be an engaging story, with just the essential details as if watching the game through a knot hole.

Use the drama of the story to communicate immediate understanding, and communicate your main points with the kind of interest that comes from sensory processing.

Take an experience that is common to your students, and map a concept to that experience.

For example…

Students understand the conflicts that teenagers experience in wanting to be independent, while their parents want to keep them safely under control. Describing this conflict

Or, students may be familiar with parents arguing about money. Describing a family drama when discussing how our political parties decide on a budget fits right in and connects with their personal experience.

Or, students may have seen their parents fuming and fomenting about being stuck in a traffic gridlock. So, connecting this experience to the drama and frustrations of African-American and Hispanic Americans who yearn to make progress with the American dream is a natural. (So is describing how our government fails to create opportunities for all Americans, but enabling the rich to "speed along on toll roads and with their cronies in the car-pool, fast-lane.")

When you relate a lesson-metaphor-drama, you take an intellectual concept and craft it into an engaging, unique, and personal experience.

And, a visceral drama is real enough to burn itself into your students' memories.

A great lesson engages your students' senses. Reliving and replaying personal experience is more real than "thinking about" concepts. The Celebration (or Consolidation) Pep Rally Finally, help your students face the aftermath of the drama.

With a game, the home-team-favorites either win or loose. So it is with the content-area lessons of life that a personal drama engages.

Win or loose, the important thing is what we do next, what we apply in our lives to keep our winning streak alive, or to come back stronger, more fit, more ready to compete.

Your students may "understand the point of the drama, but they need a way to apply the principles in their studies and their lives.

For the lesson to really "sink in," your students need a way to take action on the lesson.

The results of your students' action-taking do not have to be successful, but trying and failing often produces more substantial learning than doing and succeeding.

So, avoid "fairy-tale, happy-ever-after" endings that "pitch a simple, one-size-one-off-solution" to all issues.

The follow-up to your drama must have a "do-able" learning task.

You are targeting more than a "That was an interesting story" kind of response from your students.

You want to launch them into a project, task, mission…an application that teaches something more profound.

The "application assignment" should build your students' desire to learn more from you, create trust in your knowledge and content-based authority, and strengthen your students' connections with real learning.

The follow-up should: Break down into a step-by-step process

Identify two or three key activities

Provide examples of success initiatives

Be doable You want to give away all your knowledge. Don't hold anything back.

The more you give your students, the more that they will want.

The more you teach your students, the more learning they will crave. When students engage real learning, their interest is insatiable.

Unfortunately, real learning is often a scarce commodity in our students' lives. And, with the focus upon high-stakes testing; superficial knowledge holds sway over application learning, service learning, project-based learning and learning-by-doing.

Remember, you didn't acquire your content-area "expert status" by reading a single article or book.

So, encourage any progress that your students make, and show that profound and broad knowledge takes months or years to master.

But, rather than feel frustrated by the complexity and the saga of really learning by doing, your students will be grateful.

Your students will want to know more, learn more, do more.

Everyone you teach in this memorable lesson way activates their inborn, innate desire for mastery and achievement.

This launches a process that we call "life-long learning," a "personal quest based upon real-world skills."

Of course, there are other ways to create memorable lessons. But, this method succeeds with minimal stress and maximum student involvement and engagement.

So, create a lesson that opens as if watching a game through a knothole in a fence, then build the drama of a district championship game, and provide an action-taking follow-up task such as a celebration (or consolidation) pep rally.

Let the drama of learning launch your students into hands-on, project-based or service learning experiences that cement concepts and life-experiences together.

Creating these kinds of lessons is easy, but you may have to work hard to keep up with your students when their active follow-up branches into so many creative and inventive paths to mastery and achievement.

And check back with your students in 20 or 40 years to see how a lesson of this kind launched them on a path toward life-long learning.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 08:00

Monday, March 31, 2008

Feature Article

Transforming the Grading System into a "Motivational System"

Assigning grades and wading through the mire of a grading system are odious tasks that plague teachers. Ask any teacher if they stay up until 11:00 p.m., 12:00 a.m. or 1:00 a.m. to craft dynamic, creative, exciting lessons. Are the late hours devoted to improving cutting edge teaching skills?

Of course not. The late-night tedium involves grappling with the "paper-grading ogre."

But, this is as it should be. When a teacher has been awake for 18, 19, or 20 hours; squeezing a day and a half of work into their waking hours; their brains and nervous systems flop, go limp. Creativity and thinking go flabby and flaccid. So, teachers staggering in this state of mind don't have the energy, attention span or patience to produce anything that is creative or useful.

A "numb mind" fits congruently with a "mind-numbing" activity such as grading papers. Urgent, but Unimportant Teachers cling to the fiction that grades and grading provide a certain magic importance in education. Supporting this error in judgment requires a convoluted logic, similar to the one that teachers fabricate when they delude themselves about the benefits of homework. Sidebar

For an elaboration concerning the fallacy that homework drives leaning , see the Classroom Toolkit article, Homework: Some Suggestions for Solving a Recalcitrant, Intractable Problem

The issue that teachers face is that grading is an urgent, but unimportant (to learning) activity.

So, why do teachers devote so much time to an enterprise that provides so little value or payback?

Grading is urgent because student rebel if the quiz, test, project, report, paper that they completed (copied, wrote, shared, fudged, studied for) are summarily trashed by their teacher.

Of course, most students would never discover that their work (papers, quizzes, exams, assignments) received a summary execution in the dust bin.

Unfortunately, teachers encounter an isolated, grade-motivated student that is smart enough to calculate grade averages. A student of this ilk can only make trouble for a teachers.

Grades as Parents' Complaint Repellent

Teachers are driven to perform the "grading ritual" to exacting standards to head off parents' complaints (or to ward off the threat of parents' complaints), or to mollify a campus principal's fear of parent complaints. So, teachers perpetuate this elaborate ruse under the guise of: Fairness

Equality

Competition

Pseudo-Science (Statistics)

Motivation toward Excellence

No-cost (on the cheap, no money out of their pockets) Students' Rewards So, what is a teacher to do?

A Motivational (Grading?) System

Factors that drive this convoluted state of interference with instruction (grading) can be "fixed" to make the system sane and sensible.

But, why bother to fix a broken, lame, anti-goal-achieving process? Why not just throw the entire mess out?

Answer: Because you want to keep your job.

So, if teachers have to continue spending (investing, wasting) inordinate chunks of time on a less than useful process (only one of many distractions, wouldn't it be useful if there were some instructional payoff and measurable learning outcome resulting from the effort? Sidebar Classroom Toolkit has coined the term "Distinctions" to refer to the "district's distracting restrictions" that school districts place as roadblocks to efficient and streamlined instruction. Remember: You read it here, first!

It would be wonderful if grades motivated many more students. Of course it would be wonderful if our teen-age children ate nutritious food, followed our advice and cleaned their rooms. It would also be wonderful if there was a magic pill that prevented a teacher's sedentary lifestyle from solidifying into cellulite. But, these are bouts of wishful thinking and fantasy. Human nature drives our students, teenagers and body fat in other directions.

So, let's adjust the current system to increase student motivation. And, let's not make a big deal about it. Remember, we want to appear to conform to all school district policies, no matter how inane a (or stupid) because conformity correlates with job security.

Here are some adjustments that may salvage the grading system for you … Give additional tests (or quizzes), and drop the lowest single grade

Allow just about any student-initiated project to be applied as "extra credit" to class grades

Conduct pre-test briefing sessions (disguised tutoring), and let a few test items "slip out." This strategy really gets students to pay attention

Allow students to earn extra points by bringing in just about anything that is related to class instruction

Allow students to earn points that can be applied toward their grades by re-writing or re-doing parts of the test that they missed. Creative adjustments to the grading system can be considered "playing loose" and "wheeling and dealing." But, who will complain if students are motivated, and rewarded for re-doing assignments, for creating self-directed projects, for taking initiative to "bring up their grades?"

Listen to teacher talk in Teacher Lounges across the country, and you will discover that teachers already know that the current grading system fails to motivate most (actually a super-majority or more) students.

Isn't it time to adjust the system to take advantage of our students' human nature?

And, it is "frosting on the cake" if the revamped system allows the use of rubrics that enable holistic scoring so that a teacher spend minutes instead of hours with the grading chores.

The communication and the relationship between teacher and students also creates benefits because teachers shows students that they want to help. With most current grading schemes, teachers appear to be stingy, hard-hearted, punitive task masters that dole out high grades as if they were scarce, or as if by assigning high grades, the teacher was robbing food from their children's plates.

However, since high grades don't cost a teacher any more than low grades (actually low grades do cost more to assign), everyone's best interest is served when teachers offer ethical, learning-based alternatives for students to earn (and pocket) better grades.

Try creative ways to get students to "up their grades" and see if this method works for you.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 08:00

Thursday, January 31, 2008

Feature Article

Unlearn what you Learned in College: A Quick Way to Improve Teaching Effectiveness

You spend four years or more in college so that you can become certified to teach in your state.

These years are well spent, since you learn the jargon that is required for participating in the educational bureaucracy that employs you.

But do you learn the skills that keep your professional development on track to become a Master teacher in three years of real-world, on-the-job learning? If you remember what you learned in college, you know that you seldom focused upon real-world education.

That is because college and university education course work has little to do with the on-the-job learning that teachers need to be successful.

Higher Education Academic Disconnect

The problem with higher education is that classes there are academic in nature. This means that these classes are based upon theories, statistics, experimental research and other cognitive paradigms.

And, because these academic institutions want to be perceived as scientific, the observable, measurable, countable, replicable world of the scientific method holds sway. Sidebar Not that there is anything wrong with the scientific method, but the scientific method doesn't "cut it" in day to day classroom teacher performance. For example: What does a teacher care if improvements in observable classroom behavior are statistically significant if the model reduces the average number of verbal outbursts from 250 per hour to 125 per hour? This is statistically significant, but who wants to consider results like this to be success, even in a self-contained classroom for the Emotionally Disturbed? Besides that, what teacher is going to have the time to collect, input, analyze and evaluate experimental, scientific data. Probably the only teacher willing to do so much work (with experimental data) for so little payback is a teacher who is working on their Ph.D. degree so that they can get a promotion and get out of the classroom. Unrealistic Higher Education

Timelines Students in a college education methods class usually must develop and present a project each semester. That is, one project after six or eight weeks of the 13 week (or so) semester. (Sometimes the semester covers a longer calendar period if there is an intervening holiday such as Spring Break.)

But, what does a teacher really have to do in, say, a science class?

The answer of course is that the teacher must present a science lesson today, and then present another science lesson tomorrow…and the next day, and the next.

The comforts and luxuries of 1.) six weeks of research and 2.) multiple weekends to build the presentation, 3.) with the advantage of working with a partner…for only one lesson during that higher education semester…vaporize in face of real-world teaching requirements.

Perhaps a realistic college or university educational methods class strategy would be to require students to have a lesson ready every class period, and to have students chosen at random to present their lesson for the day to the class. This would give education majors practice in building 24 to 36 lessons during the semester, far short of the 75 or so lessons that an elementary teacher must produce in a semester, but on the right track. This minimal number of assignments is far short of the 225 lessons that a high school science teacher (teaching three grade levels) might be required to produce during one school year.

On second thought, perhaps secondary methods class should require that students bring three completed lessons to every college methods class meeting

7he four lessons for a class that meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Distracting Theory "Theory is as theory does" makes absolutely no sense.

And neither does attempting to find a "one-size-fits-all" theory of education.

The problem with studying the theories of "giants" in the education field is that most of these theories are based upon the writings of people that were not in the classroom.

How do we know that these academic book authors were not master teachers working in the classroom?

Easy. They had time to write the book and all those professional journal articles. Real teachers are engrossed with the needs of their classroom. And real teachers struggle with limited resources because of the lack of school district funding. Real teachers have families and real teachers bring their school work home with them. Master teachers and seldom squeeze out the time from their busy schedules to write books and magazine articles.

Sidebar The exception to this rule is the anthology of articles that a college or university professor publishes. These compilations are often the work of those same "one-report-and-presentation-per-semester" graduate students who were conducting the professor's research, unaware of their future contribution to the professor's tenure and book contract. Besides, master teachers interact with their students as individuals in real time, face to face, person-to-person. This professional interaction proves to master teachers that every student is unique, and that theories seldom conform to the real-live world of students except in some vague and ill-defined way.

So, master teachers dump theories and focus upon person-to-person interaction with students, "Students are as you find them, not as a theorist posits students to be."

Besides, theories filter information and understanding, real communication opens channels of perception.

The Creative Imagination Problem

Higher education academic research also struggles with the reality of Creative Imagination.

Sidebar

Creative Imagination is the process whereby intentions, images and desires are imagined as having already happened. The Creative Imagination exercise is conducted before the fact, but the master teacher focuses upon the desired outcomes as though these have already occurred.

The academic problem with Creative Imagination, or the Law of Attraction, or Psycho-Cybernetics is that academicians relegate the process to the status of Urban Legends for the Uninformed. The higher education prejudice against these personal internal processes that engage and energize hidden (unconscious) areas of the human psyche occur because these mental and psychological processes are not observable (and therefore unscientific). Higher education academicians also avoid the Creative Imagination process because the process seem to connect with spiritual personal dimensions within teachers. Separation of Church and State in Religion: "Smack Down" for Teacher Spirituality School districts and the higher education professors that train the cohorts of new teachers are conversant with the Supreme Court rulings concerning the separation of church and state.

Because of this, the capacity for teachers and students to interact and communicate on spiritual levels is down played and covered up.

Of course, ignoring the problem of irate atheist parent lawsuits (a deplorable thing), and the problem of proselytizing students (a very bad thing); creates a need for teachers to take their spirituality and their spiritual practices underground. Of course parents are sensitive to pressures for change upon the religion of their children. And of course, master teachers avoid influencing students to change their religion.

But, teachers may still…Feel compassion and reverence

Exhibit charity

Live a life of moral and ethical values

Pray for students and pray for themselves

Picture and feel the best for each of their students in the creative recesses of their mind

Center their thoughts and emotions upon a "higher power"

Think positive and loving thoughts about their students and assume that students will respond in a positive manner (on some level) to these thoughts The Wide-Open Human Psyche The theories that teachers learn in college and university education methods classes are both right and wrong.

The theories are right because people, situations, events, and processes can be found that seem to support the theory; and because there might be some predictive validity extrapolations for "what if," and "what's next" speculations.

The theories are wrong because people, situations, events, and processes can be found that seem to counterdict the theory.

This means that the theories are "part-time-right" and "more-times-wrong-than-not-wrong."

But, the bigger picture and plenty of emperical evidence suggests that the human psyche is much more plastic, pliable, resourceful, resilient and amazing than we currently theorize.

Your abilities and your students' abilities are stunning, spectacular, magnificent, creative, expansive and self-limited.

You could do more, be more, learn more, accomplish more than you realize if you didn't believe that you can't.

This is true for your students, too.

So, unlearn the theories that you learned in your higher education methods class, and let yourself and your students soar to new heights, new vistas, new dimensions.

Free yourself from the self-imposed barriers of thought, belief and action that are hemmed in and shackled by theories and indoctrination.

Open your mind and your experience to the possibility that your (and your students') abilities are just beginning to blossom.

Think of the smartest, most loving and compassionate, most talented, most successful people that ever lived as only buds" compared to the capacity that you have to flower.

You are more than an Ego, Id an Super Ego. You are more than a a theory.

Keep the theories for the faculty meetings where you have to defend your successes and allow here-and-now, real-life perception and one-to-one communication with your students to hold sway.

Your creative and intuitive potential exceeds your ability to operatonalize a theory and implement it as an instructional method. Your imagination and your personality are as important to your teaching ability as your ability to answer multiple choice questions and write college-level essays.

In your classroom, stick with what improves students' academic performance, and don't mind what the theorists say that you should believe.

Trust yourself and your abilities, and never mind what limits the theorists say you have.

Monday, December 31, 2007

Feature Article

Do you Really Expect your Students to be "Motivated to Learn if you Fail to Market your Course-of-Study?"

Did you ever hear this kind of teacher lounge chatter?"Students are lazy, but this year's batch is lazier than ever." "Yea, if initiative were dynamite, they couldn't collect enough between them to blow one of their noses." "They don't do their homework, they don't bring their books to class, they secretly send text messages from cell phones hidden under their desks, and they play video games on our classroom computer every time my back is turned." "I think that the only secret to making these kids work is a cattle prod. The Supreme Court that outlawed paddling took away the last motivational tool that we had. The teacher is helpless." "Blah, yak, groan, grumble, etc." "Marketing Hype" The days when students eagerly await the wafting "words of wisdom" from the teacher's lips like flower petals at the feet of a bride, and the days of students scrambling to please the teacher with adoration (and with demonstrations of knowledge mastery through avid and fervent study for exams) … never were.

Sure there were a few bright and compliant students that rocketed past their complacent peers, skewing the grading curve (during the unenlightened days of "bell-shaped" grading); but for the most part, motivation was relegated to "forced compliance" techniques.

In the main, students never liked to study. Students never lacked diversions from their studies, either. However, today's diversions are more technical; i.e., video games, TV, portable music players; in addition to the ever popular sex, drugs and drinking.

But what happens when children with insatiable, unquenchable curiosity and an boundless thirst for self-mastery and achievement run headlong into the barriers, barricades and dead-end streets of our school systems? What happens to our students unique skills, their creativity, artistry, and self-expression? What transformation "morphs" our students dynamic attitudes, wide-ranging interests and eagerness to learn (that they had when they arrived on the doorsteps of our schools?)

Answer: We bore the excitement out of our students.

Imagine a marriage where the husband is forced to attend the ballet or the opera when he wanted to go to the football game with his friends, or wanted to watch the basketball game on TV.

Imagine a wife who is coerced to go on a fishing trip, or to go backpacking in the mountains when she really longs to go shopping for lingerie and new dresses.

Imagine the child who wants to learn about countless wonders who is forced to read the next section of the textbook and write out the "best-guess" answers to the questions at the end of the chapter. [Note: The answers are "best-guess" because these are the answers that the teacher (and the textbook authorities) believe to be "correct." "Correct" answers are accepted, while answers that rub the "wrong way" are punished. Teachers' Marketing Errors Teachers (as ineffective marketers) assume that their course-of-study is "in demand" and wonder why their "content product" leaves their students cold. Here are teachers' major marketing errors: Teaching to "needs instead of wants." Marketers know that what people need seldom sells, and that products must be what people want. So, teachers must embed required course content in stories and information that students want to know about

Pretending that "One Size Fits All." Marketers know that products must be individualized, personalized, tailor-made, even custom-made or customized to obtain high market demand. So, teachers must personalize and customize course materials to current student interests

Expecting student motivation to be equal. Marketers know that every person (student) has different motivations for buying (or learning). So, teachers must use a huge bag of motivational tactics to engage students

Failing to perform market research. Marketers survey their market, and structure their sales presentations appropriately. So, teachers must listen to students and act upon what students tell them

Failing to test, test, test. Marketers test to see if their message resonates with their customers, clients and prospects.

This is a test to determine how well the teacher is delivering information that is "spun" and customized to account for students interests, not a test for "how much content students are retaining. So, teachers must keep asking questions to uncover any blanks or gaps that students have in the course-of-study learning and thinking that the students have accomplished Control what you Can Control Some areas of course content are outside a teacher's control. For example, a teacher cannot control … State Standards

Grade-Level Curriculum

The Prescribed Textbook

The Students that are Assigned to Class

The Philosophy of School Administrators Some things that teachers can control include: Integrating math, health, mental health and technology into stories related to every content area objective

Prizing students for their unique, personal, creative perspectives on the content area material

Directing the interpersonal and peer group towards caring and a healthy inclusion of all students

Focusing on higher-order thinking, Multiple Intelligences and the creative process instead of rote drill Turning "Dull Content" into "Bling" Teachers that understand that passion and excitement translate into learning that "sticks" market their course-of-study.

The teacher's personality dictates whether the course is "hyped" with fanfare, spotlights and an inflatable gorilla (like a used car salesperson); or on the quite side, like a camp counselor who is telling stories around the fire.

No matter how much introversion or extroversion that marketing methods take, consistent and skillful marketing will include the following: Teachers will adjust the content to what students are interested in. And, teachers will communicate in ways that pique students' interest. Teachers market the course-of-study by getting students' attention

Teachers will show students how unique the content that they are learning is. (Marketers label this "a unique value proposition." This means that students come to believe that they can't get this knowledge, in this way, anywhere else.

Students come to believe that they are privy to something special, and privileged to be part of this teacher's inner circle Teachers make motivational and compliance easy, one-step-at-a-time. This means that teacher train students to comply by asking them to choose between only one option at a time, then create small "yes" steps to the big "yes." Teachers lead students from one step to the next

Teachers reduce risk for students. This is done by providing peer group supported reasons for learning (so that the peer group doesn't sabotage the learning), and by providing a guarantee for reward (without a threat of loss) for each assignment

Teachers provide testimonials (from former students, from successful students) to demonstrate that the course-of-study is fun, exciting, important, doable, beneficial, interesting, worth doing

Teachers include a "Call to Action" that motivates students to respond, now, with the desired action step. Master Teaching Master teachers have used marketing techniques to promote student learning for millennia. They have just used other terms (educational jargon) to describe the process that they were using. The words describing the motivational process include: Grabbing attention, stimulating a desire to learn, moving student to learn, boosting interest, etc.

