Saturday, September 30. 2006

News Nuggets

Our States are Falling Behind in Employing High-Quality Teachers!
Subtitle: The Sky is Falling
Everyone knows that our nation has high quality, highly motivated, industrious and over-working teachers who over-deliver student achievement results. Teachers who work under low compensation and even lower appreciation, teachers who work for bureaucracies that under-fund and and under-support instruction...while these same bureaucracies clamor for test score improvements.So, why did the Ben Feller (of the Associated Press) article for the Washington Post look so negative? In this article Mr. Feller summarizes the latest No Child Left Behind (NCLB) data.
Answer: He used a Department of Education Press Release to acquire the "facts" for this story.Link to the original Ed.Gov Press ReleaseMajor findings:
Four states failed to meet even one requirementHawaiiMissouriUtahWisconsin
Seven states were evaluated as having seriously flawed teacher quality programs and face the loss of Federal moneyIdahoIowaMissouriMontanaNebraskaVirginiaWashington
Thirty nine states "tried, but failed" to come up with a good enough plan
Nine states satisfied all the requirementsKansasLouisianaMarylandNevadaNew JerseyNew MexicoOhioSouth CarolinaSouth DakotaWhat does this Mean?"Under the No Child Left Behind law, states were supposed to have highly qualified teachers in every core academic class by the end of the last school year. None made it."Source: Ben Feller, http://articles.news.aol.com/news/_a/review-finds-states-still-fall-short-on/20060816232209990001?_ccc=3&cid=842(Note: This article is no longer posted by AOL™)
With information like this presented by the Washington Post and the Department of Education, you might think that education in this country is disgustingly poor.
But, actually, this commotion is all about making sure that "economically poor " students get highly trained teachers (a goal that everybody wants). Yet, getting highly trained teachers for lower socioeconomic (often minority) students is made more difficult by the insideous affects of the No Child Left Behind Act.The Rest of the StoryWhen you examine this information closely, you find that this "teacher quality" issue is only about some "statistics" that state education agencies were ordered to collect about degrees and professional development for teachers who work with minority students.
What the states failed to do was collect six categories of data in a "bureaucratically significant way", i.e., in a way that was complicated and expensive enough to appease the "Feds."
And the "Feds" can be mean taskmasters...
"The department can withhold money from states that fall short on teacher quality.
Based on a separate review earlier this year, seven states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico face the loss of federal aid if they don't improve their compliance.
Those states are Idaho, Iowa, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Virginia and Washington." Source: Ben Feller, AP http://articles.news.aol.com/news/_a/review-finds-states-still-fall-short-on/20060816232209990001?_ccc=3&cid=842(Note: This article is no longer posted by AOL™)But, why would our Federal Government "badmouth" teachers like this? Why would our Federal Government, a minority investor in our public schools (with a nine percent stake) want to make our nation's schools seem worse than they are?Hidden Agenda As we have speculated before, the answer may be a desire of some politicians to promote "Voucher Programs" so that children can attend private (religious) schools at government expense.
The logic seems designed for something like this...
"Let's show that instruction is horribly bad in our public schools so that we can 'Voucher students' into a backdoor funding ploy for religious schools."
And, if there is any degradation in teacher quality, the "Feds" are complicit in creating the climate for that slide by driving teachers away from teaching lower socioeconomic (minority) students.The Issues Human Nature TermsImagine how much cheating a teacher would promote if each student who achieved a 100% score on the weekly test received $100.00 USD for their effort.
When the stakes are high, motivation soars. And, sometimes this motivation glides under the radar of ethical and moral restraint.
But, what happens if self serving behavior is legal, ethical and moral? Won't people, such as teachers, embark on a course that brings themselves the most advantage?
Here is how the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) subverts education. There are several steps to the process...The Feds pressure school district to increase test scores
District administrators pressure teachers to "increase test scores"
Quality teachers bail out (transfer) from sites where delivering high test scores is more difficult (such as in schools filled with lower socioeconomic status students

