

Friday, October 31, 2008

News Nuggets

Campaign Buttons?: Not on our Campus!

The chancellor of the New York City School System promulgated a memo reminding system staff that political paraphernalia could not be worn at school. He sent this memo in response to the truckloads of campaign buttons that the teachers' union sent to the schools to promote their favorite candidate.

Of course, this action reached the national news, and the chancellor took flack from both political camps…as well as free speech advocates, anarchists, religious rights groups and atheists.

The memo pointed out that the NYC Schools have a long-standing policy that prohibits the display of campaign artifacts. However, there had been lax enforcement of these rules until the teachers' union pushed the issues to the limit. Where do Self-Expression Prohibitions End? Should children discuss politics and national issues in school?

Of course, since the candidates often skirt these concerns in favor of spin that is designed to avoid angering anyone. But, should teachers say what candidate they favor, even with non-verbal button?

And, if it is non-verbal, how can it be free speech?

And what are the boundaries? For example, students know which teachers drive what cars. Can a teacher place a candidates bumper sticker on his or her car, and park the car in the school parking lot?

Or, does the teacher have to park said car outside the campus fence?

And, if the car must be parked outside the campus fence, how far away from school property? What other Speech is Protected? What other speech is "protected speech?"

What about religious speech?

For example, a cross is worn not far from where a campaign button might located. Is the cross OK, but the button outlawed.

And, if the cross is OK, what about a crucifix?

Schools have dress codes about Tee-shirts that use harsh, profane or other "disruptive" language.

Images of devils, demons are prohibited, and students were even banned from wearing Tee-shirts with Darth Maul, the Sith apprentice in George Lucas' movie, The Phantom Menace. The reason, he had a red and black face and small horns.

But the crucifix, depicts torture. Why should that be allowed?

And isn't a crucifixion multiple levels of magnitude worse than water boarding?

And, what if someone expresses anti-abortion sentiments. Could they make the case that abortion kills just as dead as crucifixion? But, couldn't another person make the case that the unborn fetus is a lesser person than a person that was born, and therefore it is OK to kill them> Doesn't breathing oxygen from the air instead of from a liquid or a tube confer civil rights that are absent from earlier, metamorphic stages? Where do the Rules Stop? Wicca is an established religion, probably founded before Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And Satanic Churches obtain tax deductions because they represent a legitimate religion.

However, some schools may still prohibit Muslim girls from wearing head scarves. How is a head scarf disruptive to the campus learning environment? Extremists to the Rescue Rational people, good natured and tolerant, are content to allow others to express their views and opinions. These folks just don't want other people to bother them. A Satanist is OK, as long as they don't sacrifice your pet black cat on Halloween.

But extremists hold a stricter agenda. They want to control other peoples' behavior, and they wish that they could control other people's thinking. They want other people to think in a manner similar to the way that they think.

So, while most people are content to let others alone, extremists keep churning until they get their own way. Absent: Good Sense and Sound Judgment People of gentle disposition wish that others operated with a level of tolerance and decorum.

Unfortunately, the folks that set the rules and draw the boundaries might favor one political party or another, might favor one religion over others.

So, who wants politicians to make rules about our schools, especially folks who have another political affiliation or religion than we do?

On the other hand, if we need to keep partisanship, bigotry and poor judgment out of our schools; someone has to set rules.

Let's just hope that whoever sets the rules allows out teachers to model freedom, tolerance and respect for others; and let's hope that our teachers make decisions based upon an open minded assessment of what is best for our nation's children.

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

Short Article

Students (and Teachers) "No-Excuse Zone"

Teachers need to model the "No-Excuse Zone" habit if they expect students to extinguish students' lethargic and excuse-giving behaviors. The reason for adopting the "No-Excuse Zone" response to students' excuses is that learning is easy, and because excuses have no place in describing a learning situation. Limited learning is an artificial construct, and excuses should not be used to explain away sub-standard effort or student disinterest. What are those Excuses? EXCUSE #1: "I don't have any good ideas."

FACT: Ideas are abundant and never were in short supply at any time.

Evolution prompted our ancestors to think, learn, create, invent, problem-solve, make decisions…so the capacity to develop new ideas is hard-wired into our genes.

Prompts to new ideas sprout in our minds like weeds in a garden.

And, the ability to produce new ideas is multi-dimensional. Each of the Multiple Intelligences (that think through us) produces a new slant on a similar concept. In fact, each idea has seven or more renderings in our imagination and experience systems.

In addition, each person is unique and benefits from a constellation of unique experiences…this makes our ideas different than every other persons, even if six billion people now live on Planet Earth.

The statement, "I don't have any (new, good) ideas" is pure bunk.

EXCUSE #2: "I'm not good at (an expert) at anything."

OK. So, what's stopping you from putting in the effort to become good at something on your way to expert status?

And you are in good company. Successful people always believe that they don't know very much because they realize that there is more to learn than anyone could possibly know.