Master teachers also "reframe" the learning process so that their descriptions coincide with what students are interested in. For example, assumptions can be examined as "myths," issues can be embedded in human interest (even salacious and scandalous) stories (true or not), and concepts can be applied to any personal or professional experience.

For example, a student's interest in auto mechanics or fashion design can be used to describe math concepts, health issues, science principles, politics, etc.

The connections between the course-of-study and each student's interests are limited only by the teacher's creativity and imagination…and it is just that creativity and imagination that teachers need to "set off" in students.

Master teachers also perfected marketing's "bonus offer." Here "extra credit" has allowed teachers to use talents and skills from students' various Multiple Intelligences to compensate for less than stellar abilities in the "Verbal-Linguistic" and "Mathematical-Logical" areas that lesser teachers fixate upon.

Master teachers also negotiate the means and methods that will be used during class to increase the knowledge and skills that the students acquire. Less masterful teachers fixate on a "one-method-teachers-all" strategy with "quiz and test with points off" de-motivators. These same "dim stars of the education stage" often link the "point-off" strategy to "motivating" students to complete their homework.

Unfortunately, what this process succeeds in doing is to teach students to dislike and mistrust their teacher. The Magic of Marketing: Same as Masterful Teaching A master teachers know that marketing a course-of-study is less about scattering a our message to the wild-open world of students as the psychologists, professors and theorists imagine them to be; but more about pinpointing a specific message to each specific student.

Think more like a (scum of the Earth) telemarketer on the phone with you during your dinnertime, one to one; instead of the radio that plays in the background.

What's the difference?

Answer: You hear one, but no one hears the other.

Which results do you want your course-of-study teaching to emulate?

And remember the slick marketer's most guarded secret, i.e., that "People buy from people that they like."

The foundation of your marketing your course-of-study to your students is to earn their trust, deserve their respect, and treat them kindly and well…to be seen as the kind of person that they would like to learn from.

Friday, November 30, 2007

Feature Article

"Fair Use" = Source of Unlimited Free Content: What's the Catch?

"Content is King" on the Internet, and content drives instruction in face-to-face classroom teaching. Content is required for training, no matter what "skills" are being taught, and content (knowledge, concepts, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) build higher-order thinking; i.e., if there is no content, no thoughts are built. Content also supplies the building blocks for creating and artistic expression. Projects, homework, reports, presentations and group interactions develop through interaction with content. Problem-solving and decision-making are hopeless abstract exercises with no long-term or residual meaning without working content that students investigate, manipulate and repackage.

So, what is the problem with that "ultimate, growing by quantum leaps every second" content colossus; the Internet? Answer: Teachers have an ethical and legal obligation to use the Internet content carefully. That careful use is called, "Fair Use."

The problem is that most of the content that teachers would like to use in an unlimited and indiscriminate fashion carries a copyright. This type of content is called "intellectual-property." Sidebar In fact, everything that the teacher writes also carries a copyright.

However, in too many cases the school district where the teacher works may have a policy where the district takes ownership of the individual teacher's work, and no matter whether the work was written on school district time, with school district equipment and school district Internet access; or not.

The grab for Intellectual Property that school district claim in this type of policy is called "Work for Hire." These policies are a stretch from when the claim is legitimate, i.e., when the district pays teachers to come in during the summer to write curriculum. When an employer claims the Intellectual Property rights of its employees when the employee was not paid directly for that work is a subversion of the Copyright Law, and school districts should not be allowed to continue with this practice.

Here are the problems with using content that you find on the Internet: Finding appropriate content items on the Internet can take a lot of time

This sample search for the term "Graphic Organizers" yields 1,750,000 search results.

Lesson plans are easy to find

This sample search for the term "Free Lesson Plans" provides search results for over 1,840,000 items.

Finding a lesson plan with the right level takes work. For example, you want a lesson comparing the holiday customs of plantation owners, slaves and native Americans during US Colonial times because this fits with the curricular goals that will be tested on the upcoming district-wide benchmark test. Or, perhaps you need to compare the progress toward independence among the United States, Mexico, Canada, India and Iraq for a history or government class. Good luck in finding anything this specific

Modifying a lesson plan that you find online (so that it is helpful and results in students' learning) takes time

Adapting the lesson plan to the instructional materials that you have also takes time

Link to a sample search for the term "History of Independence for USA, Mexico, Canada, India and Iraq + Lesson Plans" results in 302,000 search results. Then, the content items that you do find may be copyrighted and it takes time to sort through them, separating "Entirely Usable" and "Fair Use" items

Content by itself still requires your pruning so that it fits your instructional framework. Some material is written to a level that is too difficult for the reading level of your students, other material is a too easy for your students

Some Internet material are boring to your students, and your students rebel if you force them to read it. Some Internet material is too salacious and you would get fired if you give it to your students to read. Sending students out to find their own materials is fraught with obstacles and danger (for both your students and their teacher). Students get distracted and waste their time (and yours)

Students encounter adult, "super controversial" or otherwise inappropriate material (racism, hate speech, hacking, bomb making, terrorism and anarchy recruitment, other "Constitutionally protected" but unsavory content. Access to such content is against The Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), and teachers may be held liable for allowing students to peruse this content (in school, on school district equipment, using the school district's network). The end result of these "real-world realities" is that teachers are burdened and over worked with "unreal life and career demands" on their time. So, teachers migrate towards the path of least resistance. Stress, personal lifestyle needs, overwhelming expectations from district administrators (and the public at large); and, dodging burn out (for self-preservation) conspire to drive teachers to "just use the textbook."

After all, the research that goes into writing a textbook is based on the wisdom of confident and intelligent experts. And, textbook content is vetted by highly-paid editorial boards. It is easier to serve bland textbook fodder to a captive student audience, and to season this "without-taste" diet with personal color commentary and a little spice (as long as your

comments are politically correct enough to let you keep your job). Color Commentary The strategy that most teachers undertake for using Internet materials, one that doesn't involve a "deal with the devil" (no pun intended) is to spice up textbook content with ad lib and ad hoc "color commentary."

Using this strategy, teachers can Print Web materials and just highlight items. Then, teachers read these items, and make verbal, grade-level and job-protecting adjustment to the content on-the-fly during their "lectures"

Create note cards and stickies (Post It Notes), and place these in appropriate places in the teacher edition of the textbook where they are grabbing their "talking points" from

Post the edited notes online in free Blogs and Wikis. Then make this material available. But, exercise care since this reposting could violate the copyright owner's rights.

Pluck passages from the materials under the maximum size allowed by law, i.e., "Fair Use" and create student study guides from this compilation However, these strategies require time and effort, adding more work to the teacher's day.

Sidebar Note: Teachers with different grade level and content-area/ subject assignments need different strategies for using Internet materials. Some of these differences between grade levels and content area subjects are:

Self-contained Elementary teachers teach six or seven subjects per day while Middle School teachers and High School teachers teach one (or more) levels of the same subject, multiple times during a single day

Early Elementary (K-3) focuses on basic skills practice while students in Intermediate grades (and above) focus on manipulating and constructing content Fair Use and the Legal Beyond The rules for "Fair Use" are well-known to teachers, and repeated each year as part of the teachers' yearly, re-employment ritual; the start-of-school In-Service.

Of course, Classroom Toolkit leads you beyond the puny, pathetic use of content that is limited by "Fair Use" to what you can legally use. We introduce you to

Public Domain materials

Private Label Rights (PLR) Articles

Content Spinners

Open Instructional Materials and Templates

Modular Tools Here are how these strategies and tools can make your teaching life easier. Public Domain Public Domain materials are old, but not obsolete materials.

The laws governing Public Domain materials are complex, here are some a clues

U.S. Government documents

State judicial opinions

Laws, regulations and other official documents

Ideas

Facts

Blank forms

Short phrases (but not Trademark phrases) which can be the real thing (no pun intended)

names, titles and slogans

"Off the cuff" extemporaneous speeches

Standard plots and stock characters, such as the dedicated, old-maid teacher who could never find marital bliss because her students came first

Documents written before 1922

Stuff where copyright was not renewed between 1923 and 1964 Source: New Rules for Using Public Domain

Materials Lloyd J. Jassin, Attorney Link to the article at CopyLaw.com

Read the article at CopyLaw.Com, or do your own Google search;

Search for Public Domain Rules

As Lloyd Jassin points out, there are a lot of tricks and traps in trolling for out of copyright materials. However, there is one safe source.

The the premier source of Public Domain materials is Project Gutenberg.

Project Gutenberg Banner

Volunteers at Project Gutenberg have done the copyright research, and the endless array of materials that you find at their site are completely free for your use.

The only problem with Project Gutenberg like the rest of the Internet, is that there is so much material that it takes a long time to find appropriate items for classroom use. Thousands of no-cost articles, stories and books!

Sidebar Note: Our first Resource Bulletin package includes a product called The Public Domain Expert CODE-BREAKER Report by by Tony Laidig which describes the process of finding Public Domain content in greater detail. See the list of other items that are included in this package later in this article. PLR Articles Private Label Rights--generic materials sold by content creators for others to change and use as they see fit.

The catch is that you have to purchase these, and abide by the license agreement that the content developers set for the materials.

Sidebar Classroom Toolkit has obtained some PLR Articles for you. And, we are on the lookout for more of these materials.

The PLR contents in our Resouce Bulletin is listed below.

But, you won't have to pay for the articles. You get these by joining our Resource Bulletin Program. The way that we can

give you these articles at no cost (and maintain our legal obligation to the copyright owner) is by classifying our Resource Bulletin as a "Membership Program." Of course, because of the "Can Spam" Law, you can opt-out of the program at any time. But, why would you want to opt out if free-to-use, timely materials are one-click available on your desktop?

Sign up as a member of Resource Bulletin Program and have links to these materials sent directly to you by E-mail as we develop and post them.

Legal Reminder: This is a double opt-in process, and needs to remain in place for us to comply with "Can Spam" laws. We can't just send these items to you because you are already a subscriber to our Classroom Toolkit Newsletter. Check the license requirement of each package. You can use the content of these articles in any way you like, but some articles have restrictions on whether you can give them away or resell them.

"Tell-a-Friend!" You can tell your friends about about are opt-in program and send the link to the sign up page to them. This way, your friend can friend request these materials without your having to send the 10 MB file to them.

The materials will be available immediately for download after the Opt-In Form is filled out. We would like to just provide a link, but the licensing for some PLR materials do not allow the materials to be given away without joining a membership program. (And, the Opt-in Form, required by the "Can Spam" Law exists for your protection.)

SidebarHere is a sample of what a PLR License looks like…Private Label Right Summary

[Yes / No] You may add / edit or remove content

[Yes / No] Can be offered as a bonus for products sold

[Yes / No] Can be packaged with products for sale

[Yes / No] May be sold as a stand alone product for any price above \$__ (specified price)

[Yes / No] Can be added to paid membership sites

[Yes / No] Can be offered through auction sites for any price above \$__ (specified price)

[Yes / No] Includes sales letter

[Yes / No] Includes graphics

[Yes / No] Can sell Master Resale Rights

[Yes / No] Can sell Resale Rights

[Yes / No] Can be given away

[Yes / No] Can sell Private Label Rights

[Yes / No] There are no refunds

[Yes / No] We don't offer support to your customers

The PLR materials creator is able to define exactly what rights he or she is selling.

As you can see, even authors of Private Label Rights (PLR) have broad discretion in what can or can't be done with their materials.

PLR materials always come with associated rights, and it is necessary to check those rights before re-distributing these materials.

Sidebar

Classroom Toolkit will place a rights document at the beginning of any PLR Articles that we distribute without cost to teachers.

Note: to comply with the rights of some PLR materials, we must request that teacher Opt-In to our mailing list before we can legally "give these articles away."

Content Spinners"Content Spinners" are small computer programs that change article content, (such as PLR Articles). This software does just what you would do if you load the text PLR article into Microsoft™ Word (or another word processor) that contains a thesaurus. Then, you replace words (easy, or more difficult words) according to your curricular goals and purposes.

You can try out a Content Spinner for free at JetSpinner.Com

Link to the free JetSpinner tryout!

Note: Content spinners are used by Webmasters that want to make 200 copies of the same article for posting on tons of Websites with the same topic. The markup to make that happen will probably seem like "more work than it is worth" for teachers. We recommend the "Word Processor Word Strategy" (no plug intended), instead. Modular ToolsModular tools, such as Graphic Organizers, are "content structurers" and "thought structurers."

If Graphic Organizers were classified as forms, then they would not be copyrightable. Of course, publishers always add some little bit of art work that customizes the printed page and makes the page copyrightable.

SidebarFor a list of Graphic Organizers found on at Classroom Toolkit, check out our article, Classroom Toolkit Graphic Organizers Index Open Source Instructional MaterialsThe Open Source Instructional Materials project was started by Classroom Toolkit.Com Since then, Scott Nealy of Sun Microsystems™ started Curriki™, another Open Source project. Classroom Toolkit remains a personal, self-funded project while Curriki™ is well funded and has gathered a lot of "big name" sponsors.

However, Classroom Toolkit provides a focused set of materials and a strategy that any teacher can use to manage an entire school year (or more than one school year). Curriki™ provides articles and 8,042 lesson plans.

Decide for yourself whether the Classroom Toolkit strategy of the Curriki™ lesson plan vault better suits your

needs. But why choose, use both resources when you have time. (Note; Use Classroom Toolkit when you are pressed for time.)

If you are in a real hurry, use this search term to identify a chunk of the instructional materials that Classroom Toolkit Offers:

Link to Specialized Google search of Classroom Toolkit PDF formatted files.

Once the redesign of Classroom Toolkit is completed, all materials will be listed in a single Table of Contents and inventory page. Resource Bulletin Classroom Toolkit's December Resource Bulletin package includes over 10 MB of "free-to-use" content, tips and surprises. Holiday Stories and Articles 50 Children's Stories (Text that can be modified, edited, changed)

50 Children's Stories (PDF Format)

5 Christmas Fun (Five Text articles that can be modified, edited, changed)

5 Christmas Fun PDF eBook

Christmas Carols - Doc Format (Can be modified, edited, changed)

Christmas Tales - PDF eBook

Christmas Tales - Doc Format (Can be modified, edited, changed)

Holiday Stress - Doc Format (Can be modified, edited, changed)

Recipes Old Time Recipes - PDF eBook

Christmas Grill - PDF eBook

Holiday Recipes - Doc Format (Can be modified, edited, changed)

Candy Recipes - PDF eBook

Holiday Graphics

Christmas Family Photo Graphics - Photoshop (PSD) and JPG formats Books on using Public Domain

Materials Public Domain Advantage - PDF eBook

Public Domain Code - PDF eBook Join now

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 08:00

Wednesday, October 31, 2007

Feature Article

Planning Backwards: The Quickest Way to "Full Steam Ahead"

Planning is paradoxical.

So, is classroom planning. Some folks think of the school year as a journey, meandering in the general direction of where student learning should go...enjoying side trips and day excursions, then making a mad-dash sprint to the finish line on high-stakes test day...then a stroll, hobble, crawl, slide to make it to the end of the school year.

But this is wandering, not planning, and the capacity for getting lost, wasting time, encountering fog, dead ends, box canyons and washed out bridges to new learning increases as the vagueness of the goal keeps everyone guessing. On the "walk-about," questions about what to do abound like berries on a bush. "What shall we do today? What should we have done yesterday? Why aren't the students learning what I taught them?"

All of this is backward to the strategy that you need to reach instructional goals and student outcome targets.

The "Thinking Backwards" Strategy

The questions that you need to ask in thinking backwards are few and easy to ask. It may be challenging to come up with answers, but the answers that you do decide upon streamline your planning.

Here are the questions: What is our goal, target, objective?

What step has to happen just before we reach that goal, target, objective?

What step has to happen just before reaching that previous step? We continue with this iterative process until we arrive where we are now (Our present situation).

This path (sequence of steps) becomes our road map, blueprint, flow chart, process map for project success. All we have to do is put the steps in reverse order, i.e., from now to final accomplishment.

Thinking Clarified: Extraneous Activities Filtered Out

First, write the goal down on paper, real paper. A computer screen will do, but paper is better. Writing a goal performs a "ritual magic" that brings wishes, hopes and dreams to reality, somehow.

The benefit of "Planning with the End in Mind" strategy is that you identify a path to the goal. This path becomes evident when you "march your thinking backwards" from the goal line.

Estimates of how long each step will take to achieve can be attached to the plan.

You Can't Get There From Here

Equally important, your roadmap can highlight goals that are not possible to achieve within a certain time period, for example a school year.

This is one reason that teachers take the "cop out road" of "covering material."

Covering material is an easy goal, all the teacher has to do is talk faster to claim that the objective was satisfied.

Helping each student to pass the high-stakes test is only slightly less vague. Of course, many of these tests are "minimal skills" tests, so teachers from ordinary schools shouldn't have to break a sweat.

What becomes a challenge (although doable) is something like, "90% of my sixth grade students who are reading three to six years below grade level will be reading on grade level by the end of the school year."

One thing though: Doing what you always did won't deliver on newer, better, brighter, successful outcomes that you want to achieve.

To Do Better: Think Differently & Do Different Strategic Things

Different has to mean better targeting and measuring along the path to your goal that your roadmap identifies.

Thinking differently means that you have to believe... That the goal is possible

That the goal is worth achieving

In your abilities, knowledge and skills to achieve that goal

In your students abilities, knowledge and skills in achieving that goal Staying on the "Straight and Narrow"

Success in achieving your goals means following the road map, blueprint, path to goal achievement. This means choosing activities that are on the next step, and avoiding activities that seem inviting but are not on that path. Either the activities are not on the path at all (in which case you never do them), or the activities are on a later step (in which case you defer them to a later time when you reach that step).

The Written Form for Your Roadmap

The written format that your roadmap will take is a personal choice. However, the components will look something like this...

Step #1: Desired Outcomes for Step #1:

Outcome Measures for Step #1: (Good enough, don't have to be perfect)

Trigger that Launches Step #2: Step #2: Desired Outcomes for Step #2:

Outcome Measures for Step #2: (Good enough, don't have to be perfect)

Trigger that Launches Step #3: Step #3: Desired Outcomes for Step #3:

Outcome Measures for Step #3: (Good enough, don't have to be perfect)

Trigger that Launches Step #4:Step #x:Desired Outcomes for Step #x:

Outcome Measures for Step #x: (Good enough, don't have to be perfect)

Trigger that Launches Step #x+1:Step #Final:Desired Outcomes for Final Step :

Final Outcome Measures for Final Step: (Good enough, don't have to be perfect)Note: Listing Steps without identifying appropriate measures to (know, determine, prove) that you have reached that Step (and are ready to move to the next step) are self-defeating.

It is difficult to set specific measures because (until you become used to this kind of management thinking, you can think of yourself as a failure.

But, once you begin setting goals in this way, and measuring progress toward these goals as you go; you will actually become successful.

This move to a professional style of instructional management will make the difference in transforming "what you do to cover material" to "what you do to teach, guide and transform student learning."

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 08:00

Sunday, September 30, 2007

Feature Article

Answer: Self-Esteem and Self-Concept -- Question: What are Pass-Along Strategies? What do we mean by "Pass-Along" Self-Esteem and Self-Concept Strategies? Answer: This means that the first step for teachers in supporting improved self-esteem and self-concept of their students is to "work on themselves."

How can a teacher give what they do not have?

Faulty self-esteem in teachers prevents them from seeing the innate good and the innate value of each student. Faulty self-esteem is replaced by positive self-esteem when we treat others (and ourselves) with dignity and respect.

Sidebar What is the difference between "self-esteem" and "self-concept?"

The words are most often used interchangeably. So, in practical use, there is no difference.

However, the word "esteem" refers to the "feeling" that one has about one's self; while "self-concept" refers to the attitudes, thoughts and beliefs that one has about one's self. Both terms also refer to a process of increasing the positive value of these feelings, attitudes, beliefs and values so that the person feels, acts, thinks in a positive manner about themselves, and the statements that they make to themselves about themselves also are positive.

Self-esteem and self-concept, in their early stages, and the stages where young people are in school reflect (mirror) the situations, relationships and reactions that the students experience in their world. Later, as adults, most people shake at least part of the outward-only basis for self-esteem and self-concept, and base some of their self-esteem and self-concept upon Intrapersonal (self referred) information.

This transformation from an infant (being parent directed), to being peer-group driven (reaches its height at about Middle School age), to being one's own person (maybe [hopefully] by around the age of 18) is the journey to maturity.