Quality teachers, (under-compensated, over-worked) look for easier places to increase test scores (by teaching the more affluent)...or leave teaching altogether
The Feds cite states (and individual school districts) for failing to live up to the bureaucratic letter of the NCLB Law
The US Department of Education berates states and pillories teachers
So, there is increased pressure from the hollowed [sic] halls of Congress for voucher programs and "competition" for our public schoolsSidebarOf course the professional political proponents of this benighted course of educational interference take extraordinary steps to quench any competition for themselves. Our Federal bureaucracy needs competition, especially in the form of common sense.Wild FantasyImagine the mad dash to increase federal funding for education by certain incumbents if a new category of support for religious schools were to become constitutional.
But, this is idle speculation because these zealots would have to complete this shell game before November 2006, because a number of them won't make another term.
But, let's offer (tongue in cheek) a strategy of allowing the federal funding for religious schools. Why. Because this would be the best way to ride on the coat tails of the religius schools to flush funding of public education.
Sure, the public schools would only get crumbs while the religious schools got loaves. But, those crumbs would be a lot more than the "Feds" deliver, now.
Even better, once their real agenda (i.e., increasing funding for religious schools) were achieved, the "Feds" could drop the pretense of the No Child Left Behind law, and stop one source of their interference with education.What Education is Really AboutTo end this article on a positive note, let's consider the wisdom of a single sentence from an 11 year old student in Mexico who seems to have more insight into education than the whole pack of our politicians combined..."The teacher is to the students what the rain is to the field."Zaira Alexandra Rodriguez Guijarro, age 11, (Mexico)
Source: UNESCO (1996) What makes a good teacher? Paris: UNESCO
http://www.unicef.org/teachers/teacher/teacher.htm
Enough said!

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in News Nuggets at 11:00

Short Article

For Students of the Television Generation: Pitch your Content Area "Production"
Knowledge for its own sake?
For your students, the "joy-of-learning-just-to-learn" concept went out with Welfare, the Social Safety Net, and universal health care.Today's students (of video game carpal thumb, television trance and Internet fame) are trained from toddler-hood to hold a ten second mental focus. This is about the longest amount of time before the television image changes. Some people think that this generation's attention span is "short". In reality, their attention span is "fast-paced and dynamic."
So what's a stodgy, over-twenty-nine-ish codger/ dowager-of-a-teacher to do?
Compete, that's what.
New "Lesson Cycle" RulesReplace your academic, facts-first, the-truth-behind-the-rest-of-the-story approach with instructional delivery that "rocks."
Even though you think that your words of wisdom are pearly-delights, your students find ordinarily lesson drivel to be lifeless, tasteless, boring and irrelevant to their lives.
And, students have heard so much about the "high-stakes-test" that "fear of the test" offers only "ho-hum" incentive or motivation for them.
But, get off the couch-potato side of the tube, and merge with your onscreen personality. Pitch your product so that your students' attention is captivated.
The Pitchman ComethNotice that high-budget movies come out with a bang, not a pop, crackle, snap or sizzle. The flashy promo is called a "trailer."
No, you can't go "mano a mano" with the scantily-clad pretty people in the movies...well, maybe you can, but your job tenure will be shorter than your outfit.
Instead, train a dynamic voice, grab your students' attention with tasteful (but vibrant and exciting) mental images. Pique your students' curiosity about the upcoming lesson...it is a to-be-continued serial lesson, isn't it? If your lesson isn't a "To be continued" lesson, it needs to be. (Or maximum student attention "Will be not upon thee.")
Your lessons can be exciting and relevant if you are sensitive (i.e., listen between the lines); and if you emote with empathy with your students and the challenges of their daily lives. Soap Operas are popular because they mirror the drama of people's lives. Students can identify with your lessons if your lessons mimic a soap opera.
Tell a StoryAny lesson can be enhanced, spiced up, pitched...if you add human interest and drama.
This does not take more work. If you don't know enough facts to create "docu-drama," create fiction.
Let's take a boring, lifeless formula in a math or science class as an example.
You could write the formula on the board and order the students to memorize it because the formula will be on the chapter test, or more irrelevantly, on the high-stakes test.