But an expanding Internet Universe of knowledge is not an excuse for failing to apply yourself to a learning task.

So, think like daydreamer and a procrastinator. But think later, after you do something.

EXCUSE #3: "I'm not a skilled (technical, computer) person, so I am not able to do this."

"Skilled" and "technical" are matters of degree.

You can't type 120 words a minute, but you can "hunt and peck" five words a minute.

You can't recite the Rubyat from memory on national television, but you can talk to a group of students using phrases on note cards to jog your memory.

You can't run a sub four-minute mile, but you can walk, hop, crawl, roll or navigate your personal power chair somewhere.

The point: You can do something. So do it.

EXCUSE #4: "Learning this seems like it's going to take a long time, I just don't think I can finish it."

It is going to take a long time compared to what?

It will definitely take a longer time, if by this time (tomorrow, next week, next month, next year), you have done nothing about it.

A vehicle that sits in the driveway or garage gets zero miles to the gallon. (In fact, since a bit of gasoline evaporates as the vehicle sits for an extended period of time, gasoline decreases while movement remains non-existent.

Whether the learning or the learning task takes a long time is only a matter of perception.

Sure, it will require effort, energy and commitment. But, without starting; that level of effort, energy and commitment for the undone task will remain exactly the same.

However, if you get in gear and complete even a small portion of the task today, the remaining task will be less by tomorrow.

EXCUSE #5: "Rome wasn't built in a day."

Maybe not, but it was built.

Someone started. And someone else built on top of what earlier folks built.

We start with huge advantages because we have lots of resources, ideas and structures to build upon.

So, ignore this lazy, lame excuse of an excuse and get busy.

Summary

When students and teacher enter the "No-Excuse Zone," they meet the "tough-love" philosophy that ignores their excuses and tells them to "Get busy."

Whether the excuse giver is a perfectionist who is afraid to start because the results "Won't be good enough;" or whether the person is "just plain lazy," the return response is the same.

"Get to work. Your excuses gain no traction here."

"This is a "No-Excuse Zone."

"No parking is allowed."

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

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...

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.

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

Quick Tips

Custom Guides Free Offer

Take advantage of a month of free, "no-strings-attached" training from Custom Guides. This offer includes online tutorials and the ability to print computer software study sheets. There are a number of resources including:

Printable Study Guides

Printable posters advertising your training program

Printable Reminders that can be placed on monitors in a computer lab

Printable postcards that advertise your training to parents and community members You do have to sign up for the month of free access, so, you might like to sign up for the online tutorials test site that Classroom Toolkit set up. Then, sign up for your own site later in November so that you can take advantage of the training when you or on vacation.

Full Access to Quality Training You have full access to all Online Software Training and Skills Assessments – and you can create your own custom courses.

The price for a single user is \$95.00 per year, a bargain if you actually want to study software applications from Microsoft.

Other costs are on a sliding scale. Price points include: \$3,000 for 50 concurrent users (\$60.00 each), and \$15,000 for 500 users (\$30.00 each).

However, the Custom Guides Quick Reference Cards are free. Just download and print them.

These Quick Reference Cards are available for:MS™ Access 2003 & 2007

MS™ Excel 2003 & 2007

MS™ Outlook 2003 & 2007

MS™ PowerPoint 2003 and 2007

MS™ Project 2003 & 2007

MS™ Word 2003 & 2007

MS™ Windows Xp

MS™ Windows VistaAnd the Quick References are automatically branded with your Logo and the link to the tutorial site that the Custom Guide software sets up for your users.

And you can customize the available posters with your own Logo and district contact information.The Software Only Training ProblemClassroom Toolkit identifies software only training, in lieu of curriculum-based technology professional development as one of the distractions that contributed to the failed Technology Integration Movement.

So, we are not recommending wholesale use of this online training tool as legitimate professional development.

However, the training is high quality and extensive (extensive means 140 or more modules). The training is narrated, and responses are required to proceed from lesson to lesson.

The other side of using these lessons is that teachers know how to do a lot of the operations that are in the training program. This makes the beginning lessons boring.

So, a teacher with a moderate level of sophistication might start somewhere in the middle of the software course, or might only choose items from the tutorial that he or she wants to learn about.Timing is EverythingYou can receive 30

days of free online training, but you don't have the time, now. If you wait until the end of November, you might get some of the 30 days to use the training during the winter holidays.

However, if you wait until the end of November, Custom Guide may not renew the promotion, and you might not get any free training.

Of course, teachers seldom have free time, and holiday time is best dedicated to family and friends.

So, take advantage of this free training offer whenever you can.Check out the Quality of this TrainingClick Here to see what Online Learning could be created for your campus or school district.

Click here to set up a learning access site of your own.Other Uses for the TrainingSchool districts could leverage the investment in these training resources by using the software for computer applications classes during the day, and for GED and Community Education classes in the evening.

In this way, the GED and Community Education class fees might subsidize the use of the software for the daytime classes.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter at 08:00

Teacher Survival Strategies

The "90% Solution"

Teachers complain that they want a 100% solution because they can't leave any child behind (bad pun intended).