But outward events can batter and pound the self-esteem and self-concept of some students. Sometimes self-esteem and self-concept development is "arrested" and the student seems locked into feelings, attitudes and beliefs befitting an earlier age.

We say that individuals that are locked into feeling, thinking and behaving in non-age-appropriate ways are "immature." Of course, if the student masters the feelings, attitudes and beliefs that occur from environmental pounding (because either the hits were mild, there was a protecting force such as a parent or teacher, or the student had high Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Intelligence) we say that they have positive self-esteem and positive self-concept. Can We have too Much Self-Esteem? Can we have too much self-esteem?

Answer: "No."

What people label as conceit, bravado, megalomania … people who are "too full of themselves" is actually the opposite of self-esteem. These asocial behaviors stem, in large part, from a low level of self-esteem and minimal level of self-concept.

The higher one's self-esteem and self-concept, the more positive one's feelings, attitudes, beliefs and self-talk about others. This seems to describe the Master Teacher. How Self-Esteem and Self-Concept is "Pass Along" Self-esteem and Self-Concept are "pass along" because "actions and attitudes speak louder than words." This means that a lecture about why students should feel, think and believe better about themselves will be ineffective. Telling students that they should have positive self-esteem and self-concept is next to useless … producing minimal effect and minimal student "change for the better."

But, teachers modeling the traits and attributes of self-esteem and self-concept from a place of congruence in one's own self, and, treating students with consideration, value and honor are contagious.

Of course, some students will respond with immediate positive regard for themselves, and it is rewarding to watch them blossom. But, other students (the ones where life has provided so many "hits" and where support system from significant others are lacking) will take more time before positive self-esteem and positive self-concept can be internally self-nurtured. These are the students that everyone else has "written off" as "total losses" that bring so much joy to the Master Teacher. Teachers finding ever supporting positive esteem and the positive attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, ideals and values in themselves; their actions, their body language and their intuitive sense of timing bring positive feelings, attitudes, beliefs and actions in the "hard to reach" students. This "pass along" process may take time, but improving the quality of life of a student by "coloring their person positive" is worth the patience that is required. And where does this patience come from? Answer: It bubbles up, gushes, then overflows from the positive self-esteem and the positive self-concept of the teacher. Have you nurtured your self-esteem and self-concept today?

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 08:00

Friday, August 31, 2007

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.

Tuesday, July 31, 2007

Feature Article

The Power of "Shared Thinking" for a Learning Community

Shared Thinking is the power behind a learning community. But this Shared Thinking involves stretching our perceptions and expanding our concepts of what Sharing means. (For sure, Shared Thinking is "not what we think." Shared Thinking is what "We'all (we all) think."

Sidebar (Note: this is the first-person-plural version of the noted, Texan second-person-plural, "Y' all.")

Shared thinking is possibility thinking, collaborative sharing, group wisdom, vision and success consciousness... "breakthrough" thinking at its best. Mistaking a Product, or Byproduct for the Process. Some Shared/Community Building advocates mistake the product (conversations) or the byproduct (friendship) for the target outcome. It is a mistake to think that the conversations that are developed by the community, is a product, or that the friendships that develop from meetings and interactions are a byproduct. Process, not Product. The power of Shared Thinking is in the process, and depends little on the product. This is because real-world, stimulating, problem-solving focused thinking is never done. This kind of thinking is always "a work in progress."

The creation, development, testing and bug-fixing of ideas occurs as a process that relies on collaboration and learning; but the process is never finished.

Shared Thinking projects are "works in progress" rather than a wrapped and finished, final packages. Shared Solutions for Education. Shared Solutions for education must take this Open Thinking process one step further, and establish a collaborative dialog among equals (our students, teachers and administrators are equal participants with our parents and patrons; all education stakeholders, even politicians).

Shared Thinking recognizes that the educational stakeholder community has more wisdom, knowledge and insight than a single, talented individual... and Shared Thinking recognizes that communities of school district stakeholders raise this wisdom, knowledge and insight to a level of magnitude higher than the insight held by some isolated groups (for example superintendents, principals, politicians, techies). Brainstorming: Thinking on Steroids. Brainstorming is a tool that makes Shared Solutions powerful and relevant.

So, Shared Thinking advocates need to approach projects by examining various slants and vantage points of our stakeholders. We need to keep the process in view (and avoid the seduction of advocating a product), no matter if that product is superior to the competition.

We need to focus upon the process, and "hang on for the ride" because we can't predict where we might end up.

Just because a product is superior today does not mean that the product will be superior tomorrow, or even an hour from now. "Leapfrogging" is a label that is used by competitors to mean that one product surpasses the others, not in a step-by-step race, but with a leap forward.

So, Shared Thinking must keep up with changes in products and performances, in fact, Shared Thinking must remain "one step ahead." What it takes for a Successful Educational Project. For Shared Thinking projects to be successful in the education arena, our solutions and options must appeal to many constituencies besides the highly trained, specialized, and technical folks. So, our first goal is to increase the relevancy of Shared Thinking Solutions to as wide a range of school district stakeholders as possible, especially teachers and students.

When our thinking is stretched to include the view and vantage points of a multiplex and multitude of stakeholders; we come to understand that Shared Thinking Solutions are real-world teaching and learning projects.

Shared Thinking projects apply Shared thinking and Shared tools to the instruction process. Our teaching and learning projects are not software projects or hardware and infrastructure initiatives, or the latest repackaging of educational theory.

The use of tools, software, technology and theory always takes a back seat to instructional goals in the teaching and learning process, and Shared Thinking accelerates this action and activity. Change and Reform. Successful Shared advocates come to see that Shared thinking promotes and targets... Processes for change and reform. Solutions based upon the dynamic interaction among clients and end users (such as teachers and students)

The dynamic interplay among trainers and trainees

The dynamic interchange among curriculum specialists and professional development providers

The dynamic interrelationship among technical support specialists and the rest of the educational community. Collaboration and a Real-World View: the Real Driving Force for Shared Projects. The goal of any Shared Solution in education is the improvement of instruction in areas where Shared Solutions excel.

By considering, weighing and interacting with thoughts and ideas of our stakeholders (our clients); we stretch our vision, we encounter a greater depth of feedback. We widen, deepen, broaden and strengthen our insight. Shared Thinking advocates use this dynamic community-based feedback and this dynamic open discussion to problem-solve and to make decisions... crafting solutions and decisions that work in the real world... not just fantasy plans that seem to work on our "project management statements of work," just seem to work on "Scope of Work" documents, and just seem

to work on critical path project tracking tools. Relevancy of Interests: Success of the Community Most school district stakeholders don't know that a Shared Thinking Community exists to serve their needs. And, most school district stakeholders hold vested interests in lots of things, but don't have a need to become vested in a letting the control of ideas vest in a community.

So, it becomes the Shared Thinking Community's responsibility to listen well and adapt to the beliefs, fears and reluctance to change that we encounter.

(Note: we have to be careful that we don't mis-label reactions that seem to balk and back off from our ideas. The tendency is to label these reluctant behaviors as "resistance" and to frame the resistor as "our enemy."

In reality, any balking and back stepping is a gift to our Shared Thinking because it reveals that there is something missing, something that keeps our community-based thinking from being complete. A Real-World Example The shortcomings and unmet promises of the technology integration movement should have proven, beyond debate, that "meeting teachers' needs first" not "demands of what we can extract from teachers" is the path to educational project success.

This listening, paying attention and believing what stakeholders at all levels tell us is where Shared advocates "make or break" an Shared Solution project in our schools, and in the area of technology integration, the listening to teachers and students wasn't done.

Shared Thinking advocates either draw these stakeholders into the project, honor and prize their contributions and points of view, understand that these stakeholders have greater wisdom about teaching and learning (than politicians, superintendents, directors, principals). When it comes to the real-world of teaching and learning, when it comes to the real-world of delivering instruction and when it comes to the real-world of driving student outcome improvements; a Shared Thinking project either reaches a substantial portion of its potential; or, fails outright. Shared Thinking and active listening make the difference, but only if the sharing is real. Target Real Problems, Or Else Shared Thinking advocates either target and solve our stakeholders' greatest issues, concerns and pains; or fail to meet the promises of improved teaching and learning that is expected from the community project.

Shared Thinking projects that get this right, that consider teachers, principals, curriculum specialists, and students as "indispensable project consultants;" are the projects and initiatives that are successful.

The projects and initiatives that ram "pretend-shared-solutions" through to adoption (by sales pitches, subterfuge and chain of command power plays) always fail to achieve their potential. Guaranteed! Relevancy or Else: No Relevancy equals "Missing in Action" Community Project Success

Shared Thinking Solutions must be relevant for all stakeholders.

But, politicians, superintendents, principals, director and technical staff cannot, should not, (and should be tickled with a cattle prod if they try) think that they know what teachers and students need unless, until and after they;

Ask

Listen

Ask again

These bureaucratic, administrative and technical professionals should have more sense than to believe that "laws, policies, directives, and budget cuts" equate to test-smart, project-based, engaged-learning, outcomes-focused lesson delivery, or meaningful learning assignments. The Shared Thinking process blares, flags, screams for a focus upon adequate funding, sufficient professional development (time and time to implement), support and measurable curriculum-based objectives for every community project. Shared Thinking First Steps So, the first steps of a Shared Thinking project are "asking teachers and students what the learning objectives are" and "brainstorming with teachers, students and other stakeholders."

During the brainstorming and sharing process, all ideas are accepted and one idea may invoke a "piggy back" response, or provoke an opposite idea, an antithetical response. One idea, both, or yet another idea may prove to be beneficial. It is difficult to judge which ideas will bear fruit; so, open discussion is encouraged and promoted.

Another component of brainstorming is allowing participants and learners to make mistakes. This is another Shared Thinking strength...where the community steps up and shares the task of fixing what needs to be fixed. This strategy, when accompanied by a wide, deep and broad inquiry into ideas and possible solutions results in what some folks label as "breakthrough thinking."

The best implementation of the Shared Thinking philosophy means an open-minded approach to problem-solving and decision-making, a willingness to dialog with stakeholders of all backgrounds and a willingness to communicate with people with all levels of expertise. If only those in the highest echelons of authority or expertise are encouraged to participate, how will "Newbies" (who by definition, make mistakes) acquire the skills to progress in their own knowledge? Sidebar Note: This is another of the myths surrounding the lackluster performance of the technology integration movement. The myth has it that teachers were afraid to venture from their "expert status role" and be seen to be making mistakes by students. While this myth is plausible, the reality is that students know that technology involves mistakes. That is why video game players get a "fist full of lives" when they play video games. If there is only one "right answer" then the person or group that holds that card is king. That is "closed-minded thinking" at its finest, but darkest hour. Shared Thinking understands that all together we are smarter than the brightest and best single one of us. This makes Shared Thinking Solutions powerful.

And, weaving the discussion with the threads of many viewpoints (from many stakeholders) creates a rich tapestry of

Shared ideas. Vision and Success Consciousness But, brainstorming is not the only component of Shared Thinking. Vision and Success Consciousness are even more important.

Vision is related to the clarity with which an Shared Thinking project's goals are sculpted and held to. And, success consciousness is the attitude and values of the of key players who develop the project.

The vision that the project's originators and sponsors hold affects the outcome of a project. Unfortunately, you cannot know what is in the hearts and minds of any other principle member of the project community, and this aspect of the project remains hidden until the results are observed and known.

The vision that key Shared Thinking project originators and community sponsors hold is difficult to know, and the level of success consciousness of these players is difficult to know. However, these are key crucial and key components for any project, especially Shared Thinking projects.

The open communication and the honoring of all stakeholders is an important aspect that reveals a sliver of success consciousness, but, it is still possible that manipulators, sales people, and power-focused chain of command people agree to the Shared Thinking model of communication because they know that the model propels success, rather than because they hold all stakeholders in esteem.

Unfortunately, even a clear vision can weaken as the community project progresses, and other folks can be brought into the project before they develop a clear knowledge of the vision for the project.

Success consciousness, in practice, boils down to the belief systems held by key project originators and sponsors.

This is also difficult to know because our vision into the hearts and minds of others is obscured by the mist and fog in our own heart and mind. We must perceive what is in our own consciousness before we begin to sense what is in the hearts and minds of others.

Unfortunately, Shared Thinking advocates face power, control and tradition-oriented community members who may not believe in the wisdom of community interactivity.

Some community stakeholders are complacent in their status and authority, and shy away from honest and transparent communication with others.

The upshot?

Make sure that a "people person" rather than a politician, bureaucrat, manager, administrator, salesperson or techie" is in charge of a community-based project. Shared Thinking Projects and School Leadership

Unfortunately, some school district leaders are politicians, i.e., people who say what they think that other people want to hear (and possibly with limited thoughts of their own). Look out for these folks because they are found in every stakeholder group.

But, these folks have lack vision of their own except one built on the shifting sands of taking advantage of situations by reflecting what they believe are other people's opinions. The upshot: we seldom find clarity of vision in any of these folks, so never place a politician in charge of a project. In fact, avoid placing a politician in any position of authority, responsibility or importance. These folks wreak havoc in most endeavor that they experience. Sidebar Note: Evidence of this dearth of vision in politicians abounds in the circus arena of government where clowns, ringmasters, jugglers, tight-rope artists, animal tamers and slight-of-hand performers entertain us with their antics. So, what is the Shared Thinker to do to motivate a project towards success when such important factors as the vision and success consciousness of stakeholders remain hidden?

Here are some steps to consider: Make sure that an honest and ethical person is in charge of the community project

Make sure that the vision for the project is communicated to everyone that is involved Note: The Shared Thinking and the open (transparent) communication process serves to share the vision and serves to discover how the vision (and associate goals) will play out during its implementation

The "buy-in" of project stakeholders and participants is really a "buy-in" for the shared vision for the project. Maintain a positive attitude and a belief that the project will be successful

Hold to attitudes and beliefs (that the project will be successful) in a gentle, caring and friendly way

Trust that open and transparent communication and a vision of success for the project will attract success-oriented folks and create discomfort for those people that would be detrimental to the project It is amazing how negative, project-albatross type folks respond to positive, success-oriented communication by self-rejection

But do not be surprised if these folks become hostile, disgruntled, backbiting and insidious. Just hold gently to the positive vision for the project

Avoid any "in kind" response to the negative people that orbit around the community project

Continue to respect these folks, continue to wish them well, and continue trusting the open and transparent communication process and the Shared Thinking process Picture success results for the project as "already happened" Also feel, believe and sense this success in a multi-modal, multi-sensory way

Listen to self-talk and listen to the success-talk of others in your mind as though they are commenting on the success of the project

Project your thoughts into the future and perceive how that success continues

If any thoughts or images seem to be in discord, redo the vision of the project until all images and all steps of the creative imagination process come into harmony

You will be amazed at how the right people, the right resources and the right information are attracted to the project Trust that the negative people will add many benefits to the project by pointing out areas where the project vision is weak Silently and honestly thank these people in your heart and mind because they benefit your project in ways that you

may discover later, or in ways that you may never know

Consider your community project to be like a chick that hatches from an egg. The chick needs to struggle to exit the eggshell, and the chick even grows an attachment to its beak to assist in the exit process

But, if we break the shell to assist the chick, we create a weak and sickly bird that never becomes healthy

Somehow, the chick (like our community project) needs the struggle to become strong. Vision and success consciousness can "fall through the cracks" and take a back seat during the excitement and stress of a Shared Thinking project. Be sure Shared Thinking occurs during the implementation of your community project, not just at its inception.

Do not trust folks at any level of a Shared Thinking process who cannot hold to a positive vision, who cannot hold love and respect for teachers and children in their hearts and minds. Encourage everyone to participate with open and transparent communication, but understand that some stakeholders will do otherwise.

Hold success consciousness in your heart and mind, so that you cannot harbor hatred.

The person who cannot embrace the polarity of opposites, who cannot find value and benefit because of preconceived disgust for other's successes, and who cannot honestly embrace alternatives that might be best practices for the community project (because of bias) is one who stagnates Shared Thinking. Such a person is the one who mires (and fogs) any community project that they become involved with, yet they are indispensable to the community. Collaborative Sharing

Collaborative sharing also is a creative process that is bigger, higher, wider, deeper than brainstorming. Brainstorming is a "wild ride" a stretching and a creating, a weaving of associations, and a kick off towards tangents and parallels. Brainstorming is like a skyrocket that launches fragments into colorful star bursts...delighting many but their glow is quickly extinguished.

But, collaborative sharing is the slow and steady, meticulous, often painful, building out of a vision.

Collaborative sharing is hammering out of dents, a smelting of ore and a purifying to rid the project of slag, an oiling of squeaky wheels, of giving all (read every) stakeholder groups their due.

Collaborative sharing is the process that a Dali Lama, a Mahatma Gandhi, a Mother Theresa would take to ensure that all people (stakeholders) receive respectful and caring treatment. No group is ignored, stomped on, ramrodded or forced to acquiesce to the "solution de jour." Everyone is respected and consensus, rather than "who comes out on top" is the prize.

But, why would anyone want to give up winning, give up taking personal credit; and let group-think prevail?

Answer: They hold the best interests and well being of our students and teachers in mind. Their vision is the "greater good of all students, teachers and stakeholders." Group Wisdom Even if an individual thinker is brighter, smarter, more talented & more talented than all the rest of the stakeholders; pushing through their personal agenda is "short-sighted."

The reason is that these community projects depend on other people to carry them out, and that it takes other people to see the project through to completion.

The community project depends upon the talents, skills, and knowledge of others; but the project also depends upon the attitudes, feelings, beliefs, values, insights, motivation and good will of others.

And in implementing a Shared Thinking Solution in a school district, the attitudes, feelings, beliefs, values, insights, motivation and good will of stakeholders positioned along all levels of the chain of command are crucial.

But, teachers in particular hold the key to instruction because teachers are the stakeholders that deliver direct instruction. Other stakeholders may just need to be happy that their issues and concerns are addressed, but teachers must have the support, professional development (and anything else that it takes) to ensure the Shared Thinking project's success.

Thinking Communities: Pay Attention to Teachers

Paying attention when teachers talk is more than just being polite. Taking to heart what teachers are saying, and acting upon what they tell us is more than good sense. Listening, and listening between the lines. Understanding what teachers (and other stakeholders) said, understanding what teachers and other stakeholders meant to say, and understanding what teachers and other stakeholders would have said if they could, even what they wish that they had said & are part of the conversation that exists when Shared Thinking prizes the wisdom of the group. Giving and Receiving Shared Thinking communities pride themselves in sharing, but, giving is the other side of the complex set of interactions that comprise giving.

Giving means more than sharing. If the begging bum panhandles a quarter, and you begrudge the quarter that you drop with disdain into his alcohol-perfumed hand, you have given next to nothing.

In the same way, if Shared Thinking community members hold attitudes of self-superiority, disdain, distrust, deception or a focus upon a project (without regard for the people involved in making that project a success); the project cannot reach its potential. Attitude and value make all the difference because people are not boxes and wires, but even boxes and wires respond in a positive manner when we care for them.

Of course boxes (such as computers) can turn from speedy track stars to brain-dead malingerers in the space of three years; but people remain precious throughout the life cycle of the project. And Shared Thinking community members must become aware of other negative thinking.

Take for example, any prejudice.

Of course, an attitude of prejudice is unwise because holding hatred and a vision of success in awareness at the same time is incongruous. And, holding any attitude of bias, stilts and convolutes thinking.

Holding prejudice in mind or heart costs Shared Thinking the flexibility that is needed, binds thinking to a type of tunnel vision that excludes opportunities and increases the burdens that are placed on the community. Often prejudice will force the elimination of elegant solutions in favor of a kludge that takes the long way around to avoid the object of that prejudice.

Of course, what really happens is that bias and prejudice leads the community project through a struggle that could have been avoided if only a spirit of giving and receiving were present.

Praising our competitors and people who disagree with us, and wishing our competitors and those "obstinate others" only good is the attitude that leads to success. Begrudging success to any other, even a corporate entity or incorporated organization, blocks that good from pouring itself upon a community project.

Since hatred is "alien" to an accepting-of-all Universe, the obvious conclusion is that those who hate, hate a part of themselves; and they are just projecting that hatred of themselves outward toward (real or imagined)

others. Breakthrough thinking is any change in thought, attitude, perception, planning or insight that leads us from "locked in our comfortable rut kind of results" to success.

What do we have to breakthrough, break out of, escape from?

We have to break out or escape from our belief that we know…

What is best for ourselves

What is best for others

How things really are

How things should really be

The best way to do or perform anything

What experience is like for others and what will help them do or perform better One characteristic of breakthrough thinking is that the components are simple, not complex. Others often say, "Now why didn't I think of that. It was right in front of us all along."

Whether the breakthrough is creative associative, i.e., putting common things together in novel ways; or, creative dissociated, i.e., separating things that have always "gone together; the breakthrough idea just stands out as better.

We break through barriers, mostly barriers of thought and assumptions; but often barriers of habit, feeling, attitudes and conditioning.