Or, you could describe a the life of the scientist who discovered or solved this formula, spicing up the details about his "pathetic little life" or the intrigue worked against him by his enemies or competitors (docu-drama).
Or, you could make up a story about how a private detective, cop or wrongly-accused suspect solves the case with the simple knowledge of this formula (fiction).
Use DialogUsing dialog during lesson delivery covers any number of students' attention sins caused by lagging, late in the day energy and excitement. Your morning's live-wire energy looses voltage, your spark runs out, and reception for your message fades. But, bring dialog into your instructional delivery production to perform a dramatic rescue.
Dialog does not have to be accent-laden, does not have to be voice and gender perfect and does not have to be an actor-quality rendition of reality. You can achieve riveting results by just stepping from one side to the other or turning one way and the other to simulate both speakers...while slightly altering your voice. Or, you can get a student to ad lib one part of the dialog with you.
Even better, each time you change character, position, speaking voice or the pace of the performance...you increase your students' memory and recall of the information.
A Little Sugar (or Spice) goes a Long WayIf you make the "trailer" for your lesson a multimedia, over-the-top, Tony-winning production; what will you do to deliver the same (or better) performance for the real lesson?
Meeting expectations is key to your fame and key to the success of your on-stage approach to teaching. In fact, like in business, you have to over deliver, i.e., exceed expectations, just to stay in the game.
You over deliver by using only enough spice to keep your students attention riveted and focused upon your lesson. You can't top "over the top" very often. And, if you get carried away with this, you can train students so that instead of just wanting "salty", they will demand "salacious."
So, leave a lot to your students' imaginations. Spice up your instructional productions, but spice with a light touch. Use a "pinch" of excitement, not a spoon or a scoop. Make each teaching production a "moment to treasure", a bright-spot memorable dot on the screens of your students' imaginations.
On with the show!

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Short Article at 10:00

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.
SidebarNote: 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 ThinkingCreativityIntuitionProblem-solvingDecision-makingCommunicationCollaborationNegotiationProject ManagementPresentation DeliveryPositive Self-help Belief SystemsMorals and EthicsTeachers 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 FeedbackChecking 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)SidebarClose 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" classroomSidebarAlmost 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 tutoringMaster 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 ImperativeCollecting 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. AssessmentFeedback 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."GradingThere 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 gradingIntegration with paper and pencil testsCollection of district-wide benchmark test scoresAllowing even shy students to participateAnother 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.SidebarGrading, the burner of every teachers' 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 IssuesDelivering 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 PracticesRemember 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.SidebarAdministrators 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 timeMulti-step thinking is more important than "one-step-recall"
Student Responses consist of more than answers to questionsVotingPrioritizingAssociatingSurveyingDecidingSpeculatingQuestion 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 motivatingHomework should never be an excuse to trick parents into providing the tutoring that the school district failed to fundHow 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.

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

Quick Tips

Prepared for the Weekend?
Monday morning needs to find teachers vitalized, refreshed, energized, vibrant, dynamic and recharged as they return to school.Teachers need to face the workweek with high-intensity happy smiles...made possible because the weekend was delightful, stress-free, and devoid of school-task drudgery.
Your task, Mission Possible, if you choose to accept it, is to replace patterns of weekend stress with relaxation and enjoyment.Changes Needed?
Figure out a way to move, schedule, and contain all classroom-related labors to the weekdays...place that "overweight workload" on a diet.
If you were told that you would be fired unless you found a way to do all your work during the "work week", you would find a way.
So, now is the time to develop strategies for placing school work "off limits" for the weekend. Your eventual goal is to develop habits and procedures that allow you to leaving all school work at school where it belongs.Timely Tips
Here are some tips to get you started in converting you weekend into the relaxing resource that it was designed for...
Visit a museum, cultural center, or the tourist attractions that everybody but the locals frequent
Go outside to a park. Picnic next to a pond, lake or stream
Do something nice for yourself, get a haircut, buy some new clothes
Take a "spur of the moment", "get up and go" trip
Sleep late, if you can. If not, get up at your accustomed time, breakfast, then take a nap (See Footnote below)
Give yourself an "Exempt from Homework" certificates, and cash them in
Note: Do Not log in and check your district's E-mailProductivity Paradox
The "Math" doesn't add up, but the stress does.
You can complete more work in five days than you can in seven.
But, as you string together week after week of seven-day work Marathons, you become WEAK.Other Suggestions
On Sunday, get your clothes ready for the work week. Shine your shoes
Minimize weekend planning and make choices spontaneously
Exercise, take a walk
Keep televised sports watching under control. Set a reasonable time limit
Avoid binge drinking and late-night partying
Keep your use of caffeine and nicotine under control
You will find that you have more energy at the end of the workweek if you start fresh and refreshed on Monday. Enjoy your weekend.
Footnote:
Some people find that they experience a headache and feel groggy if they sleep late on weekends. If this is you, you can easily circumvent the headaches by getting up at your habitual time. You should be ready for a nap in about 90 to 120 minutes. Give in to the urge, and indulge yourself in some quality sleep. Pleasant dreams...