But breakthrough thinking at its best in Shared Thinking projects. This is thinking that accounts for the wants, needs, desires, fears and pains of multiple groups of stakeholders; and satisfies many or most of these issues with an elegant solution.

Everyone in each stakeholder group may not receive everything that they wanted or needed, but at least they are satisfied that their concerns were heard and every effort was made to accommodate their needs.

Teachers, students, participants, clients and end users who feel that their needs and issues were cared for in this way build a real, vested buy-in (not the "lip-service, appear to be cooperative" buy-in that reveals its true characteristics at the most crucial, critical, "no turning back now, no escaping catastrophe" embarrassing, "egg-on-your-face" time. Efficient Solutions The collaborative solution may seem inefficient to the politicians and chain-of-command authority figures who pride themselves on getting their way.

But, the Shared Thinker has to be sure that the footprints that they leave is not one of their stomping on teachers, students and community members by forcing (kicking and whining) compliance to the community project.

There are all manner of "monkey wrenches" that disgruntled, unappreciated community members can toss into a Shared Thinking project if they are forced, bullied, beguiled, or cajoled to participate in a project that they don't like (or forced to comply with an authority that they don't like).

Even worse than a community project that fails to build buy-in, is a project that increases the pain that teachers and students feel and experience.

For example,…A technology integration project that requires teachers to stay after school (without compensation) to learn to operate software

A technology integration project that increases the amount of work that teachers must perform (without increasing measurable student achievement), or

A "Catch-22" project that "everyone just knows will produce spectacular results", but doesn't, therefore the problem that scuttled the project must be because the teachers

All learning community projects fail if teachers and students are not considered first. The Technically Superior Solution Shared Thinking also skirts the problem of the "technically superior solution" because the technically superior solution is impractical in the real world. Open and transparent communication exposes the "technically superior solution for what it really is.

For example, stunning technology rollouts, without professional development, without an educational (or business case) for the project and without stakeholder buy-in are "real-world impractical." Prescribing technical solutions without exploring the feelings, fears, stresses, conflicting commitments, bureaucratic system inconsistencies and management incongruities is "real-world impractical."

But, Open dialog is practical. Brainstorming is practical. Open and transparent sharing is practical. Success consciousness is practical. Breakthrough thinking is practical.

For example, teacher members of Shared Thinking collaborative would not want to be bothered with the intricacies

about setting up Web servers, and minor distinctions between computer specifications would hold limited appeal to a campus principal or curriculum specialist. But members of each of these groups would be interested in the professional development issues, educational case justification for the community project that used these resources. Teachers, principals and curriculum specialists would be glad to turn the logistics of managing software for the community project, as long as they were consulted about the need and value for that software.

The technically superior community project starts with teachers, students, principals, curriculum specialists; then matches the appropriate professional development, technical support, hardware, software and infrastructure to get the measurable increases in instructional delivery and measurable increases in student performance done.

The technically superior community project focuses upon the process of arriving at superior results, and then brings only the highest quality processes and resources to bear on the solution.

But, Shared Thinking community members need the integrity to explain what conditions apply to the project, and they need the professional and ethical integrity to steer community members away from high-tech, superior technology if that technology stands little chance of delivering on the community project's real world goals.

This is what technology integration should have been before recommending so many initiatives that lacked measurable teaching and learning goals. The Shared Thinking solution will focus on a direct relationship to measurable content area and subject matter achievement in learning communities.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Saturday, June 30, 2007

Feature Article

Plan into Action: Vision into Reality Getting things done. That is the single most important key to success. Everyone agrees on this, but few people know how to "get it done." But, if "just staying busy" were enough to ensure success, all overworked teachers would be "post-high-stakes test" heroes.

But we also know that just working hard, or just "working smart and hard" fail to achieve success objectives.

In fact, "working hard" is counter productive in a number of ways. Working hard … Creates stress, and stress breeds mistakes

Provides a model of learning effort that students reject and students have no interest in emulating Students want learning to be easy, captivating, fun, play, creative, spontaneous … like how they learned language as infants and toddlers Builds a consciousness of lack, and a lack of confidence in the teacher This includes a lack of confidence in the teacher's abilities by students, and a lack of confidence by the teacher of students' abilities Creates a sense of struggle, and the struggle to "help" students to learn and perform causes teachers further to doubt the abilities of students Doing "Right Things Right" So if "working hard" is insufficient (even ineffective) in ensuring successful learning, what is effective?

This is where vision comes in.

The key is to execute strategic tasks. But, the teacher has to know what these strategic tasks are.

Here is a lesson in logic. Possible choices that a teacher can make include: Action Category Indicators Remedy Right things done right Proper execution Rest easy, enjoy life, no need to worry Right things done wrong Improper execution, improve delivery and execution skills Figure out how to be successful by observing, conferring and interacting with students. Assess your strategies and methods as you go Wrong things done right Take credit for skillfully not producing any valuable student outcomes Find strategic activities and methods that pay off, then execute them with the skill that you already demonstrate Wrong things done wrong Little chance that any positive outcomes will result in any useful student outcomes. Teaching may not be for you. Become a politician … or a spokesperson for The NCLB Ordinary Measures: Extraordinary Results Results from our action come from our taking ordinary actions.

Outstanding results come from doing the right things in a streamlined and effective manner.

The paradox is that simple procedures, learned and repeated, produce outstanding results, while complex superstructures of actions sag and crash from their own dead weight. The Cruel Hoax of Procrastination Procrastination is a silly excuse for our failures. We pretend that some mysterious force, some evil and insidious quality, is working behind the scenes in our lives to sabotage the benefits and scuttle the outcomes of our desires.

But, procrastination is not a "real thing," in the same way that "cold" is not a real thing. Sidebar

In science, the concept of cold is used to describe a relative phenomenon; but in reality, there are only atoms and molecules spinning and dancing at different speeds. What we call "cold" is only the absence of heat. And when heat is absent, the atoms and molecules move more slowly.

So, there is only heat or the absence of heat, but no "thing" such as cold exists, except in our experience.

In the same way, as there is no thing as "cold," there is no thing that is "procrastination." What we have is the experience of avoiding one task by doing some other task, such as playing, eating, watching television, fishing, playing golf, etc.

What we have is the choice to do something that is either more pleasant, or the choice to do something that is less stressful, or less painful.

Putting off or delaying a task that is aversive, painful, stressful, unpleasant, or difficult is really choosing to take care of ourselves in some way. Unfortunately, we don't complete the "taking care of our self" job in an efficient or effective manner when there are negative consequences for not doing what needs doing … or when not doing brings really deplorable consequences if left undone.

On the other hand, putting off something so that we can incubate ideas, or putting off the release of a "creative work" until it is "finished" (as long as we are continually focusing and building it), is a high-payoff strategy.

Here are the reasons that these choices might not be beneficial: We "enjoy" secondary gains (other rewards) for failing to execute For example, our colleague received recognition (and we didn't) so that we allow the project that we both work on to languish … in an effort to punish our colleague in a passive-aggressive way We enjoy temporary pleasures now, and face unpleasant consequences later For example, watching the championship game into the wee night hours, then dragging all the next day, giving your students (and your employer) less of you than they deserve We experience a dynamic interplay of guilt and self-inflicted punishment, possibly learned from people we loved and trusted when we were children

We don't really know what we are doing, so we "fake it"

We know what to do, but the task is complex and daunting. We face the task with "shallow breath, stress, and queasy fears" instead of completing one part of the task at a time

We are trying too hard to "be perfect" and this need for "stellar personal achievement" causes us to freeze. For example, because we are compelled to write the Pulitzer Prize winning novel, not just any ol' novel, we never start writing, we never practice our craft and the best seller that we would have eventually produced remains in "Fantasy Land." Health and Wellness... Nutrition, Exercise and Self-Care. Acting on your vision (AoyV), and executing with elegance (EwE) require that you operate with energy and alert focus. When you are semi-sick, dragging-tired or stressed-out due to inadequate self care; you lack the energy and stamina to succeed.

Be sure to relax and rest well, eat with wellness in mind, and sleep a comfortable and restful sleep.

Your students deserve to relate to the best you that you are. And, the you that you are provides more of a model (more positive impact upon your students' lives) than all the lecturing that a "do as I say, not as I do" bravado accomplishes. Top-Notch Mental Condition (and Conditioning) Energy and focus require that you exercise and eat a moderate amount of food. And the food needs to be the right kind of food. Sugary, grease-laden "treats" sap your strength; and "starches basking-in-grease" carry calories, but the calories in these concoctions refuse to carry you. Sidebar A deep-fried, jelly-injected, hydrogenated or lard-frosting-decorated doughnut carries within itself the demise of your energy and stamina. This improvised destructive device (IDD) (doughnut) operates on your body like the wrong wood thrown onto a campfire. This is the equivalent of wood that emits lots of putrid smoke, burns in a flash; but extinguishes itself before the embers are completely consumed; leaving lifeless coals that harden into a useless blanket over good wood. The Terrorism of Perfectionism One of the insidious internal processes that "masks as procrastination" is the ill-advised, ill-conceived, emotional and stress "illness driver;" "perfectionism." Sidebar "Perfectionism" is the name of a "self-warping" process that you learned, probably early in life. "Perfectionism" is a noun, and the word refers to a process, but not to a "thing."

As a dynamic process (even as a failed learning process), perfectionism is detrimental and often fatal to personal achievement.

Perfectionism is different than the process of genius, where small steps are practiced until the performance is seamless (over learning), and where major portions of the performance are placed on performance autopilot (habit). Examples, riding a bicycle, shaving, driving a car, delivering instruction to your students

"Perfectionism" is a stepping over the line from, "doing your best" to "you have to be the best," and on to "what you do must meet the classical "definition of perfection."

Sidebar within a Sidebar This idea may have originated with the ancient Greeks who reasoned that it was impossible to draw a straight line or a triangle that was perfect, but these figures existed, without blemish in the mental world.

Of course the ancient Greeks should have extended this proposition to several other, more practical concepts, but their search for "ideal beauty" blinded them to practical definitions. For example: "Good enough"

"Good enough for government work"

"Just do your best" "Your best is good enough"

The corollary to this misguided mode of thinking is, "Unless what I do is 'perfect,' what I do is not good enough."

Teachers and parents foist this mental monstrosity upon students (and pre-student children) with a focus upon high grades, perfect scores, making a hundred, and other less-than-useful motivations. Sidebar within a Sidebar One way to create a "stuttering child" is to take a child with "perfectly" normal intelligence and "perfectly" normal language development and place them with a "caregiver" that "corrects" their words "until they get them right."

What this does is cause victim child to hesitate, think about the words before saying them, and worse; to think about how to make the sounds. With normal language learning, children just make lots of trials until they build a habit of producing the correct sounds.

With "on-the-job training" for stutters, normal practice is interrupted in favor of practice within the "acceptable range" (for the caregiver).

Using this model of incapacitation by perfection, much learning in our schools goes awry. And, this focus on "right answers and perfect papers" saps the fun and joy out of learning, and eliminates the reward for great performance.

For example, if the golfer focuses upon nothing less than a "hole in one" on each shot, then almost every shot is a "disappointment." But, when a real "hole in one" accidentally happens, the golfer is such a "living wreck" (from negative reactions to every other shot) that the joy of the "hole in one" is overshadowed by the gloom of the preceding, "inadequate" shots. And, if "just do your best" is good enough for teachers to use to support their students in a stress-free learning environment, if "try it and see what happens" is an elegant strategy for "discovery learning;" then these strategies should be "good enough" for teachers to use on themselves.

Master teachers understand that a stress-free, competition-free environment accelerates learning, so they create "habits of vision into action" that return the "fun, enjoyment, excitement, curiosity, creativity and serendipity" to learning. Habits (and Habit Development) The goal of automating personal habits is to make the attitudes, knowledge and skills of effective teaching available in response to minute-by-minute interaction with your students.

Of course, you must be sure that the habits you develop are in the category of "doing-right-things-right."

But, it takes experience to know which activities and instructional delivery skills these are.

But, the learning process is enhanced and expanded by your trying lots of things and noting the outcomes. It is OK to practice activities and instructional delivery (AnID) that do not pay off. Why? Because, these may just not pay off for your particular group of students, at this time. But, these same activities and instructional deliver skills (AnIDS) could pay off with highly measurable student outcomes... At another time

With another group of students

With only a slight adjustment in strategy, method or procedure

With a bit of fine tuning

For 80% of any group of students

To 80% of the goals that you have for instruction
Students' abilities are so creative, adaptive and extensive that almost any reasonable procedure can be effective with 80% of your students. Of course, different procedures will make sense to, relate to, and reach a different 80% of your students each time you apply one.

It takes the unique skill and perception of a Master Teacher to choose and optimize an instructional approach so that not only do the "easy-eighty" learn, but the "tougher-twenty" learn, too.

The most important thing to figure out about what habits to cultivate is "what the right things are and how to do these right things in the right way."

This is the experience that allows some folks to look like geniuses to their peers and colleagues. In fact, what "genius-level" application and execution involves is building simple habits of doing the high-payoff "right things." Multiple Intelligences/ Learning Styles
There are several issues to consider when you build your vision, and these relate to application of Multiple Intelligences. You must pass your vision through your "sensory filters" as you move toward applying your vision in real life.

The first issue is that each person will only frame the vision in their preferred mental representational system. The second issue is that describing your vision to someone else, especially someone who has built a very different representational system than you have, is very difficult.

The third issue is that, under stress, you revert to a less favored, less effective representational system; so you have to be sure that you frame your vision in that mode, too.

Here are some examples of the same vision, represented by different Intelligences.
Hands-On, Tactile, Kinesthetic, Proprioceptive do the right things in an efficient and effective manner, bringing learning activities to students, and touching their lives with warmth, feeling and the love of life-long learning
Visual, Spatial, Pattern, Imagination

I show my students enlightened patterns of knowing in a clear and focused way; picturing learning outcomes to students, illuminating their lives with bright and sparkling motivation and projecting and imprinting the delightful vision of life-long learning.
Auditory, Listening, Creating and Recalling Language

I relate to and motivate my students to hear and remember the words that harmonize and resonate with their internal language of learning; and I orchestrate the melody and mood of that knowledge into a symphony that supports life-long learning
Mathematical, Logical, Sequential, Analytical

I postulate learning goals and tasks in a logical and sequential manner, bringing the beauty of problem-solving and decision-making skills; and increasing to a high probability, the chance that life-long learning will continue in the experiences of my students
Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, Ethics, Values

I relate my dedication and commitment to learning as I interact in an open and transparent way with my students, and I model the value and benefits of ethical and moral inquiry, especially the addressing of real-world issues. This interactive and project-based learning creates intrinsic interest in personal and interpersonal issues, and prompts the internalizing of attitudes of life-long learning
Smell, Taste

These examples get really silly, so we won't waste your time with them. In reality, vision statements based on smell and taste really "stink and leave a bad taste in your mouth" so we won't sour your experience with tasteless jokes about them. The thing to notice about these restatements of the same vision is that the verbs change to match the sensory modality (sensory intelligence).

The other thing to notice is that if you listen to your students, you can discover what modalities they prefer for their personal learning.

You only have to track a few things about each student in your mind, and even better, it is possible to blend verbs from several modalities into the same sentence because some verbs cover several modalities at the same time.

It is also possible to blend three modalities for just about any vision statement, just don't over do this. For example: As we get in touch with this information, we can see, imagine and picture the learning, and we can listen to the instructions; we may have feelings and sensations, images and impressions, and hear ourselves saying to ourselves, how this information is just as important to us now as it will be in the future
This blending of modes of experiencing was "suggested" by the famous hypnotherapist, Dr. Milton Erickson; and made popular later by Neuro Linguistic Programming practitioners.

Although hypnotic language is beyond the scope of this article, the principle of communication that is inside and outside of our (or our students') conscious awareness is important for teachers.

For example, teachers know that students have difficulty focusing for a long time on what the teacher is saying (short attention span). But, what if a teacher who relates to the world with visual modalities is talking to a class of students where 75% relate to their world with hands-on, tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive modalities? What happens is that the unaware teacher blithely uses good classroom management skills to keep the students behavior under wraps, but most of the teacher's words are wasted because many of the "visual words" are received as suggestions that are outside of the hands-on students' conscious awareness. "Hands-on" students have to translate the "visual words" into meaningful & "feelings and touch" words before the information will have personal meaning for themselves.

The teacher with a high level of visual words either needs to learn to map hands-on words into the active lesson (doing right things right), or the teacher needs to ask the hands-on students to translate for the rest of the class. This is easily

done by asking students to restate what the teacher is saying (a great review technique). Skills for Executing Once a teacher knows what the "right things" are, the skills for taking action and executing are easy to practice. This is because building instructional delivery skills is just the "piecing together" of a series of simple performance steps.

Add another step, practice that step for a few days; then add in another step…

An analogy for this process is learning to play a musical instrument, i.e., first the notes are practiced, then the scales are practiced, and finally melodies are practiced. This process may seem boring, but any other strategy (such as attempting to play melodies without knowing how to reach the notes) is sheer folly and sheer frustration. Standards are Good Enough Teachers can take comfort in knowing that a simple strategy is more effective than an elaborate strategy. And, simple components, ones that students master early in the school year, can be used to build elaborate learning structures.

Teachers who build on a standards-based framework find that the easier and basic the framework, the more outstanding the outcomes.

Results from our action come from our taking ordinary actions, and outstanding results come from doing the right things in a streamlined and effective manner.

So, the Master Teacher applies this paradox as a set of simple procedures that are learned and repeated. This simplicity can produce outstanding results.

Even better, "right activities" can be standardized and modularized so that they are repeated whenever the "doing right things" calls for them to be used. This is an example of the Classroom Toolkit Model. Sidebar For a more elaborate description of the modular approach to learning materials, visit the Classroom Toolkit Website. Here is a link… Classroom Toolkit instructional materials…

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Thursday, May 31, 2007

Feature Article

Changing Your Mind Set: "Uncovery" + "Discovery" + "Recovery" = "Empowerment"

We are "creatures of habit." And, although we usually think that habits are physical behaviors, such as how we brush our teeth, how we hold our knife and fork, etc.; our habits can be mental as well. And, it is the mental habits that we most need to change.

But what if we find that our mental habits are even more difficult to change than our physical habits and behaviors? Resistant and Resilient Our mental habits develop a resistance to change and a resilience that make a direct, force of will, frontal attack a "self-defeating" exercise.

Therefore, we have to use an indirect approach. This approach is: "Uncovery"

Discovery

Recovery

Empowerment We may be prone to giving up on the challenge of changing our mind set. We may have internalized the "spirit willing, flesh weak" mantra. We may use this excuse, but the "spirit/ body dichotomy" is far from a complete roadmap.

Beware even more of the mantras of your burned out colleagues, particularly when they apply their version to students. The burned out educator's version is, "Spirit willing, body strong and hormone filled, mind weak." Beware! Avoid commiserating with someone who displays this mind set. Avoid this thinking trap because it is slow death from moment-by-moment misery and learned helplessness. Spirit is Willing, Body is Strong, Mind is Reluctant, Recalcitrant, Resistant, Reactionary and et al. What this means is that the mind is the best tool for focusing (executing) your vision, planning, application, and performance.

This also means that your mind (especially hidden habits of mind) can be the greatest impediment to your changing, developing and growing professionally. Your habits of mind (not your IQ) are the independent variable that contributes to your professional genius. Steps to Empowerment Genius gives everybody nothing if unused and hidden. Results count! Literally, you can count results; but, how can you count something that doesn't exist?

This is the same reason that losing weight, quitting smoking or not eating sweets are ineffective goals. There is no target. There are no measures for something that doesn't exist.

That is the reason that changing your mind set requires that you specify exactly what measurable targets can be used to provide clear indicators of your progress.

This is the reason for the three steps to empowerment, i.e.,: Uncovery Here is where you find out as much as you can about the "inner workings" of your mind

Items in this category are difficult to know, and one of your lifelong learning tasks is to uncover them Assumptions

Beliefs

Rationalizations

Cognitions

Self-Talk

Values

Ideals

Dreams

Etc. Discovery This is an exploration into the "outer" workings of your mind. Items in this category are easier to know The list above plus …

Talents and Skills

Experiences

Contacts

Personal Resources Recovery

This is the process of setting yourself on the "right track," of making yourself "right with yourself"

If you know what your ideals, values and beliefs are, either Align your thoughts and behaviors, or Substitute aligned thoughts and behaviors or misaligned ones

You see what you believe, and you interpret events, environmental states and interpersonal interactions based upon your beliefs.

This is important because so much of your effectiveness as a teacher, mentor, facilitator and guide to your students depends on the components of your mind set.

You can use almost any theory to explain, justify (even excuse) your classroom behavior and performance. This is a process, some call it a "defense mechanism" called, "rationalization." Your Relationship with your Students The "Uncovery," "Discovery" and "Recovery" process is designed to help you eliminate these rationalizations and to focus instead on the "reality" that exists for you in relationship to your students.

This "Uncovery," "Discovery" and " Recovery" process enables you to change your mind set to a mind set that reflects the possibility that your students can learn at rates and levels, at a depth and expanse that will amaze you. This "Uncovery," "Discovery" and " Recovery" process can open your eyes to the emense creative talents, charisma, potential and insight that your students posses. EmpowermentThe "Uncovery," "Discovery" and " Recovery" process also leads you to one of the most apparent (yet hidden) secrets of education, i.e., that the "empowered teacher" is the teacher that empowers students.

And, the empowered teacher is the teacher that has aligned their mind set to a constellation of attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, values, ideals and dreams that reflect a reality of empowerment for teachers and students.

When you come to behave, feel, believe, self-talk and when other people discuss this constellation that you exemplify in terms of parameters that expand instruction; then you will have objective evidence that the "Uncovery," "Discovery" and " Recovery" process was effective.

Feel free to leave the comfort of your current mind set; travel the "Uncovery," "Discovery" and " Recovery" road; and travel towards the uncharted terrain of personal satisfaction and professional genius.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Monday, April 30, 2007

Feature Article

Don't Send Kids to the Office: Save Minimal Administrative Support for When you Need it

Teachers fare far better by keeping discipline "in house."

It often proves counter-productive to send students "to the office." First, a teacher should never threaten, and "promising" to send students to the office is a threat.

But, what if the campus administrator sends the student back with no consequences having been leveled?

Worse, what if a teacher refers a misbehaving student to the office, only to find that the student was rewarded!

Sidebar! remember a case where "trouble-making students" (repeat offenders) on one campus were given special hats and made partners on the Assistant Principal's Posse. Of course, the Posse scoured the campus for papers and trash, but the students "got out of class" (a reward), and received recognition. Besides, "Negative student behavior isn't only the student's fault, is it?"

In these cases, teachers need to exercise the caution and "wisdom" shown by (better paid) lawyers.

The rule for lawyers is, "If you don't know what the witness is going to say beforehand, don't place them on the witness stand."

The same rule holds for referring students to the office, i.e., "If you don't know what is going to happen (consequences to the student, consequences for yourself), don't send students to the office." Indirect Suggestion Sending students to the office communicates the following… The Teacher is NOT in Charge

The Teacher can not handle the situation, alone

The Student is "winning"

The Teacher doesn't have enough power to control the student or the situation

Etc. Perhaps the stress relief is worth removing the student from the classroom seems worth the risk of ejecting the student, but this ploy is short-lived and often self-defeating.

Reward First, Take Away Rewards, Punish Last

A rewarding, engaging, stimulating, supportive and dynamic learning environment is the first line in defense against negative student behavior.

Rewards, as long as they are not perceived as "bribes" are the first choice for teacher intervention.

And, the shorter the student's attention span, the more frequent those rewards need to be delivered.

However, for some age groups (especially Middle School, Junior High), peer pressure overpowers most of the rewards that the teacher can offer. This means that the teacher must "win over the peer group" with fairness, compassion, toughness, empathy and a "no teachers' pets favorites" approach. Taking Away Rewards The most rewarding part of each student's school day is inclusion in the exciting, stimulating, socially beneficial "happenings" that engaging lessons provide.

"Time out," cooling off periods and other side roads from where the action is; as long as removal is not too far away or for too long, creates an internal pressure within the child to return to the flow of classroom activities. That is, as long as the teacher didn't "burn any bridges" connecting the student with the class.

"Everyone cooperates and succeeds here, everyone is welcome" is the mantra that teachers need to repeat aloud, show by behavior and body language, share with empathy, and pound home with fairness. Consistent, Determined, but Minimal Punishment The military slogan applies in education, "Surety of punishment is more effective than severity of punishment."

This means that a teacher needs to choose the highest level of mild punishment that they can support, and level that punishment as a consequence, every time, no exceptions, no delay.

If the teacher's own child was visiting and broke the rule, the punishment would be leveled, at once.

But, if a harsh penalty is chosen, the teacher vacillates, delays and has to process whether this instance meets the test of "deserving" the punishment. Whenever a teacher engages in this internal debate, students lack confidence in the teacher, and become confused about the rules.

Of course, one or more students will rise to the occasion to "test the limits" and bring clarity to the classroom milieu. Crystal clear teacher policies avoid this unnecessary limit testing, and decrease the number of behaviors that require redirecting.

Teachers who are dedicated to student learning become "ruthlessly consistent" in a kinder, gentler sort of way. And, most children appreciate and thank them for this approach because it brings stability, safety and comfort to their lives.

Boredom, Frustration and Failure Disguised as Misbehavior

Teachers alert themselves to the slightest hint of misbehavior, and teachers focus upon restoring order. But, seeing the cause of the misbehavior as the student may mean misperceiving the symptom instead the cause.

Master Teachers ensure that the classroom environment is safe and secure, that children are supported and empowered, and that everyone is valued.

Then, teachers assess whether the curriculum or the instructional delivery could be more engaging.

As long as punishments were mild, "teacher's remorse" is kept at bay when the cause for the misbehavior turns out to be

The lesson was boring or confusing

The lesson was too difficult and students were floundering, feeling confused and feeling frustrated

The lesson was irrelevant to the students, and did not connect with any portion of their lives Punishment is like "Fly Spray." Over use extermination chemicals, and the buildup creates a toxic environment

It is better to have a strategy that keeps the screens on the doors and windows in good repair and don't prop the screen door open for long periods of time.

Meaningful, learning activities targeted to each student's learning style (Multiple Intelligences) are the learning environment's equivalent to screens on the doors and windows, i.e., barriers that keep pesky misbehaviors out of the classroom. Keep it in the Family Just as families like to keep facts about the family's issues known only to the family, teachers need to keep most of the classroom family's negative information under wraps.

This means, Dealing with issues in a private way

Avoiding comments about a student in the Teachers' Lounge

and briefing supervisors about the success of classroom management efforts without a "blow-by-blow" rendition of the saga of getting a specific student to behave "Keeping it in the Family" also means contacting each student's family ahead of time, with positive reports, and with a description of classroom rules and procedures.

The task is to win over the family's help with the classroom focus upon positive behavior.

If rewards are fair, if children are treated fairly, and if punishments are fair and mild; almost every family in the world will support their child's teacher.

Then, when a call home is necessary, the focus can be on obtaining help in keeping the child on track, obtaining help in keeping up the child's great progress, looking for a return to progress, positive behavior and cooperation. Catch a Student Acting Nicely Narrowed, tunnel vision is often necessary, with a lot of effort and vigilance expended in finding something that a student does that is positive. But, this strategy is worth the effort, even though the first time (or the first several times), the student may reject the social reinforcements of praise and appreciation.

But teachers who stick with this strategy are often rewarded by the cooperation of the child who was won over by the teacher's good will. Experiment, Assess Another approach that you can use is to keep track of the number of times that you threaten to send students to the office and compare that number of threats with

The number of actual office referrals

The number of threats before an office referral is initiated

The increase in offenses between the time of the threat and an actual referral

The increased number of offenses following an office referral

Keeping objective, countable records should convince you to refer students to the office for discipline incidents only as a last resort.

Make Campus Administrators your Greatest Ally

On the other hand, creating all kinds of award certificates, especially ones that require the signature of a campus administrator, make sending students to the office a rewarding experience for everyone.

Pass these certificates out when they are deserved, when students vote on the most deserving recipient, when you catch a student doing "good."

Sending students to the office to be rewarded is a strategy that pays off. Try it. You'll see.

Saturday, March 31, 2007

Feature Article

Fast-Track to Patience

"Hurry up to achieve results!"

"Rush to meet current goals!"

"Push students to learn faster!"

"Make every instructional minute count!"

"Work smarter, not harder, and drive your students (and your) performance to the top!"

"Hold to high expectations, and demand top-notch production from your students!"

"Believe, motivate and achieve great things…no pain, no gain!" Stress-Filled Folly
The one thing that each of these "prescriptions" for success have in common is that the desired result is opposite the intention, and that these suggestions are counter-productive.

The other thing that unifies these "strategies" is that stress for both students and teachers is the natural result of forcing learning into an "unnatural" process.

Memory, creativity, practical application, and the integration of knowledge each suffer when stress is poured into the learning environment.

Sure, a bit of stress at the time of a performance, heightens perceptions and pumps energy into a person's system. But, the systematic over-straining of our physical and emotional machinery leads to mistakes, errors, hypertension, obesity and a host of ills.

But, maybe it would be worth the effort if students' instructional outcomes, performance results, produced and measured artifacts…even test scores…met higher standards of proficiency and knowledge. But these indicators don't demonstrate higher levels of learning productivity, accomplishment or achievement. "Catching Up" Takes Time
One source of the dismal results from teaching children from low-income families stems from believing that these children are not ready to learn.

When these children start kindergarten or first grade, their teachers believe…The children are "behind"

Drill and practice is needed to help the students "catch up"

The children are deficient in personal experiences that ready them for learning at the appropriate pace

The teacher has to work harder to achieve even meager results from this "unmotivated, unprepared" group of kids

That isn't fair that a teacher of these kids is compared to a teacher of children from middle class families using the same test

These are all myths could be dispelled with evidence. And, all these "obstacles" could be overcome with patience. Dispelling the Myths
Here are some learning myths that are easily dispelled. (We wish that it were this easy to oust these methods from our school environment.)
Myth: The children are behind.

Fact: The children are where they are. It is the assumption of the "factory school theory" that every student needs to be learning the "exact same thing at the exact same time" that is the error.

Myth: These children lack experiences.

Fact: Unless the child was in a coma for an extended period of time, if the child is five years old, the child has five years of experiences.

Myth: These children are unmotivated to learn. Their lack of intrinsic motivation requires that they receive lots of drill to catch them up, and tangible rewards to bribe them into compliance.

Fact: Mastery and achievement are innate. And, these children have mastered their environment.

Myth: These children don't know how to learn.

Fact: These children are more honest about how little value teacher "lecturing" adds to the learning ledger. Really the middle class children are only pretending that the "talking teacher" is responsible for the learning that they demonstrate.

Myth: Drill and practice are needed to help these students catch up.

Fact: Drill and practice is great for subversive control, but lousy for learning. These children need practice communicating, talking, expressing, describing what they are doing as they participate in stimulating, richly rewarding experiences.

Myth: Teachers have to work harder to teach these children.

Fact: Teachers need to work differently, but not "harder" to teach children from low socio-economic households. Mainly, teachers need to exercise active patience, believe in the innate abilities of children, and provide a "rich environment."

Providing opportunities for learning

Myth: These students have to work hard to catch up.

Fact: Students from low socio-economic homes catch up, even outdistance some of the children from middle class homes if they start with their own life experiences, communicate and explore in an engaged, hands-on environment.

Myth: Drill and practice accelerated remedial learning for students of low socio-economic homes.

Fact: Drill and practice comprise the most sterile, lifeless methods of instruction. Drill and practice competes with "teacher talk" for the title of the "most boring" and ineffective school day strategy. One Size Fits One Student As far as learning is concerned, every student requires a "tailor-made," "designed-only-for-me" course of study.

But how is a teacher to create 22 to 35 tailor-made programs (in an elementary classroom); double that for team teaching), or 180 to 220 individual programs (in a secondary classroom)?

Here are the steps: (Note: Of course this process requires patience.) Communicate with each student on a personal level

Ask questions about the process that the student uses to think

Pay attention to the senses that the student uses, i.e., the relationship of thinking to "Multiple Intelligences"

Categorize each student (in your mind) in terms of primary and secondary learning styles

Begin to create personas (stereotypes/ characters/ story plots) of the top patterns

Check these patterns in particular… Hands-On/ Visual

Visual/ Hands-On

Hands-On/ Auditory

Visual/ Auditory

Auditory/ Hands-On

Auditory/ Visual Enrich the classroom environment with hands-on and visual materials

Enrich the time that the teacher talks with hands-on, visual and auditory descriptions

Make these story-like, if possible use stories and dialogue to share lessons…

Use language that is tailored for multiple learning styles Hands-On: Get the feel for, get in touch with, get in contact with, get a sense of…

Visual: See what the information is about, see the relationship, look at the big picture…

Auditory: Hear what this is about, talk it out, debate the issue, describe in detail… Group students by major processing preference to start

Later, group students by mixing (integrating) students into groups so that the major patterns are available for each group

Come to see each particular processing pattern as a resource for the others Focus on project assignments that require multiple patterns Case Studies Case studies demonstrate that many methods are capable of taking students that arrive "behind and not ready" and bring them to "catch up, mastery and accelerated" levels in a couple of years.

But the components of each of these successful systems include: Children are prized and respected

Teachers are confident that learning will "catch on"

Students are encouraged and their self-esteem is nurtured

The environment is kept "stress free"

Teachers are patient, and let the learning happen The message for teachers to share with the forces of ignorance that

want to drive classroom management into a stress-filled frenzy is, "Our students have abilities, intelligences and motivations that surpass our expectations of them. If we start from where our students are and if we help each student achieve in their own way, our students will outdistance the students who are yoked to the "factory school model" curriculum. In fact, they will "skate rings" around the lock-step students because they won't be shackled into learning in a way that does not match their learning style.

There is a wisdom in taking our cue to how we deliver instruction from each student. And a road map of how that instruction is implemented is "patience."

Wednesday, February 28, 2007

Feature Article

Application and Performance: The "Flip Side" of Planning

Application and Performance (AnP) are crucial for teaching success. Yet, school districts spend little time and money in perfecting instructional management and instructional delivery. The reason that only proclamations and directives target improved application of research-based skills improvement and performance is that improving education delivery is time consuming and expensive.

Note: See our previous article: The Flaws, Fallacies and Foolishness of Benchmark Testing Myths or Realities? Teachers are trained to plan, not to apply the plan and perform; College and university professors assign a report for the semester

Teachers-to-Be spend months creating a 15 to 20 minute PowerPoint(TM) presentation, maybe with some "Show and Tell" objects

In the real world, teachers spend 45 or 55 minutes teaching a lesson, and must be ready for another instructional delivery session the next day

Once the teacher is employed, the ability to plan, apply, execute and perform on cue is assumed

Administrators assume that because they pay more for one Teachers Edition than they can get by donating two pints of plasma, that they have provided the necessary and sufficient condition for teacher's instructional performance; As long as teachers turn in lesson plans on time in the required format

If instruction is shoddy, just push teachers to spend more time planning! But, Application and Performance (AnP) takes longer than planning. And, "AnP" takes more effort than just knowing what to do. Parameters of "AnP" "AnP" is a process, not an action or step. "AnP" is only effective when habits, knowledge, attitudes and skills of the teacher are integrated into a seamless performance.

"AnP" involves students in active dialogue and interaction, it has little to do with parroting (or paraphrasing) the words of the Teacher Edition. Obstacles to "AnP" There are many obstacles preventing "AnP" from becoming an integral, integrated, indivisible part of instruction. Here are some challenges; Changing is difficult

No one advised teachers as to how difficult or long the changes would take

Information sharing among teachers is not easy or automatic

Behavior and performance goals for improvement are vague and unclear

Directives and instructions are unclear because supervisors are not teachers, or cannot tell others what it took for them to learn successful instructional "AnP"

There is a lack of teacher training in "AnP"

Administrators don't sell the effort for improvement as a benefit for teachers and students. Stress for changing is often threatening, punitive or negative. And, even when the directive to improve is not negative, teachers perceive it as odious

There are no real institutional rewards for teachers who excel

Directors and principals have to know what to do before they can assist teachers; but some of the "help" that they provide to teachers is harmful to instruction, counterproductive or "just plain stupid" It's the Outcomes, not the Results, that Count This sounds like a play on words, but what it means is that the power of "AnP" comes from internalizing skills, attitudes and performance ("SAaP") behaviors at the habit level.

Here are some challenges; Teachers don't understand how difficult it is to improve "AnP", mainly because most of the improvement stems from other than cognitive skills

Teachers are left to their own devices to improve "catch as catch can", and they receive little informal help and almost no formal help

Colleagues provide help by "bragging about how well they do" under similar circumstances

School districts focus limited funds on professional development (See our article) Professional Development: Fast-Track to Empowerment or an Energy-Sapping Seat-Time Rut, but provide little funding of the follow up required to create changes in "AnP"

Changes toward "AnP" best practices are subtle and often take years to perfect, so a change process never launches

School districts and educational leaders fail to provide models of outstanding "AnP" These patterns mean that even talented teachers find that they are ill equipped to perfect their "AnP" skills in the world of work. What to Do? Here are the strategies that teachers need to take to build these capacities on their own. (Teachers cannot count on the school system employees to provide what they need for personal improvement. Develop a model for improving

"AnP" including: habit, skill, management, delivery and follow-up for effective instruction

Understand that the "Plan into Action" completes only part of the "AnP" process; there is an internal executive component to executing at a more proficient level

Change the culture of teaching so that teachers don't work alone

Change the roles of principals and "bosses" to one where these folks answer to teachers in terms of the delivery of

classroom support and instructional needs

Factor in student (and other influences) so that answers to the "What's in it for me?" provide student motivation

Develop structures for mandatory sharing, coordinating, "strategizing," and implementing a curriculum framework with a clear focus upon "AnP" best practices

Teach empowerment and leadership to teachers instead of squelching their initiatives through the "chain of command." The Role of Planning Planning creates a framework and guidelines, a model, a roadmap and a timeline for "AnP." The plan, the plan documents, the plan graphics (such as Graphic Organizers and Mind Maps) keep the "AnP" process on track.

Strategic planning ensures that the tools, tactics and techniques are targeted…efficiently and effectively. Strategy is the key. Key Strategies Use…Technologies

Resources

Mind-Sets

80-20 Rule Procedures…to…Manage Change

Coordinate Learning Attitudes

Develop Teacher Leadership

Build a Culture of Excellence in Learning

Provide Latitude (freedom) within Boundaries

Institute Controls and a Risk Management Plan A college or university education provides a diploma, a "Ticket to Play" in the educational arena. It is "On-the-Job" learning that molds a teacher's raw talent into elegant skills.

But, this process of building Application and Performance" (AnP) skills, habits and behaviors takes time.

Let's give our teachers all the help that they need to make these changes in their instructional planning, instructional delivery and instructional management.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Wednesday, January 31, 2007

Feature Article

Workforce Readiness: The Tripe Behind the Hype

As amazing as it seems, impossible to contemplate, baffling to ponder…American business leaders agree that our graduating high school students are incompetent (actually "deficient" is the word that they use). Instead of describing the value and benefit of hiring our high school graduates, business executives and managers talk in terms of major deficiencies.

The ratio of deficiencies to strengths would be ten to one…except that there was not a single "one." That is, no capacities of our high school graduates were evaluated as "excellent." What Skills are Needed before Hiring? Name the skills that are crucial for business and industry and you have a catalog of the shortcomings that these business leaders lament…but what you might not guess is the magnitude of these business folks' assessment of our graduates. Here are some examples: About 81% of high school grads are deficit in written communication Maybe we need to test our students' writing every year 70% are deficient in professionalism and a work ethic See our previous article on student honesty Student Honest and Ethical Behavior: The Road to Politics (Perdition) or Spin City? About 70% of our grads have defective critical thinking and problem solving skills Probably the business leaders didn't provide high-stakes test coaching immediately before the exam About 53% failed to demonstrate adequate oral communication skills

The business leaders just don't speak the language of youth. They should analyze their cell phone conversations with their friends to discover the real language and communication shorthand that our students are skilled in About 44% of our grads are judged to be lacking in ethics and social responsibility Amazing, since they have been trained to drink responsibly and at social gatherings, and to "Say no" to recreational chemicals About 38% don't measure up in the area of reading comprehension Of course, the employer are probably using business jargon on an unfair test without providing a study guide to the controlled vocabulary first. About 34% need remedial work in teamwork and collaboration Odd that our students don't learn this skill while listening to their teachers give lectures About 28% of our grads were judged to be weak in "diversity" Maybe this means that bussing has ended, or that bussing didn't go far enough About 21% require retooling in the use of technology applications I guess the huge funding of "Ed Tech" should be cut by our wise politicians if only one out of five students is graduating with a deficit in this area About 21% are judged to be deficient in the English language Maybe these aren't our graduates at all, but undocumented migrants who purchased their high school diploma and transcripts at the flea market Solutions to this "Problem" If We have One? If our country has a problem, whose problem is it?

If there are solutions to a problem, then who knows what to do to resolve those issues?

One issue is important to note: if business and industry expect to benefit from the skills of our high school graduates, shouldn't business and industry foot more of the bill for operating and managing our schools?

In addition, the squawking that these "captains of business and industry" are doing stems from the cost of training workers after they are hired…costs which diminish the value that the companies are able to deliver to their stakeholders.