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Quick Tips at 08:00

Top Tips

Classroom Layout and Design: It's not too Late
School has started. Is it too late to make changes to your classroom's layout and design?Not if you do it step-by-step. Not if you and your students think differently.
And, you may be able to motivate your students toward increased achievement and stimulate your students sense of mastery over their environment.Change PsychologyChange psychology involves both the cognitive reframing of the changes, and the physical labor of moving things.
Stress is generated when anything changes because adjustments now take effort. There is little or no stress when our minds are on automatic habit-pilot. But, when things change, we have to think and adjust.
But, a corollary to the stress of change is the "Hawthorne Effect." This is the tendency for motivation (and output) to improve when people believe that they are treated as "special."
Using the Hawthorne Effect by making your students feel special (you are doing that anyway) is easy because you just have to leave indirect hints that the changes are experiments to see how changes affect a (special, top performing, motivated, street smart, you fill in the descriptor of your students) group.
Even if the change fails, or if the change proves to be more trouble than benefit; there are payoffs to your students (knowing, believing , feeling, acting like) they are special.Historical Goals for ChangeThe goals for our classrooms have not changed since the days when rows of desks were screwed to the floor, i.e., to maximize learning for every student. But the teaching environment has become more dynamic, and even full-sized rooms seem small if a sector must be reserved for every instructional activity and function.
Amazing when you realize that the attached to the floor, teacher-only-talked factory school design (comfortably?) accommodated a class size of 45 students.The answer: Modular Design.Of course some restraints exist that prevent complete adaptability. For example, the location of data ports and power outlets, projection screens, windows (this is not referring to the operating system on the computer), doors and bulletin boards.
For course, a modular design for classroom components is consistent with Classroom Toolkit's recommendation for the modular design (and use) of instructional materials. (See our Instructional Management page on the Classroom Toolkit site.
On the face of it (face validity), classroom layout and design would seem to be "space", but, in reality a more effective focus is on time and use.
What is the timeline of learning experiences? What delivery mode will the time accommodate? Choices include: whole group, small group, learning center, individual work or individual or group conferences, group projects...
"What uses will the time be put to?"
Answer these kinds of questions, and space will coalesce around time and use. Focus upon space, and there will never be enough. Focus upon use, and there will never be enough time, but there will be plenty of space.Focal PointsIn the old days, the teacher's desk was the focal point of the classroom, and the desk needed to be placed in the front of the classroom (for control and authority purposes). Today, the teacher's desk could be placed at the side, or even in the back of the class.
In the control days, students could not sit at the teacher's desk, and could only approach when invited. Today, a "student teacher" (one of the students) may be assigned as a classroom helper and be found using the desk.
The classroom library is a recommended focal point (see Classroom Newsletter article Develop or Upgrade your Classroom Library Multi-Use AreasWhat are some multi-use areas that you can create in your classroom?
Choices come as fast as you can imagine them. Here are some ideas:Library
Learning Centers
Conference Center
Study Hall
Laboratory
Office Complex
Research Park
Employment Office
Brokerage
Lounge
Retreat Center
Store
Bank
Auction Barn or Trading Floor
Jail (Just kidding!)
Church (You'll loose your job)Further ResearchDan Butin of the University of Virginia offers a comprehensive four page white paper for the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities. Link to the Classrooms article.
Suggestions found in Dan Butin's article include:Allow 20 sq. feet (5' x 4') for each computer, table and chair. A classroom may need 15% more space to accommodate technology needs
Wall mount a television, VCR and DVD.

Consider access to outdoors as a part of the room plan. (Note: Remember the Naturalistic Multiple Intelligence) (Quip: And you thought that being sentenced to a portable building just meant that you didn't have any seniority on the campus, or that the principal had it in for you.)
For areas with sliding walls (to facilitate team teaching) ensure that the walls are composed of acoustic material to deaden the sounds that emanate from the other space.Creative ThinkingDuring the era of "Open Concept" schools, teachers used book shelves, desks, dividers, boxes, curtains and other devices to partition the space into their own "room."
Now, with walled rooms in vogue, teachers can consider the hallways outside, the library, gym, computer lab and any other space as another "schedule-able classroom annex."Involve StudentsInvolve students in the design and planning of their classroom's space and time, and when you can accept their suggestions, do. And, train students to a schedule of time use at a certain space. (Ordinarily, students are trained for a subject/ content area association for time (i.e., a schedule).
When students are interact with learning activities and each other, as they manipulate time and space, as they focus upon feeling special, and as they integrate activity and outcome...they develop a sense of mastery of their world. Show students how, when they hold their attention upon their intention to learn; that time and space seem to mold experience so that there is an abundance of each.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Top Tips at 07:00

Teacher Resources

Free E-mail for your School (Or your Classroom)Do you want to put up with some advertising so you can have a safe, kid-friendly E-mail system for your entire classroom?Then, register for the free service at Gaggle.Net™ Unfortunately, your school has to register for this service, but with over 12,000 schools registered, the process cannot be that difficult to get approved.Why Kid-Safe E-MailStudents like E-mail and they will use E-mail to communicate. And, there are many learning tasks and classroom projects that you can assign. Easy E-mail options include:Daily media projectsE-mail mentoringElectronic Pen Pals (ePals)Subscriptions to electronic newsletters and magazinesKid-safe chat roomsCreative roll playing with students taking on online personas
Your students can even use their "Kid Safe" accounts from home.What does "Kid Safe" Mean?Gaggle.Net™ provides a number of "Kid Safe" benefits, even for the free subscription. These include:Pornography ProtectionVirus ProtectionSpam ProtectionE-mail and Text FilteringTeacher Controlled Chat RoomsMonitored Message BoardsAccess from Any Internet-Connected ComputerSpell CheckingFiltered Digital File StorageBasic Web Hosting and Classroom Profile PagesSchool and Classroom CalendarsAnd, don't worry about the advertising. As well as being age appropriate, students respond to it much like they respond to monotone teacher lectures, they tune most of it out.Is it Really Free?Gaggle.Net offers three subscription versions, including a truly free (of cost) service. Of course, the free service is what subjects your students to online advertising.
If your school wants to avoid the advertising, your school can pay for the upgraded service and remove the ads.
Your school district can also apply for discounts for this service through the e-Rate program. (See your district's Technology Director concerning district eligibility for this discount. But, don't hold your breath. The federal e-Rate program route will take almost a year before you see benefits. So, you could expect discounts as early as the 2007-08 school year.)For More Information...Link to what other teacher have to say about the service.
Link to the Gaggle.Net flyer
Here is a link to the features that Gagele.Net™ offers.
Link to the Gaggle.Net™ sign up page.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Teacher Resources at 06:00

Book Review

Mapping Inner SpaceAuthor: Margulies, Nancy with Maal, NusaISBN: 1-56976-138-8Format: SoftcoverPub. Date: 2002Publisher: Chicago: Zephyr PressPages: 159Cost: $32.95 (List)Available: Amazon at as low as $20.76 (new) - No used copies at eBay™Subtitle: Learning and Teaching Visual MappingThe Books' Topics:Finding and Creating Symbols
Applications of Mind Maps
Mapping with Students
Discovering your Inner CapacitiesThe central themes of this book are:Everyone engages in some level of visual thought, and Mind Mapping taps this learning resource
Improved results with Mind Maps blossom with practice
Mind Maps assist in developing your inner capacities
Mind mapping techniques can be taught to young children, older children and adults