Here are some possible solutions, not in any sort of order: Find ways to teach applied skills throughout our students school careers. If necessary, add additional hours to the school day

Build school-business partnerships. If necessary, extend school into the workplace, and hire teachers to staff the company training programs

Create a post-secondary diploma in the area of lifelong employability

Get politicians and politics out of the way of education

Use some of the school technology money to retrofit graduates instead of buying new computers

Create a multitude of small businesses that provide business coaching for employed but deficient youth, possibly a lucrative business opportunity similar to the test-prep tutoring businesses that litter our landscape Discussion for these "Alternative Solutions" Retrofitting teachers would be a lot cheaper than retrofitting students simply because there are more students than teachers. However, the impact of upgrading teachers might pay in the long term.

Is it unfair (and uncompetitive in the world market) to ask that business and industry foots the bill for new worker training? It is business that reaps the benefits (profits) from this training (if the worker remains employed long enough). But, those grads with diminished work ethic and deficient company loyalty might take advantage of training, then move to another company with better pay and benefits. Training them might prove to be a "bad" business investment.

Some schools have felt the "crunch" of providing technology for students. Maybe this paid off for business since only 21% of our grads were judged to be deficient in this area. Sidebar Of course, the number of students with this deficiency may be much larger since this study only measured high school graduates. There may be a much larger number of young people with these deficiencies since most of our schools under calculate and under report the actual number of school leavers (dropouts). Our School's Roles in Business Skills Remediation Maybe our schools don't have a role in rectifying this problem for business and industry since it is the stockholders of these companies that actually profit from

the labors of our graduates.

One solution is to graduate students and not worry about them, just as we do now.

It would be easier and cheaper for our taxpayers if our country just increased the "guest worker program" and allowed enough qualified workers from India, China and Russia in to fill these positions.

Of course, that could mean that 50% to 80% of our graduates would be unemployed, but that is what they get for not studying more.

After all, it is their own fault that they wasted their time cramming for high-stakes tests instead of learning employable skills.

Schools must discover that test-taking is not a skill that employers will pay for, and alter their strategy if they hope to snare some of that school-business partnership money.

If our schools are doing a fine job, as increasing test scores attest; and if students are meeting graduation requirements with "flying colors," then isn't it the employer's responsibility to hire, train or import workers? What does the Education Dollar Buy? If we are purchasing "the most expensive public education that money can buy," what are we buying? And who is doing the purchasing?

Debating the argument of whether we are getting "our money's worth" from our educational dollars is a worthless rut to follow. What we should follow instead are two lines of questioning: What is truly needed? What will it cost? and How long will it take to bring education up to the required level?

When we know what it will cost, are we willing to pay for what it will take? Another solution is to let this issue remain a "private domain" solution such as a nation-wide program of Small Business Grants and Loans to develop a safety net of post-high school tutorial services for our deficient students.

In this case, students could attend private tutoring service, something like "boot camps" where they would be "toughened up" for the world of work.

Another solution would be to modernize our "Use Tax system" and base the system upon consumption. That is, if a business consumes a one of the rare, "grads of quality", that business would be taxed at a higher rate than a business of industry installation that "consumes" a grad of lower quality.

This recommendation is based upon the common business practice of charging more for the deluxe version (the upgraded model, the "pro" model).

Recently we heard the phrase, "Vision without funding is hallucination" bandied about. But, a belief that under funding and political spin will produce superior results in our schools is "delusion." Who's Job is it Anyway? Who says that it is our school districts' job to build employable graduates? Isn't it enough that our graduates can read, write and calculate?

The short answer is, "Yes."

Reading, writing, speaking and calculating are exactly the kinds of skills that our schools focus upon. But the results of our expensive efforts are what our business leaders label as deficient.

If this is true, then our collective educational track record is dismal at best and a disgrace at worst. But the complaints of these business leaders needs further examination…Enough Talent to Go Around?The fallacy of this entire business leaders' argument is that there is not enough good talent to go around.

Our students are as talented as students anywhere. However, the analysis that these business leaders gloss over is "the rest of the story." Here is what is "left out of the complaints…"Business leaders are successively more satisfied with "Junior College" graduates and even more satisfied with college graduates who work for themSo, the "shabby product" that these business leaders are referring to are the students who don't go on to a college career of some kind. Not a representative sample of all our high school graduates

These "corporate giants" spin their argument as though they provide most of the jobs for our countryFacts are that small business provides from 70% to 80% of the jobs in this country.So, small business is also grabbing the "lion's share" of our graduates, probably the best remaining workers. So, the business leaders are complaining about an even smaller, unrepresentative sample than just our graduates that don't go to collegeThe bureaucracies of many big companies are similar to the bureaucracies of school districts, and creative, independent thinkers find accommodation to such restrictive environments to be a trade off with their values and idealsThis is one reason that so many talented and dedicated teachers leave the teaching profession and go into business for themselves, or find other outlets for their talentsCreative, talented teachers are probably better off not going to work for the companies run by these complaining business leaders. This would be like stepping out of the cat litter box and onto the doggie's pile.Final

RecommendationsTeachers should counter the "hype and gripe" of these business leaders with "a shot across the business bow" challenge to change the business climate from one of "profit and stock valuation at all cost"to one of social responsibility and altruism.

Teachers should also point out the fallacy of these business leaders' complaints, showing that their arguments represent distorted reasoning, exaggerated expectations, and the effect of their own inability to attract top talent from the much larger employment pool.

These business leaders are getting away with a thinly disguised form of "teacher bashing", and teachers should call them to the front of the room, shame them by revealing their "self-centered, selfishness", and rap their knuckles with a ruler.

On second thought, that recommendation is a throwback to a pre-industrial age style of teaching that went out of fashion with hoop skirts, or at least out of fashion with "Poodle skirts."

Maybe teachers should just continue on teaching, reclassifying (reframing) the noise that these business leaders are generating from "just blowing hot air" to "just passing gas."
Teachers should stand proud and gallant and face these business leaders down. Teachers should take credit for the great work that we all do for the benefit our our students, and not stand for distorted criticism about the work that we do. We're teachers, we're proud, we know it, and we show it."

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Sunday, December 31, 2006

Feature Article

Treating (Teaching) Children "Equally" is Unfair

You hear these statements all the time…We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal…

Everyone is equal before the law.

Teachers should treat all students equally.

One platitude after another…

Who can disagree with these assertions?

After all, isn't treating everyone equally the same as fairness? Teaching is Different than Running a Lunch Counter This article is about providing love, service, protection and caring instruction to every child.

In fact, children of illegal immigrants, the children of the same religion of the terrorist airplane hijacker, the children who come to school wearing the same dirty tee-shirt for weeks at a time…deserve to be treated fairly.

But, for all the compassion, empathy and caring that teachers hold; for all the dedication that teachers donate to students and our society by perfecting their instructional skills; treating children equally is unfair. In fact, treating children equally turns out to be stingy, uncaring and unkind.

Here we expose some of the effects of the "Treat/ Teach all children equally" prescription…Since No Child is the Same, Squeeze them All into Grade-Level Achievement Molds The factory model of education is "efficient" because it processes large numbers of children…cheaply.

"Two chickens in every pot and a car in every garage" are great ideals…except for vegetarians; or for the person who wants their car to be something other than black, and who doesn't want to have to use a hand crank to start the car.

And, keep children in lockstep for at least a year. If they try to move too fast, keep them busy, "let them play on the computer" until the other children catch up. (We will be integrating technology into instruction.)

What if a child could "move up a grade" after only two or three months. Would the trauma be greater for the child (in holding the child back, separating the child from friends), or for the system (in making adjustments, creating new class rolls, changing computer entries)?

And, force every teacher to pretend to like every student. The truly likeable ones will fail to learn how valuable their charm and grace are; and the unlikable children will fail to learn what personality traits it takes to succeed in the real world. Since Each Child's Exhibits Many Talents, Abilities and Gifts; Narrow Instruction to Test-Taking Abilities This strategy is unfair to everyone. Even the children who find test-taking to be easy, even fun, are mistreated and "dis-served" because test-taking skills serve no useful purpose in their lives outside of the classroom environment. In fact, test-taking skills over reach with grand expectations, are overvalued, and provide limited payoffs, even in the classroom.

And, those students who rise as "cream" in the "test-taking milk" are ill served because they come to believe that those skills will work for them in their careers and vocations. Sorry!

There is little justification for limiting a child's contribution to their education by ignoring all the skills and talents that they have, by ignoring all the things that they can do; in favor of molding them into activities that they will seldom use (such as multiple choice test-taking).

Does anyone know of real-life situations where choices require only one mark, where choices boil down to four alternatives…with only one alternative being right and the others being clearly wrong?

Wouldn't children be better served if they learned to ask more (difficult to answer, nuanced, pin-our-politicians-down-type) questions instead of learning to provide discrete answers to shallow, uniformly-constructed questions? Equal Portions of Pabulum for Everyone Pabulum, Anyone?

Let our curriculum be bland and offensive to no one. Keep our language clean and "cuss-free". Model middle-of-the-road values, and chastise teachers who raise questions that cause children to question.

And, for the test that gauges Adequate (Acceptable) Yearly Progress, make that a "minimum skills test.

What this means is that the teaching target becomes minimal performance [and Oh! how deplorable when whole classrooms (or schools, or districts) full of students fail to reach this mark.]

Well, it is more deplorable when children as artists, musicians, debaters, problem-solvers, craftsmen and craftswomen, skilled tradesmen and trades women, statesmen and stateswomen, technicians, healers, teachers, farmers, negotiators, deal-makers, agents, managers, executives and traders are dealt a test-taking-skills-hand-of-Jokers instead of a flush or full house.

Spend as Much as You Have to on Education: As Long as it Don't [sic] Cost a Lot

Make sure that education is the best that money can buy, as long as it is affordable (cheap).

And watch costs so that expenditures remain under control, and see to it that no children cost more to educate (unless

of course a court order forces us to spend more for the 10% or more of students that are tagged as "Special Education" students, or the increasing number who are targeted as "Bilingual.").

And, when the school's money supply tightens, remove all non-load-bearing expenditures such as art, music, P.

E. and let classroom technology become so old that the equipment is more of an object-lesson-history course than a useful tool. And by the way, eliminate recess because it "subtracts" from productive teaching time. (Isn't it time that teachers and parents, not politicians did the education math?)

And, keep categorizing teachers as "exempt employees." Translation: Brown beat teachers into working longer hours for the same pay, and convince them that they will be fired if they don't bring their students' test scores up. Treat Individual Differences as a Curse that Must be Exorcised How dare a child to be "different." Who do they think they are, someone special?

And, if the child is bored in school, it is their own fault. They should learn to pay better attention.

If a child finishes their assignments early, they should do more problems, look up more words, copy extra sentences from their grammar text.

We already spend more than any other nation on earth for instruction, and our textbooks are the most expensive mass-market books in the world; what gall to want to learn something that is personal and meaningful. We have our state standards.

Give Every Child a Highly Qualified Teacher: But Drive the Best Teachers Out of the Classroom with Stupid Laws and Bureaucratic Bungling

We can buy at least three "newbie" teachers for the two "old-timers" (experienced teachers) that we get rid of. If we are really lucky, we can get two for one.

Since labor costs constitute 80% of a school district's budget, the lower that we can keep labor costs, the better. Give Uniform (Uncontroversial) Textbooks instead of Current Technology Given technology today, students can explore our globe, examine issues and synthesize knowledge. Given textbooks, students can learn to parrot non-controversial facts and to regurgitate the opinions of groups of textbook authors who avoid toe-stepping statements that could arouse passion.

Textbook publishers are generous big businesses that write hefty campaign contribution checks. And, their lobbyists have clout. Besides, students encounter unreliable information on the Internet, and we fear that they won't be able to think for themselves and evaluate (judge) what information is correct.

Presenting textbooks with agreed upon content is the best way to ensure that "every child is on the same page" concerning what information they acquire in school. It is only fair that all students learn the same thing at the same time. Value Some Skills and Abilities, but Reject Children who Don't Bear these Valued Skills This is really only the flip side of providing "education on the cheap."

Translated, this means that it costs extra money to do anything extra for students.

Imagine how much it would cost if each teacher created individual worksheets for every child for every subject. The photocopy costs would "bust" the campus' and district's budget.

Now, magnify these costs for something other than photocopied worksheets, and see just how unreasonable it is to ask for anything different or extra for our students.

And, anything like art, music, or P. E. that doesn't pull its own weight, forget it. All these "extras" send costs through the roof. Graduate Students that are Barely Employable, or, "Hold the Back" Until they Pass Executives and business managers lament that our graduates lack the skills needed for employment. Therefore, or high-stakes-testing school environment is not delivering what the world of work needs.

There are several solutions: Increase the guest worker program and streamline the path to citizenship so that students from other countries can work in our country to fill open positions

Encourage our employers to relocate their companies in other countries where the pool of skilled employees is large enough

Abandon the non-functional "teach-to-the-test" strategy and provide our students with a useful (i.e., expensive) education. Providing an equal education and an equal opportunity is less than fair if that opportunity is mediocre and minimal.

Our goal needs to be to help our students grow into becoming (to borrow an ad jingle) "all that they can be."

Anything less is second best, less than fair, deplorable, and the current state of affairs in our educational system.

Let's start our educational system on a track to deliver more of everything that our students need to succeed in their personal and economic lives; and less of the minimal, mediocre and malaise-inducing equality that characterizes a "keep it cheap" educational system.

Imagine what beautiful outcomes our schools could provide in the lives of our students if we focused upon building love, service, caring and protection into the instruction that we deliver to every child.

What would a quality school system like this look like?

We don't know because no system like this has been built.

One thing is for sure, a system that delivers on its promise to educate all children to become "all that they can be" won't be "cheap."

That's the reason that we'll continue "concentrating" on providing an "equal" education. It's the only "fair" way to distribute scarce wealth to all.

Blog Export: Classroom Toolkit Newsletter, <http://classroomtoolkit.net/serendipity/>

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Thursday, November 30, 2006

Feature Article

Teacher Leadership: Business Models or Modern Alchemy?

Modern educational "theory" (which we advise that you sip in small doses) [See our article, Plan Simply -- Build a Simple Plan: Loose the Ideology] seems to stem more from psychology or business theory than from educational knowledge. Why?

Perhaps this is because psychologists are "nasty scientists" and because business people are "greedy pragmatists." (Note: Credit for labeling psychology as a "nasty little science" is given to William James.)

See supporting links: Theistic Psychology Or: Functionalism Notes

Therefore, any educational "theories" that devolve from business or psychology are automatically suspect based upon their source.

But, why don't teachers devise theories of their own?

More than likely, master teachers are too busy teaching and guiding students to worry about philosophy and theory.

What "theories" actually assist teachers in the minute-by-minute performance of their jobs?

Here are the problems...

Psychologists are trained to be "impartial observers." They believe (incorrectly) that an "antiseptic" observational process can identify behavior and develop theories. But, the fact is that any observer affects the outcome of the observed situation by the act of observing. (Note: This is true even for light particles in a lab. And, what about the "Abdicating Our Roles? Just as politicians have no business meddling in education, psychologists and business people also should keep their distance from the educational enterprise.

Sure, teachers should adopt sound business practices and sound psychological procedures that improve the mechanics and interaction of education. But, teachers should hold to their own theories.

Can anyone identify a business or psychological "theory" that improves education? (Note: We will gladly publish any professional debate concerning this issue.) Why Business and Psychology Lead Educators Astray Let's look at some popular leadership theories that do not hold "educational water." Theory X Assumes that people are inherently lazy, that people don't like to work, and that it takes a strong (dictatorial) manager to get them to perform a bare minimum level. (Aside: Sort of like high-stakes testing and the NCLB Act Theory Y People are intrinsically motivated, like to achieve goals and master their environment, and enjoy work if it is meaningful and if they can provide their own direction This theory leads to the democratic manager and a "participative" style of management. Neither of these theories enjoys a blanket application in education. Here are the reasons:

First, education is unlike factory-floor production, and the goal of education is not to churn out products. Factory models of education flourish because these models provide a rationale for cheap and measurably mediocre education, about what our politicians and our society are willing to settle for.

Second, education that focuses upon uniformity and standardization loses most of its value.

An analogy that explains this would be if all precious gems were cut to the same size and shape of diamonds. There would be a lot waste as large diamonds were ground down to the standard size, and a lot of rejects as diamonds that were too small to begin with were discarded.

But, the effect on emeralds, sapphires, rubies and other lesser stones would be far more damaging because being cut as diamonds would not allow for their innate, natural beauty to express.

The parallel in schools is to use a minimum skills, high-stakes test to squeeze students into a standard mold. Then, to reject all the talents, energies and delightful differences in students as they are squeezed into "narrow skill sets" that are suitable for low-level management. Myths Dispelled Here are some common (useless) myths that come from outside education and plague our profession: The human mind is like a computer

The education process should run like a highly productive factory

Standardized tests tell how well a teacher is teaching

Measuring student test scores is effective in "benchmarking" teacher performance

Education must be the "same" for all students if it is to be fair

Teachers must avoid humor, and avoid "smiling before the Winter Solstice" The Truth about Education These myths shelter hold more holes than a termite-ravaged dead tree. But, what is real about education? Here are some truths & hellip;

Teachers work with the most precious resources in the world, our children. For proof of this, check with 99.999% of parents. With rare exceptions, parents will tell you that their children are precious to them.

Teachers work with the behaviors, emotions, images, cognition, beliefs and language development of students. This is the most malleable resource in the world, capable of infinite variations, unlimited capacity and boundless energy (before it solidifies into constructs, compulsions and cravings.

Teachers draw on an unlimited capacity for students' talents, skills and abilities & hellip; what we ask students to perform

is a miniscule subset of what they are capable of

Teachers stimulate creative ideas, higher-order thinking, the construction of new knowledge and solutions to issues that locked-tight minds know there is no solution for

Teachers launch students toward attainments that surpass previous generations in quantum hops…

Teachers model caring, empathy, compassion, fairness and justice; contributions far more important for the future of our country than all the political deal-making, budget allocations and legal wrangling that is supposed to offer solutionsThe New AlchemistsIt is not without reason that the legend of a special stone that could transmute materials was called the "Philosopher's Stone." But, even though teachers cannot touch lead and convert it into gold, they can perform a far more important miracle.

Teachers can touch a child's heart and soul, change the path of that child's life, and sow the seeds of benefits and improvements for families as yet unformed, for generations to come.

There is a modern name for the "Philosopher's Stone" of human health, harmony and happiness. That name is, "master teacher."

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Tuesday, October 31, 2006

Feature Article

Zen and the Art of Classroom Management

Classroom management can be balanced, insightful, mindful and effective...leading to harmony, happiness and peace of mind. Classroom management can be conflictive and confrontational, such as a martial arts sparring match...or, smooth and graceful, flowing and dynamic...like a Tai Chi exercise session.

Teacher mind set, i.e., attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, cognitions, ideals, images and self-talk; to name a few components, are the key to classroom management success.

Of course your definition of "success" is important, too. Examine first the "Culture" of your classroom management approach. Strange question? Stop and consider that culture is the lens through which we perceive "Right and Wrong"...In...English and Italian, the child is "Bad" "Be good," implies that the child was "bad" French, the child is "Imprudent, Silly"

"Be wise" implies that the child was "foolish, imprudent or silly" Scandinavian and Jewish, the child is "Unfriendly" "Be friendly" implies that the child was "unfriendly, acting un-nice, lacking in hospitableness" German, the child is "Out of Step" Out of step implies that the child was "not marching to the correct drummer, out of line" Spanish, the child is "Not showing good manners, not behaving appropriately" "Pórtate bien, no seas mal educado" implies that the child is "behaving badly or is not well mannered" Hopi Language, the child is "Not following the Hopi way" "No, no, no, that's not the Hopi way." implies that the child is "not living up to the Hopi tradition" The Master Teacher The master teacher recognizes that any one of these cultural labeling strategies is detrimental to building rapport with students, so the master teacher avoids any phrases that "devalue and deflate" students. The master teacher says, "We don't do that here." "We don't do that here," implies "Try another way." "Try another way" suggests that improvement is needed without affixing blame (and a negative evaluation) upon the student. Sidebar Many students carry enough negative evaluation baggage about themselves to keep themselves depressed for years, and they do not need additional reminders about their resident low self-concept, or reminders from their teachers about their limited and dimly lit self-esteem.

A master teacher focuses upon students' successes, and a master teacher centers thought and action upon positive outcomes. A master teacher looks forward to improvements, and glances backward at mistakes only long enough to show students how avoiding such behavior leads to success and personal payoffs in the future.

A master teacher communicates acceptance of each student, and avoids hinting that the teacher might harbor a hidden, condescending view of the child.

The rule is: "the more uncooperative, unfriendly, belligerent, hostile and noncompliant the child appears to be; the longer and more sensitive the child's antennae (that are tuned to picking up slights and slurs)" become.

Other Lenses for Viewing Behavior

Practitioners of Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) observe that all behavior is motivated by a desire for positive outcomes.

Of course, the goals and methods for generating these positive outcomes may be different than other people's goals and objectives, i.e., the street-wise students goals and methods may differ from the upper-middle class ethics...lower-middle class economic values of the teacher.