Effective mapping is a process, and artistic quality maps are not required in order to be used as effective learning and communication toolsKeywords:Knowing and Sensing
Activating Thinking Skills
Learning in Context
Improving Study Skills
Stress and Learning
Mapping and Sharing what we LearnMain Idea:Visual thought is a foundation of thinking and learning, and Mind Maps can solidify the learning and thinking process.
Mind maps communicate complex relationships and make cognition and constructs concrete and explicit
Learning and knowing can be shared with visual strategies that draw on patterns, symbols and the inner dynamics of thought.
Phases in Mind Mapping Include:Generate the Central Map
Draw a central image and add key words
Associate
Add branches with more ideas. Brainstorm
Review
Check the overall pattern of the map and add new ideas
Incubate
Do something else, then return with a different perspective
Organize
Prioritize and highlight. Regroup ideas
Add symbols, image, arrows and lines to increase meaning and impact
Redraw Map
Redraw the map with the new organization and structure
Quotes:"Before we establish language, we visualize pictures in our minds and link them as concepts. Throughout our lives, the inner knowing that we sometimes call intuition appears as an image or sensation long before we articulate it in words. Unfortunately, we often block the creative channels by training children to write only words, monochromatically, on lined paper. Now that many educators are aware of the value of nurturing thinking skills and creativity, we can employ systems like visual mapping that don't restrict, but rather promote, creative thinking." (p. - 12)
"We now understand that the notion of right and left hemispheres each handling specific task is far too simple to explain the workings of our brains." (p. - 12)
"Most people report that note taking is frustrating, and many have so much trouble reading their own handwriting that they never bother to refer to their notes again." (p.- 18)
"We think we see, but what we usually do is recognize, and then continue looking at what we think we know. This process helps us store data in simplified forms." (p. - 80)
"...Mind Mapping uses key words and does not require the use of phrases, or even a knowledge of grammar. Thus, children who haven't developed writing skills and students for whom English is a second language can use mapping successfully." (p. - 88)
"...one style of thinking is more active when we are writing words on lines because this style deals with words and placing things in order. The other style is more Mind Map--like, using symbols and colorful pictures, and creating new ideas that are not in any special order. Mapping and writing together help us use more of our brain power." (p. -100)
"Our own limiting beliefs often pose a barrier to using our intuition and imagination fully. Most of us do not want to put our faith in our intuitive senses and have trouble accepting credit when our hunches turn out to be accurate." (p. -138)
"The best way to become a skilled visual mapper is to practice. Teaching mapping to others will anchor the learning....Your own capacity to make connections and think creativity will increase, as ill your ability to see and record the systems within systems that make up our world." (p. - 152)Issues Addressed by the Book:This book focuses upon the visual aspect of conceptualization, and focuses upon the visual connections associated with learning.
The book also focuses upon methods for teaching the Mind Mapping process to young children, to older children, to business and professional people, and adults. The book demonstrates how the Mind Mapping process is useful for presenters.The Book's Shortcomings:The book models visual communication, and therefore is difficult to "read." Normal speed reading and scanning skills are slow going.
The book presents learning in a (graphical) artistic manner, but does not explore technology solutions for Mind Mapping such as the freeware, Open Source, and commercial products that are available to help us less artistic (and more in a hurry) teachers. (See our article on the free Visual Thought™ program in this issue of Classroom Toolkit.)
The book could have emphasized that visual learning is dynamic, not static, as the book's Mind Map drawings seem to demonstrate.
The book also fails to mention that the reason that people don't review lecture notes is that they don't have the time. If people don't have the time to scan lecture notes, how will they find the time to work through the notes at least once to re-conceptualize and redraw the concepts on a new map? It is possible that mental rehearsal of the redrawing of concepts would increase learning as much as physically drawing a second or third draft of the notes.
Of course, creating Mind Maps during the planning of a presentation, and sharing the Maps during the presentation will

clarify the purpose and the concepts that the presenter wishes to communicate. Still, rather than scanning an elaborate and cluttered Mind Map, a presenter (who will be using electronic slide projection) can streamline the presentation process by creating the Mind Maps with software.
The only drawback of creating Mind Maps by using computer software is the loss of hands-on, tactile, kinesthetic and proprioceptive stimulation that occurs from drawing by hand.Comments:"Reading" this book presents an excellent exercise (and conceptual challenge) for teachers as they peer through a window into how at least one quarter of their students process information (visually).
The book's conceptualization could have been strengthened by mentioning that internal images contain sound, smell, taste, sensations, feelings, self-talk and words; not just visual images.
The author's ideas also would be stronger if she explained that a static drawing represents a minor subset of the rich, dynamic and multisensory internal pictures that many people think with.Summary: This is a book that is meant to be perused and explored, not studied and memorized. Look for inspiration and insight, not information. Use the examples and create maps of your own.Rating (Four Point scale):Useful - 4Applicable - 4Relevant - 3Innovative - 4Original - 3Interesting - 3_____Overall Rating - 3.5