"What's the difference between lying to get elected and picking people's pockets through crooked lobbyist, and lying to sell them junk, or picking their pockets on a busy street?" the young thug asks.

The master teacher establishes rapport with each student, and frames the motivation to cooperate and learn in terms that resonate with each students.

Note: "One motivational phrase does not fit all."

Practice a Zen Attitude

Keeping a caring, but detached attitude and holding a belief in the innate value, dignity and importance of each student firmly in mind results in a day to day teaching experience that is characterized by...Agility Attention Attunement to both Overt and Subtle Communication Balance Calm Flexibility Intuition Mercy Patience Responsiveness Success for Each Student's Sake

Reigning in your "jumping to conclusions" horse, "keeping the hounds of blame" at bay, implementing a "Discovery before Remedy" strategy pay off in peace, happiness and success.

Pondering profusely before mobilizing a power struggle or waging a campaign of personal domination against any student. Classroom warfare is not an art, it is a dirty, grisly, repugnant business, a business capable of producing no profitable outcome for anyone.

Introspect now, and discover a more enlightened way to manage your classroom.

Feel, believe, receive and imagine the harmony and success that you desire as though it already graces your life in the classroom. The stronger and more vividly that you create (and hold to) these mental pictures, the more thoroughly you

make intuitive decisions and intuitive statements that bring your mental intentions into reality.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Saturday, September 30, 2006

Feature Article

Hassle-Free Assessment: Pipe Dream or Reality?

The goal of assessment is to keep the teacher on track, to ensure that the instructional presentation is clear and effective...to ramp up, revamp, tune up, and fine tune instruction. The process of determining if "what the teacher is doing is effective" is what assessment is all about. However, this is different than what most teachers are trained to do. Most teachers are trained to look at students' responses to figure out if the students are "getting it."

But, it is easy to slide down the slippery slope from using student feedback to determine what to do next...to becoming entrained (e.g., trapped in the rut) of letting student responses drive instruction.

Sidebar Note: It is the ski jump to the bottom of this slippery slope that brings education to the "super-deep snowdrift" of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). and all blizzard of stress that is created by high-stakes-test-driven instruction. The art of teaching requires a balance of using student feedback and of sticking with known-to-work strategies and best practices.

Instantaneous feedback, even if you could get it, cannot always reveal...

the progress that students are making in building complex learning skills

the progress that students are making in acquiring and constructing knowledge

the maturing of attitudes and beliefs that are key components in your students' life-long-learning habits and personal success

Training students to produce the "one-right-answer" develops skill sets suited for the assembly line factory floor, but not those skill sets required of modern information workers.

Instantaneous feedback also tends to focus upon "short-term memory" responses to knowledge and comprehension levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Information workers (the career paths of most of your students) require skills (strengthened through practice) of: Higher-order

Thinking Creativity Intuition Problem-solving Decision-making Communication Collaboration Negotiation Project Management Presentation Delivery Positive Self-help Belief Systems Morals and Ethics Teachers who become addicted to the easy-route, the one-right-answer rut; can stagnate students' thinking (and limit students' future employability) with practice directed toward lower-order skills.

The "80 / 20 Rule" of Checking Student Feedback Checking every student response, all the time, could generate lots of data. In fact, teachers could create so much data that they experience "data overload." The technical term for the "gridlock" caused by too much available data is "analysis-paralysis."

Examples of too much, next-to-useless data are the item-by-item, objective-by-objective student response printouts that teachers receive for every student in their class who suffered through the state-sponsored, mandatory high-stakes test.

The technical term for this data is "summative assessment" (Individual teacher's terms for this "data" are not spoken in front of children.) even though...The test is administered too early in the year to account for the accelerated learning spike normally occurring during the last two or three months of the school year (the real summative target date)

The printouts arrive too late in the school year for the teacher to extract trends and inferences, and too late for the teacher to make corrections in instruction

The high-stakes-test will be used for purposes for which its creators did not design or develop the test for (i.e., evaluating teachers) Sidebar Close behind in the "Uselessness Parade" are the school district's Benchmark Test reports that mimic the high-stakes test, and demonstrate the bureaucracy's "commitment" to improving test scores.

Collecting data also fuels the "Benchmark Testing" myth. (See our previous newsletter article: The Flaws, Fallacies and Foolishness of Benchmark Testing)

Teachers do not need high-stakes test printouts, or even feedback from every student before making action-based decisions and course changes (no pun intended).

But, compulsive folks may argue: "But I don't want any student to fall through the cracks."

This "falling through the cracks" myth is responsible for teachers collecting lots of unused and unusable data. This myth also is responsible for maintaining a "teacher-centered" classroom Sidebar Almost all current educational research recommends that a teacher-centered approach should be relegated to a chapter in The History of the Industrial Revolution, but abandoned as irrelevant for the skills future workers need in an Information Economy.

Building a gigabyte database (student response data) file just moves the focus of improving instruction away from the teacher and onto the students...a big mistake.

In addition, collecting data and doing nothing about it is worse than not having data.

Teachers should develop a strategy for improving instruction that applies the "80/ 20 Rule". This means that: 80% of students will learn by any method that the teacher chooses to apply

20% of instructional delivery will result in 80% of the improved learning that students achieve

No matter what strategy of instruction the teacher initiates, 20% of the students will require individual tutoring. Master teachers focus upon the "20% strategies" that result in 80% learning improvement, and make teaching look easy. Making educated and intuitive guesses, and observing how students' performance improves involves a higher-order problem-solving and assessment process. This strategy is superior to manipulating data. Another way of defining the "20% strategies" needed to improve instruction is that the 20% are the approaches that address "trends." The Data Imperative: Collecting data creates an imperative to uncover trends through analysis. Then, by discovering trends, the teacher must provide solutions to remedy any negative developments.

What solution does verifying negative trends from analysis of the data point to? Answer: Some sort of individual, on-demand tutoring is required for some students almost all the time.

If the teacher (or school district) does not have the personnel (trained and available) and funding (enough tutors are available for every student) mechanisms in place, it may be better not to collect the data. Feedback vs. Data vs. Grading vs. Assessment: Feedback is the usable, generally ad hoc information that teacher obtain by observing, obtain by asking students to reveal their thinking process, and obtain by asking students their opinions.

Data are collections of responses, generally (difficult to interpret) numbers.

Grading is the political (and semi-metaphysical process) of evaluating students in a "Cover you Backside against complaint" kind of way.

Assessment is the higher-order process of interpreting and evaluating the instructional course of action. Assessment contains cognitive, affective and psychomotor components...with the non-cognitive components generally summarized by the terms, "teacher intuition and creativity."

Assessment is key for teacher improvement. and teachers must be sure that assessment is kept separate from "analysis of student feedback" and "grading." Grading: There is a tendency to view grading as assessment when the connection is only a "face validity," and slight of hand.

Grading focuses upon one correct answer, because answering these kinds of questions is the only "fair" way to assign a grade.

Other kinds of questions are more "subjective" and therefore, not "fair." "Non-one-right-answer questions" bring real-life issues to the fore, are the kinds of questions that knowledge workers grapple with minute-by-minute, and are next to impossible to grade.

What is the focus of the questions that you ask your students?

Clickable Gadgets to the Rescue? There has been a recent development in the feedback/ data/ grading/ assessment dialog...the clickable gadget. These technical innovations are marketed under a variety of names, i.e., audience response, classroom performance, real-time opinion survey, wireless voting systems, etc.

Do these clickable gadgets hold promise for assessing the changes needed to improve instruction?

The first obstacle associated with the gadgets is that they are expensive. The classroom units from one company range in price from about \$1,500 to nearly \$3,000 USD.

And, there must be a computer in the classroom where the units will be used.

The advertising and compelling sales pitches from the makers of these devices could lead teachers to believe that collecting data and pulling out responses from shy students is assessment. The technical jargon for testing students to determine if the teacher is teaching well is "formative assessment."

The problem is that there is no direct (one to one) connection between the independent variable, i.e., what improvement the teacher makes in delivering instruction, and the dependent variable, what the students learn. (This is the reason that teaching remains an art, and the reason that software cannot replace teachers. This is also the reason that the "20% Trend Solution" is the most efficient method of addressing instructional improvement.)

In the language of database development, the relationship between what a teacher does (and the myriad of other influences upon learning, some under the control of the teacher, others, not) is a "Many to Many relationship."

This means that there are likely more variables that the teacher cannot control that are affecting learning than there are variables that the teacher can control.

The master teacher discovers what controllable variables improve learning and makes integrating these (the 20% Solution) into a repertoire of efficient instructional habits.

Of course, systems that record individual responses and analyze trends would be useful, if they ease one or more of the tasks that teachers must perform.

Even though higher-level assessment would demand lots of creative innovations to frame insightful questions, could the clickable devices save time in grading? Less Work or More? Teacher like the clickable gadgets, one of the worst complaints being the trouble of changing batteries. Of course the batteries only discharge when the units are in use all the time, so this should be interpreted as a "good sign."

Students also seem to like these gadgets.

But, the school district needs to have a great IT Department and super support if a teacher's entire instructional delivery and instructional management system depends upon this technology. This means that the classroom computer must always function, and it means that replacement systems, backups of software and data must remain 100% current.

So, what will these gadgets do if the IT infrastructure offers 99.99% uptime?

One maker of "clickware", eInstruction® lists the following benefits: Streamlined grading: Integration with paper and pencil tests; Collection of district-wide benchmark test scores; Allowing even shy students to participate. Another maker of

clickable gadgets, Quizdom; claims that their technology allows instructors to communicate directly and privately with each student. This also seems to be a benefit since one motive for checking on the responses of every student, in real time, is to inform the student whether their answers are correct.

Still another seller of these response-gathering gadgets, Option Technologies Interactive; lists the benefits of these devices as making meetings interactive.

Unfortunately, none of these benefits address the issue of higher-order assessment for instructional improvement. Grading, the bane of every teacher's midnight oil, is faster and more accurate when gadgets and technology are used. But, grading is more a function of politics, public relations and customer service than assessment. In fact, teachers should communicate how little grading has to do with assessment, so that, over a period of years, their constituents come to appreciate the difference.

And, remember, it is more important for a teacher to discover what students are thinking and how students derive their answers, than to know how many students chose the correct answer.

An additional benefit for the purchase of a clickable system for an entire grade level may be to get teachers to work with each other since developing a database of quiz or test questions is time-intensive. Several teachers, each sharing the workload of creating test questions may decrease the amount of work that each has to do.

Of course, teacher sharing and a unified database of response questions requires an even higher level of IT support. Other Learning Issues Delivering a lesson, then asking questions about the lesson relies upon short-term memory. Asking the same questions a week, three weeks, and six weeks later would determine if the learning "stuck." In addition, there are a lot of other kinds of information besides answers to questions that factor into higher-order assessment thinking. Choices, decisions, opinions, votes and associations are a few examples. Perhaps you can think of others... (See what I mean? I just modeled what teachers need to do to stimulate more than one right answer with this previous statement.)

Another issue is whether lots of students'-response data cause a teacher to fixate (stagnate) on knowledge and comprehension-type-questions. And, how much creativity and innovation a teacher needs if they wish to develop higher-order questions (and if they wish to ignore knowledge and comprehension ones).

Not that a teacher would fall into this scenario (trap), but as higher-order questions are presented, greater numbers of students can be expected to take longer to arrive at the "correct" answer. And, greater numbers of students can be expected to make choices other than the "correct" answer.

What is important to the master teacher is not whether the students arrive at the correct answer, but what each student's thought process entails.

What might become important to the "Newbie" teacher is that students feel a sense of success, so positive reinforcement of easier questions might prompt a trend toward knowledge and comprehension questioning by the novice teacher. The Master teacher will continue challenging the thinking of each student. Assessment Best Practices Remember that instruction is more than the teacher explaining concepts. To teach to the way that most children think and process information, visual and hands-on experiences must comprise most of the students' learning activities. When there is talking to be done, the talking needs to be done by students, to students, and sometimes by students to the teacher.

Also, since grading is a political, rather than an instructional process. And, since harsh, i.e., failing grades in the first few grades are still the best indicator of what students will eventually leave school (drop out) when they become old enough to legally do so, teachers need to ensure that every student is successful. Ensuring that no child "falls through the cracks" means that on-demand tutoring needs to be provided to every child that requires it. Administrators and bureaucrats could demonstrate their commitment to education by funding this tutoring instead of expecting that teachers will compensate for the lack of an appropriate tutoring program by donating hours of uncompensated time to make up for what the system fails to deliver.

Best practices to keep in mind are: Student thinking is more important than "a single correct answer" Questions with a "Yes or No" or "one right answer" should be asked of students maybe only ten percent of the time Multi-step thinking is more important than "one-step-recall"

Student Responses consist of more than answers to questions Voting Prioritizing Associating Surveying Deciding Speculating Question created by students are often more meaningful than questions created by teachers

How the answer was "thought up" is more important information than whether the answer is "correct"

Students tutoring other students is a viable option suggested by higher-order assessment of student-centered instruction, and part of the 20% Solution

Homework should be creative and highly motivating Homework should never be an excuse to trick parents into providing the tutoring that the school district failed to fund How much you make higher-order assessment a part of your teaching habits determines whether your students' successes are the reality that you dream of. Start today and develop a strategy of making higher-order assessment part of your instructional repertoire.

Thursday, August 31, 2006

Feature Article

Robbing Peter to Pay Paul: A High-Stakes-Test-Objectives-Driven Classroom

Teachers who teach a High-Stakes-Test-Objectives-Driven curriculum, driven by fearing-for-their-jobs principals and an aggressive and odious benchmark testing program; do not realize that they are gambling with their students' future. On the surface, teaching to the test seems to have "face-validity" but there are several insidious characteristics of this strategy that are similar to a "Ponzi Scheme."

Of course everybody knows that Ponzi Schemes are illegal in the U.S., but, it is the U.S. Government that is (inadvertently?) pushing these short-sighted strategies under the guise of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Here is the classic definition of a "Ponzi Scheme."

"The Ponzi scheme continues to work on the "rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul" principle, as money from new investors is used to pay off earlier investors until the whole scheme collapses." Source: US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) Link to SEC source

Teaching to the Test is not Taking Students' Money: How does the Ponzi Scheme Definition Apply?

The classic high-stakes-test-objectives-driven curriculum is similar to a Ponzi Scheme on two dimensions:

This curriculum scheme borrows against students' future learning by focusing upon short-term payoffs instead of building upon a solid foundation for learning.

This curriculum focuses upon short-term memory training on the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, the kinds of learning tasks that are the most quickly forgotten

This borrowing against the future is most evident when students who excel at test-taking discover (later on in the real world) that they are less than competitive in the job market.

For example, Texas spent about a decade testing "writing skills" with the now defunct TAAS Test (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills). During that time, all Texas students learned to master the art of formula writing so that they could write to the high-stakes prompt.

Unfortunately, Texas trained a half-generation of job candidates that lacked basic writing competencies in the job arena. Here you see how the future cost of lost jobs, unearned raises, or unpaid bonuses falls due when the Rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul system collapses.

And this does not include the costs to students who must take business writing courses to keep their jobs, or the cost to employers who have to pay for training to teach their employees (who aced the TAAS Writing Test) how to write. And, what about business lost when poorly written proposals were submitted according to the "formula?"

Is a Focus on Short-term Memory Skills "that" Shortsighted?

Industrial-age, factory-floor education has always focused upon facts and figures, i.e., knowledge and comprehension. But, Benjamin Bloom suggested that other types of learning were more important.

Link to the learning domains of Bloom's Taxonomy

Application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation are considered to be "higher-order" thinking skills.

And, even though newer high-stakes tests claim to focus upon questions that seem to require higher-order thinking to come up with an educated guess, high-stakes test proponents fail to notice that Benjamin Bloom's hierarchy contains two other domains, i.e., the affective and the psychomotor domains.

A curriculum that focuses upon paper and pencil test practice doesn't have time for the reports, performances, presentations, hands-on experimentation, student projects, peer mediation, service learning, arts education and all the other meaningful experiences that broaden and deepen a students' intellectual and academic world. Students need to stretch their creativity and their perceptions as they integrate and manipulate intellectual, emotional and hands-on models of mastery and achievement.

Students are shortchanged if their world view is narrowed to the drab and dingy perceptions of the professional test-item writers. Students are conned if they learn that there is one and only one "right" answer, or if they learn that all of life's skills boil down to how well you answer test questions.

Focusing on a high-stakes-test curriculum leaves students impoverished in thought, in a similar way to how investing in a Ponzi Scheme leaves them financially hurting and longing for their vanished, hard-earned money.

A Warped Numbers Game

In addition, the focusing upon a test-objectives matrix (grid/ printout) to drive instructional activity choices is a "the gambler always loses" scam.

A teacher's odds for a positive student outcome payoff are better in a dice game or at the roulette table than following

this instructional hustle.

Here is what is wrong with the numbers.

Let's say that there are 50 high-stakes reading test objectives and 80 high-stakes test math objectives.

Let's also agree that the high-staked reading test will be administered 125 days after the school year, and the math test will be administered 150 days after the start of the school year.

This provides approximately two days per objective, if all students are present each and every day.

The Gung-ho Newbie teacher who wants to please the high-stakes-harried principal is going to track every data point and use spreadsheets to keep up with the progress of 20 students.

Of course, the teacher lines the objectives up and schedules two days for each in succession.

This means that the teacher doesn't dare to skip the grading of every reading and math practice test each night so that those students that need extra tutoring can be helped the next day.

Soon, however, a backlog of students who have to make up "work" for missed objectives develops. Fortunately, there are days off for Thanksgiving and the Winter Solstice/ New Year holidays. Those students who fall behind can use these days to catch up by doing the extra homework. "Won't those students be grateful that I help them pass the high-stakes test," the Gung-ho Newbie teacher thinks.

Of course, in the march to "cover" all the objectives in time, this high-stakes-test-driven teacher has to tramp on art, music, creative expression, student projects and any fun activities. "How can students have fun when they keep falling so far behind?" the Gung-ho Newbie teacher thinks.

But, guess what. By the time that the students get to objectives 35 or so, they have forgotten objectives one through 25.

No one pointed out that students forget stuff that they only see twice.

And, oh yea! the Gung-ho Newbie teacher is spending so much time entering data, sorting students by objectives mastered and missed, and grouping and regrouping students that spouses and significant others tire of begging for affection and attention from the always working Newbie, and seek satisfaction elsewhere.

What if the Test-Smart Teacher "Covers" all the Objectives All the Time?

The really industrious Gung-ho Newbie (probably one with no significant other) who can devote 24x7 effort to this testing strategy can build enough tests for at least one can be given each week that covers everything.

Of course, this teacher has to write all these tests because, after buying all the grade level test books at the teacher's store (six weeks and \$200 later), the supply ran out.

But, after 16 weeks of this "artificial intelligence," the students' affection span dwindles to next to no empathy for the teacher (or for each other).

Tempers flare at the slightest glancing provocation, and disgruntled, unhappy children rue the day that they were placed in that class.

Conditions become so odious that the only sweet revenge that the students can muster is to slack off on the real test to lodge their futile protest.

And what could be sweeter than to strike their tormenter where it really hurts, with poor test scores for the class affirming that they "had a lousy teacher."

Are there any other Insidious Issues

Another submerged, under the radar issue, kept hidden if at all possible is the issue of referring test-challenged students to Special Education to the maximum amount that the teacher or campus can get away with.

These clandestine machinations, made in the name of helping the student to be successful, rob students of job payoffs in later life, as well as self-confidence and peer acceptance in their immediate future.

Of course, school districts and state education bureaucracies have caught on to this diversion-from-the-test tactic, but their vigilance has driven the practice underground more than eliminating the practice.

Other loosing bet is the negative bounce that students' and teachers self-confidence and self-esteem takes as a bad draw of the benchmark test cards is played.

Benchmark testing, for any but the most academically talented students, brings a "lose/ no win" reward for weeks of endurance and boredom in practicing for the high-stakes test.

Of course, repeated benchmark testing jades students in stages so that they are turned off and unmotivated by the time that the "for real" test darkens their horizon.

See our previous newsletter article...Link to The Flaws, Fallacies and Foolishness of Benchmark Testing article.

Another Ponzi Scheme-type outcome is what occurs the minute after the high-stakes test is administered. Everyone knows that the school year is over, even though there may be 30 or 65 more school attendance days. After wasting most of the school year studying for this test, no one has the motivation, desire or inclination to squander the rest of the year preparing for next-year's test; or for study of any kind, for that matter.

Equally unethical is the practice of focusing on only a small number of students, the students whose test objectives mastered patterns indicate that they are close to passing.

These "on the cusp" students receive an inordinate amount of attention, while students whose pattern of mastery of test objectives is very low are abandoned. The rationale is that no amount of effort will help those low students to pass, so why not focus your finite attention on the students who have a chance of passing.

And, the cumulative abandoning of these "low performing" students, passed over as hopeless, year after year, is robbery of the lowest order.

Stamping out Waste, Fraud and Abuse

Just say, "Yes" to empowering students and their teacher. Make learning dynamic, creative, artistic and real world. Communicate with student about what is exciting to them, and find ways to integrate student interests to the curriculum. And, adopt some version or iteration of the "Golden Rule." If would like for others to treat you with dignity and for others to teach you what is important for your life; then treat them kindly, eliminate unneeded stress from your classroom, and bring your investment (or gamble) in high-stakes-test-practice to a minimum level, a level of risk where it doesn't matter if you loose.

Remember, if your test study scheme robs students' of their future prosperity, you have really let them down. Protect your students from the scam of the Ponzi-style, rob Peter to pay Paul, dice roll of high-stakes-test practice. Remember, "high stakes" means that everything is riding on one throw of the dice or one spin of the wheel. Help your students invest in solid, low-risk, high-payoff learning instead.

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Monday, July 31, 2006

Feature Article

Professional Development: Fast-Track to Empowerment or an Energy-Sapping Seat-Time Rut

By whatever name or disguise, professional development, In-service, staff development or training, this seat-time ritual is ubiquitous in school districts at the start of each and every school year. Every year starts with a required, mandated, placebo-dose of this bad-tasting medicine.

These seat-time endurance extravaganzas are the one time of the year when all but the most comatose of the educational consultancy corps are employed (deployed).

In theory, the funds expended for this ordeal result in targeted change and trackable/ traceable teacher improvements that focus upon directly-measured student outcomes.

So, why are the collective benefits from this "feedlot-style" professional development less than ideal?

Examples?

For example, during the In-service program on individualized or differentiated instruction, the presenter models a one-size-bores-all system that is fully described in the consultant's 368 page book. Of course, after the \$1,200 US consultant fee for delivering the presentation (the consultant is a published author, you know), the campus cannot afford the \$34 US book for each teacher. Fortunately, the the consultant was generous enough to donate a used copy for the campus library.

Fortunately, the copy is always available for checkout, since no teacher has time to slog through this ponderous tome.

In another "Sleeper Cell" presentation, the technology consultant flashes PowerPoint slides for six hours.

Fortunately, the purchase orders have been "cut," and the software that the consultant is "teaching" will be ordered as soon as the new fiscal year begins. The teachers will remember remarkable amounts about the concept behind the software when the software arrives (ninety days after the start of the fiscal year), and they will still remember a lot after the IT Department schedules the software for installation (six weeks into the next semester).

But, entering "back-dated-data" into the software seems too odious, oppressive, repulsive and stressful; so, none of the teachers who were "trained" bothers to use the software. Maybe the software can be salvaged for use next year...but only if funds for the software's maintenance fees are budgeted.

However, there is little sense in my droning on with these endless examples. Everyone has seen, first hand, endless renditions and iterations of these well-known scenarios. Pressing on would be just plain boring, or, would prompt you to think of worse-outcome "horror" stories that you have seen that could easily trump my examples.

Telling it Like it is

So, what describes ("Tells it like it is") this well-known "Curse of the Never Quite Alive" professional development ritual that replicates itself, year after year?

In theory, professional development should fit one of these professional models, even though each model offers issues, concerns and obstacles to be overcome.

Of course, there is only enough money in the professional development budget for one-off training.

Follow up, follow through, action plans, application of any valuable nuggets of knowledge is...

Impractical

Too time consuming

Too low a priority

A waste of time

Wait a minute...

...What teacher has the time?

...What valuable knowledge nuggets?

Low-Impact, Intensive Training A limited professional development budget is responsible for a large percentage of training sessions that start with the following dialogue...

The presenter introduces the topic by saying that the information that he or she is presenting is really a "three-day, week-long, three-week" class. So, the best that he or she will be able to accomplish is to "hit the highlights."

Translation: All that is going to happen is that presenter is going to sling slides and read bullet points.

These initial words, coupled with a quick slide (no pun intended) into the "PowerPoint Daze" results in a rapid transport of the audience into an altered state of awareness. The primary characteristic of this training-trance is a post-hypnotic suggestion that blocks all memory of the contents of the session, or, at least recall is blocked for the remainder of the school year.

I am not sure if any controlled experiments have been conducted to study this phenomena, but my hypothesis is that

less than 1 in 56, 287 teachers who attend one of these workshops will be able to state (at the end of the school year, with 10 degrees of freedom) what the training was about.

But, if so few participants can recall one major point that was presented during the previous day's workshop; shouldn't some Business Office Purse-Protector squawk, and ask what the goals of these professional development training programs are?

I believe that it is OK for expenditure-hawks to raise these questions because, after over one quarter of a century of observing these start-of-school professional development rituals; I ask the same questions, too.

The goals of a genuine staff development program must include:

A way to apply the attitude, skill and knowledge so that these become habits

A way to maintain the attitude, skills and knowledge so that the learning doesn't fade

A way to improve the attitude, skills and knowledge once the foundation is set

Institutional support (and reward) for the improvements in attitude, skill and knowledge that were acquired

Empowerment of staff members so that they can do whatever it takes to implement the learned attitude, skill and knowledge for the benefit of students

And, during the training, professional interaction with the course content should include:

Participation

Collaboration

Practice

Reflection

Action Planning

Follow Up Planning

The litmus test for hiring training consultants is to determine if they can apply, analyze and synthesize the following:

The Basic Characteristics of Adult Learning

The Ability to Model Every Single Thing that they are Teaching

Real-World Experience in Delivering Instruction to Real Students related to the Class they are Teaching

Active Learning

Project-Based Learning

Action Planning

Application Follow Up

Follow Up Tracking

Follow Up Evaluation

The consultant's academic degrees have a correlation of "Zero" with actual benefits to students that develop from these opening of school training programs.

Translation: 1.) Students would probably benefit just as much if staff members ate popcorn and watched movies. 2.)

Students would probably benefit more if their teachers designed and constructed bulletin boards in their classrooms with curriculum-related decorations.

Delivering what Teachers Want Teachers are adults and have no interest in re-experiencing the "whole-body" learning of what it is like to sit in one seat for an entire day. Teachers' backsides are no longer conditioned to this abuse since they graduated (escaped).

But, students backsides are miniscule compared to the size of the terrain that pain has available in its romp across the rump of adults; and teachers do not need to be reminded of the fact that petite rhymes with seat, or that pain rhymes with gain.

Summary Effective use of this mandatory professional development time hinges upon the ability of the presenter to turn the corner from an emphasis on teaching (the consultant's) to an emphasis on learning (the staff participants').

The most important characteristic of any program that stands any chance at all of being useful is a change of focus from disseminating knowledge to that of applying, synthesizing and evaluating performance and change.

However, in the case of most consultant presenters, although talk may not come cheap, it is next to useless...unless, of course, the talk is embedded in active, life-changing, habit changing, able-to-apply something tomorrow, and the next day, and the next action plans that are on target for each teacher's needs.

If anyone encounters a truly useful professional development experience this year, please tell up about it. We will be sure to publicize the experience and celebrate the memorable event with you.

But alas, we expect that useful professional development experiences will be as rare as teachers who like and appreciate the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) for all the benefits that the law brings to children.

Friday, June 30, 2006

Feature Article

Incentive Pay Proposal in Texas

The Dallas Morning News ran an online story on June 12, 2006 that should chill the optimism of any Texas educator. <http://tinyurl.com/ecp4z>

The headlines were, "Incentive Pay Enters Classroom."

Holly K. Hacker and Terrence Stutz of The Dallas Morning News report that the State of Texas plans to spend one quarter billion dollars on incentive pay for teachers. This incentive pay will be tied (surprise!) to increases in student test scores.

This is another expedition "deep into the heart of mistakes," but the kind of mistake that we expect when folks who don't know anything about education (legislators/ politicians) meddle therein.

Here is our translation for comments that were included in the article:

"Despite criticism that such plans are largely unproven"

[Translation: Everyone knows that this won't work]

"Over vigorous objections from teacher groups"

[Translation: No need to pay attention to those slackers]

"...the program will push Texas to the forefront of educational excellence."

[Translation: We (lawmakers/ politicians) don't know what to do, so let's throw some money at it and pretend that we did something of value]

"Talented teachers will be more inclined to stay in the profession..."

[Translation: We (lawmakers/ politicians) can't tell the difference between a talented teacher and an armadillo, but we hope that this testing stuff gives us a clue]

"Texas is going to take the national lead in rewarding educational excellence and attracting top-performing teachers to struggling campuses," predicted Mr. Perry [Texas Governor], a longtime advocate of merit pay for teachers who initiated a pilot program for 100 campuses this year.

That \$10 million pilot will be expanded tenfold in the coming school year, with more than a thousand schools – educating mostly lower-income students – expected to join. Bonuses will range from \$3,000 to \$10,000 per teacher. In the 2007-08 school year, a second program, emphasizing improved test scores, will be offered to all school districts. Bonus amounts have not been set."

<http://tinyurl.com/ecp4z>

[Translation: The Texas Governor doesn't have a clue, either. However, he knows that attracting and keeping great teachers is a serious problem.]

Here are some statistics from the article:

Texas has 300,000 teachers

Average teacher salary is under \$42K

A \$10 K bonus could increase some teachers' pay by almost 25%

Nearly half the nation's governors talked about incentive plans in 2005

Merit pay schemes for teachers have been around for 200 years, in this and other countries

"Ms. Shapiro said test scores have to be a big part of the incentive pay plan because there are few objective ways to measure the effectiveness of teachers. She noted that the program also considers other factors, such as teacher evaluations.

We want to see a new philosophy in our schools, one that says you reward your best employees. Those are the teachers who go above and beyond, who make a difference in the lives of children."

Source: Senator Florence Shapiro, R. Plano, the Bill's Author

We would add that there are lots of objective ways to measure teacher performance, but all of these require long-term planning, training, teacher release time, hiring of observers, and a lot more money than one quarter billion dollars. If these politicians knew what they were doing, and wanted to do the job of measuring 300,000 teacher's performance in a fair and supportive manner, one quarter billion dollars would look like "Chump Change."

Here are the main interpretations of the lawmakers/ politicians beliefs:

Most of the state's 300,000 teachers are less than talented

Most of the state's 300,000 teachers are less than dedicated

Teacher performance is somehow, magically, connected to test scores

A new philosophy can overcome issues such as under funding, bureaucratic chain of command, micro managing, and district governance that handcuff teacher empowerment

Teacher arguments against this bill are just as bogus.

"I'm very bothered about the whole premise of paying out money based on performance," said David McClure, a sixth-grader teacher at Davis Intermediate School in Wylie. "If you thought there was cheating now, you wait until money's thrown in the mix."

[Translation: Some teachers don't know how to teach children from lower socioeconomic homes, any more than the lawmakers/ politicians do]

Here are the main opposing points of teachers:

Teachers with seniority will migrate to schools where students are from middle class homes

Only the newest teachers will take jobs in schools for poor students

Money that is intended for instructional materials will be diverted to this program, forcing teachers to spend their bonus money on out-of-pocket purchases of materials for their classrooms

There is no fair way to tag test scores to teaching quality

Teachers of upper and middle class students could do little or nothing and see high test scores

Teachers of lower-socioeconomic students can work brilliantly, effectively and round-the-clock and still see lower test scores than "lazy" teachers for upper class and middle class

Teacher friends of the campus principal can have their class rosters hand-picked, so that their test scores will be higher

Teachers will campaign to get students placed in Special Education classes earlier in the year to protect their incentive pay stipends

Adversarial relationships could develop among teachers, depending upon who gets extra money, and how much "that other lazy slug of a teacher" gets

Different incentive schemes have been tried in Colorado, Florida, Minnesota and Texas, with mixed results

This bill would let each district work out the details differently. This could effect a migration of teachers to neighboring districts that developed a more lucrative and generous (it wouldn't have to be much better) incentive structure

In a state like Texas where First, Second and Twelfth Grade students don't take the high-stakes test, would these teachers be locked out of the incentive pay scheme?

Likewise would Art, Music, PE, Health teachers, Special Education and any secondary subject content teacher who taught a class that was not tested be locked out?

Etc., etc.

Cheating!

The subject of cheating is important. What I am writing next is true, but I am not at liberty to reveal sources (an education specialist in a Texas state senator's office)...

1.) This pilot program has been put on hold.

Reason: Many of the schools that were to be participating in the pilot program were identified for "Testing Irregularities" on the previous state-sponsored high-stakes test

2.) The Texas Education Agency was not going to do anything to investigate these irregularities

Reason Given: There was no money involved in the irregularities at that time

With this bill, money is now involved...

3.) With between \$2,000 and \$10,000 at stake, theft by test fraud would qualify as a State Jail felony

This theft by test fraud would be prosecuted by the White Collar unit of the District Attorney's Office; a unit that many jurisdictions might have to increase in size if this bill were to be implemented and enforcement were to be strict.

4.) If students participate in the test cheating, does that make them accessories to felony theft?

Other information in the article:

609 schools were identified as having testing irregularities during the 2005-06 testing year

In 2003, five percent of elementary schools in Chicago were found cheating, with only incentives, not additional pay at stake

Evidence of cheating was found for Dallas, Houston and a now defunct, Wilmer-Hutchins, and school district during 2004

California tried an incentive program, and there were allegations of cheating. The California program ended because the state ran out of money

Of course, these were only the most egregious cases.

The article states that the "public demands higher achievement from students and schools."

The problem is that these high-stakes tests contain only face validity for what traditional (factory-model classrooms) do, but the tests have no face or content validity for what students need to know or be able to do when they graduate and compete in the work force. The article notes that the No Child Left Behind law also is complicit in the testing debate.

Our Competing Plan!

Our plan calls for a simple solution. Overtime pay for teachers.

If teachers are working above and beyond their regular working hours, then, all they should have to do is turn in a record of the extra hours that they worked, and their stipend would be added to their next paycheck.

Here is the math...

Let's see. 1/4 billion dollars, divided by 300,000 teachers.

Each teacher would get about \$833.

If teachers earned \$20 per hour, they would exceed their quota for extra pay in just less than 42 hours.

If teachers earned \$6.15 per hour, they would work 135 hours before using up their entitlement.

Over a 36 week school year, all a teacher would have to work extra (at \$6.15 per hour) for only 3.7 extra hours a week. At \$20 per hour, the teacher would only have to work a few minutes over an hour a week extra.

What seems like a lot of money to the state doesn't mean much to teachers, since most teachers work well over this amount of time for no additional compensation.

It would be nice if the extra work was recognized and appreciated.

Instead, some folks would like to make teachers "more accountable" to the tests.

But, this is Texas. And, your state has more good sense than to damage our children's future by handcuffing teachers to these tests, doesn't it?

Texas is the place where a local school board would rather fire a teacher for allowing her partner to post topless art pictures on the Flickr(TM) site, but where the state education agency decides not to investigate 609 schools for testing irregularities.

{Note: Texas is a great state, lots of wonderful, big-hearted, warm-hearted, generous, caring people live here. I have lived in Texas for 25 years, and speak from experience.

However, this does not mean that Texas politicians and school districts know what they are doing when it comes to supporting education. In fact, the school finance issue in Texas has been appalling for all of those 25 years.)

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Wednesday, May 31, 2006

Feature Article

Bilingual Programs: Short Shrift as Usual for a Double-Barreled Opportunity

There is a need for quality Bilingual education in many countries including the United States.

But, the delivery of quality, useful, benefiting-our-country learning to our children gets bogged down, side-tracked, subverted and "short-shrifted" by the bureaucracy, just like most other programs.

"A gentleman by the name of Ernesto Ortese, a foreman on the south Texas ranches quoted [sic] as saying, 'My children learn Spanish in school so that they can grow up to be bus boys and waiters. I teach them English at home so they can grow up to be doctors and lawyers.'"

(Thursday, April 30, 1998, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families, Committee on Education and the Workforce, words of Representative Martinez)

(<http://tinyurl.com/jlcu4>)

Aside from the political issues (because there is a perceived connection between the need for Bilingual instruction and immigration in the mind of many citizens), there are basic educational issues that seem to be ignored by almost everyone.

In addition, some "Bilingual" issues are economic, because, in many cases, children with lower English language proficiency will earn less money, particularly in an "Information Economy."

Is Bilingual education responsible for maintaining a large Spanish-speaking underclass?

Here are words from Congressman Martinez at the same House Hearing...

"None of my brothers and sisters went to college. In fact, I was only one of two that graduated high school of ten. But we did all right, and we didn't have bilingual education. But I'll tell you something else, 50 percent of the kids that started with me in kindergarten never finished high school, because they dropped behind because they had English-barrier problems. They dropped behind until they were so frustrated they dropped out.

(Thursday, April 30, 1998, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families, Committee on Education and the Workforce. Words of Representative Martinez)

(<http://tinyurl.com/jlcu4>)

"If you are learning math, you first learn all the terminology in Spanish, Laotian, Tagalog, whatever. Then you have to retranslate it when you are taught it again. Is it any wonder these kids are bombing achievement tests when they are given in English? They are having to learn the subject matter twice.

(Thursday, April 30, 1998, House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Youth and Families, Committee on Education and the Workforce. Words of Mr. Jim Boulet, Executive Director, English First)

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Sunday, April 30, 2006

Feature Article

The Stripes, Spots, and Yellow Streaks of School District Stakeholders

Project managers like to tout their skill in building buy-in among the stakeholders of a project.

Stakeholders are those people who have a stake in the project's success. These people could be anyone who touches (or is impacted by) the project in any way.

Scenario #1:

When the Scenario #1 process is working in a flawed manner, for example, a director decides to implement a new math program, district-wide. A salesperson visited, provided slick brochures, a CD, maybe even a luncheon and a high-pitched sales presentation.

Anyway, the director is "sold" and decides to use "left-over" federal funds to purchase the program. Then, at the start of the next school year, teachers receive training in how to add this supplemental and expensive set of materials to their math classes.

Of course, this is backwards from how this should work, and the implementation of the materials meets with resistance...some subtle, some not so subtle. After a year, no one is using the materials, and the director begins to sweat, a cold sweat fueled by fear. Someone might find out that the project was a complete flop.

Scenario #2:

This time, a new salesperson with another set of materials visits with teachers (maybe a committee) to build buy-in.

Teachers are promised better student scores, access to add-on technology (CDs), and high student interest. Every question that teachers ask is met with a slick redirect, and the sales person, they call him or her the "Closer" overcomes every question that teachers have.

Results: This initiative begins to march in step to the roll out of Scenario #1, and the results are about the same.

After a year, the salesperson visits the district, driving in a new luxury European sedan, and selling a new product.

Scenario #3:

The superintendent puts out the word that directors and principals should look favorably on the products of one particular company. But, the superintendent is very busy, and absent mindedly omits the fact that the salesperson from that company is a brother-in-law.

Wanting to "score points" with the superintendent, principals and directors trip over each other in their scramble to be the first to impress the superintendent with the quantity of their knowledge as measured through the size of their order.

When minimal, even negative results, result; no culpable individual wants to bring accountability measures to the table; and the de facto conspiracy of silence is the traditional group response.

Scenario #4: (Note: This scenario is so pervasive that it is often thought of as standard operating procedure.)

Budgets are devised from a fixed-pot mentality. Folks scramble to spend the money that they were assigned to use last year, making rush-to-spend misjudgments, and avoiding contact with knowledgeable front-line workers (such as teachers) while making purchasing decisions.

Common wisdom dictates that unspent budget money will be taken back the next year, and money cannot be "rolled over." This means that budget managers cannot save up for complex, multi-year projects, and that projects generally must conform to fiscal year time frames. A corollary to this is that most budgets, most projects and many grants are under funded in educational bureaucracies.

Here is what actually affects a project (each allowance should be budgeted):

Estimated cost

Allowance for price increases from the time of proposal until the time of project approval

Allowance for items missed in the original estimation

Allowance for things going wrong

Allowance for additional benefits to be added as they show up to make the project stronger

What is actually budgeted?:

Arbitrary amount of estimated cost, say 80%

Let's say that you pad the project proposal's budget so that you can account for some of the allowances, say 10%.

Then, when the decision-makers cut the project budget by 20% you end up with a project that is 12% short of funds.

Here is the math:

Original project cost:

Actual Amount = 100%

Budget Request = \$100

Padding for allowances:
Padding Multiplier = 10%
Padded Budget Request = \$110

Arbitrary Funding Approval
Project Arbitrary Funding = 80%
Actual Funding Amount = \$88

Actual Shortfall
Actual Shortfall = 12%
Underfunded Amount = \$12

What is pervasive is that legitimate education (and bureaucratic) projects tend to be under funded and under resourced.
-> Sidebar Sidebar

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00

Friday, March 31, 2006

Feature Article

Daily messages, Daily Inspiration, Daily Motivation:

Subtitle:

Treats Hard-Nosed, Street-wise Kids Crave more than Chocolate. Treats for Sweet Kids, Too

This article was reprinted on our Web site. Here is the link.

Note: This page already received search engine referrals, and we are adding the link to avoid creating duplicate content.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 09:00