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Book Review at 05:00

Site Strategy

Free Graphic Organizer CD Available OnlineDownload your No-Cost Copy and Share the CD with your ColleaguesClassroom Toolkit's Graphics Organizer CD is available for download.
This CD is in the "ISO" format. This means that you can download the "ISO" file, and use free software (if your CD burner software doesn't support creating CDs from the ISO-file format) to create the CD.
This system allows creating the CD with just one step following the download. And, the CD that is created is a full working copy of the original CD.
Link to the Graphics Organizer "ISO" FileThe ISO file is actually an "image" of the CD. This file is posted at:Link to the Graphic Organizer ISO image file.
Link to the site to download the ISO to CD Burning Program.Be sure to read the version descriptions of the ISO to CD Burning Program carefully, and choose the version that is right for your computer's operating system.What's on the CD?The CD that you create will self-start when you place it in the CD drive's tray.
The CD will start what looks like a Website (actually, the CD file structure is built like a Website), and a connection to the Internet is not needed to copy, print or use the Graphic Organizers.
The Website format of the CD serves as an Index and Table of Contents so that you can find the Graphic Organizers, lesson plans and Presetations quickly.
The CD also contains links to free, Open Source, trial software, and software file viewers that are a toolkit for the use and creation of Graphic Organizers.
The computer that is reading these links does have to connect to the Internet to download the free software.Other ContentsThe CD also contains presentations, lesson plans and other materials.Why an "ISO" CD?This CD is sold at cost on eBay™ as self-supporting advertising to publicize our Website and the Open Source Movement.
Most of the contents on the CD are found on our Website.
But, this "ISO" image allows a complete download in one (walk away and come back later, depending on your connection's download speed) step.
Be sure to use a broadband connection, or be prepared for a long download since the "ISO" file is 145 MB's in size.Link to a description of the Graphic Organizer CD on eBay™.
But, there are eBay™ listing costs, PayPal™ transaction costs, production costs and shipping costs associated with eBay™.
Distribution through the ISO-download bypasses all those costs. Use the "ISO" strategy and obtain the CD for free.
And, pass the links (or copies of the CD) to your friends and colleagues. Even tell your district's Webmaster about the links after you check out how useful the CD proves to be.
To add extra value to the eBay™ offer, the CD contains actual copies of the Open Source, freeware, trial, and file viewer software. The "ISO" image file only contains links to this software. But, this saves about 445 MB's in file size.Our Next "ISO" CDWe have begun converting another CD, Teacher Time Savers to the "ISO" image format.
This conversion should be complete in time to be included in our next newsletter.
There are lots of Open Source and other software applications on this CD, and each one is listed in the menu...that the conversion is time intensive.Link to the description of the Teacher Time Savers CD on eBay™.Note:Almost all of the files on these CDs are available for individual download on the Classroom Toolkit Website.
Try the "ISO" CD strategy and look on our Website for free materials that you can use.
And, send an E-mail message now, to tell your friends and colleagues about these free, time-saving instructional materials.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Site Progress at 04:00

Open Source for Education

Visual Thought™ - A Free Mapping and Diagramming ToolVisual Thought™ is actually "Freeware" rather than an Open Source program. (The difference is in the wording of the license).Classroom Toolkit is reviewing this program to coincide with our book review of Mapping Inner Space in this issue.
The practical difference between an Open Source program and this freeware program is that you can download and use the Visual Thought™ program without cost for only the next 13 years. After 13 years, the license will run out and you will have to uninstall it...but in the meantime, you can use a mapping, diagramming and flow-chart making program for free.
Look at what this program can do...

Even more amazing, the objects that you create with the program can be connected with "Smart Connectors." Smart connectors are lines that stay connected, even when you move the object around on the screen.
How to Get this ProgramLink to download the Visual Thought™ program.
Link to download the Visual Thought™ documentation.What Else Do you Need to KnowBecause the Visual Thought™ program requires a license key, you have to enter one after you install the program.
But, installing the license key is done with a separate program, not through the Help Menu.
When you start the Visual Thought™ program through the Program Files menu, start the Admin applet, instead.

Then, enter the following key in the rectangular block...

License Key to enter: 0356 9674 3262 8895 9914 96
That's it.
Now you and your students can use the Visual Thought™ program to diagram all sorts of documents, presentation, Web pages, notes and drawings.
You will find multiple uses for this program, particularly when you capture portions of the drawing on screen with a screen capture utility program. The power of the Visual Thought™ program is in its rapid drawing and editing capacity.
For a listing of free screen snapshot programs, visit, Ask.Com's free Screen Capture directory.
Happy Snapping!

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Open Source at 03:00