They also note that administrators frown on leaving any child (or group of children) in the lurch, and focusing upon only the students that are close to passing the high-stakes test offers a disservice to every other student.But the "90% Solution" is not about students at all. The "90% Solution" is about perfecting your abilities and becoming a Master Teacher.

And, the "90% Solution" is not more of the "You have to give 110% to your job, to accomplish more" motivational "trash-talk."

Implementing the "90% Solution" in your teaching actually streamlines your workload and focuses your efforts; giving you more time for your family and other quality endeavors.

What is the "90% Solution?"

The "90% Solution" is a strategy of perfecting one important teaching skill at a time. The "90% Solution" is learning to implement one technique very well…practicing until you are an expert at it.

Of course, you maintain your level of quality performance in everything else that you do. You just single out one strategic area and do what it takes to improve in that one area.Sounds Easier than it IsThe idea here is to concentrate, focus…easy for teachers, right?

But, other inviting strategies (distractions) must be ignored. New "magic bullet" solutions, even those high-prices speakers and acclaimed authors…concepts and innovations with promises that fire you up with enthusiasm. You must ignore them. Maybe you can implement these later, if you need to.

And, the professional development training that you are ordered to attend, if you cannot incorporate parts of the course into the professional skills that you are targeting for self-improvement; you must be abandon these…at least for now.

The "90% Solution" is about doing what it takes to become good, "expert-level good," at one teaching skill.

And, some skills may take a long time, maybe a couple of years to perfect.

But, you will never become a Master Teacher by following your current path of "trying everything" and repeating only the "stuff that works."

Distractions and diffused talents leave you standing in the "dunce corner as a master of nothing," instead of in the Master Teacher Winner's Circle. Antidote for Activity-Driven Teaching: Activity-driven teaching is the teaching "strategy" that 80% of your colleagues employ.

Activity-based teaching means following the textbook as a lesson planning framework, and finding worksheets, projects and lesson plans that fit in; so there is enough work to keep students busy.

Activity-driven lesson planning maximizes the amount of work that teachers must do. Activity-driven instruction is the polarity-opposite to the strategic and streamlined systems that Classroom Toolkit advocates.

Links to previous Classroom Toolkit Newsletter articles on teacher planning and

Application and Performance: The "Flip Side" of Planning

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

The Twelve Worst Planning Practices

Create a Master To-Do Log/ List System

How to do More in Less Time: Why do More when Doing Less gets Better Results?

Overworked and ineffective teachers invest time in scattered activities, like bees flitting from flower to flower in a garden. But even bees know better than to sample rose juice here, daffodil nectar there, tulip pollen over yonder; because this conglomeration of ingredients produces substandard honey.

Instructional results from an activity-based strategy tend to be of low quality.

The problem is that in doing so many things, time isn't available to examine the nuances, details and intricacies needed to perfect the requisite skills.

In other words, teachers need to become "geniuses" at one thing. In this case, "genius" means the ability to know everything there is about a specific strategy. What to Choose to "Get Right": There is "doing" and there is "doing it right." What the "90% Solution" focuses upon is "doing it right" (i.e., executing perfectly, taking action at the highest skill level) so that 90% of the time, execution is very right.

The biggest obstacles to the "90% Solution" include: Impatience - teachers want every student to learn everything by whatever method the teacher decides to adopt

Frustration - teachers see that a technique didn't work and blame the technique or the students

Acting First, Thinking Later - Focusing on getting through the day instead of doing things in a better way each day

Clumsy Execution - "Getting it right" was more difficult than imagined

Taking the Road of Least Resistance - teaching the easy stuff first, but maybe never getting to the challenging, long-lasting, important stuff

Using the Incorrect Benchmark - targeting student outcomes instead of looking to see how your own strengths can be made more effective

Wrong Goal - targeting the goal of keeping students busy instead of targeting how to perform better as a teacher

Measuring Outcomes based upon Colleagues Performance - colleagues are perfecting different skills of their own.

Besides, they cannot be trusted to share the challenges they overcame when they brag about how successful they are

Lack of Confidence - forming, "Since results were mediocre, the problem must be with me" options about your performance

Avoiding the Hard Thinking of Planning - taking the easiest path instead of analyzing what will produce the best results

Believing in "Working Smarter" or believing in "Working Harder" - neither approach delivers. Working more creatively,

artistically, and skillfully are the correct targets. Choosing what to Become Good At: Teachers focus on improving the

wrong skills because their professional training teaches them to look for errors to remediate. This is the wrong approach for improving personal performance!

Choosing start with our weakest areas for teaching success is fallacy. Instead, start with strengths and perfect talents based upon those strengths. Compensate using strengths and bypass weaknesses. Use what we have with passion.

See the Classroom Toolkit Book Review, Teach with your Strengths: How Great Teachers Inspire their

Students: Not Back to Basics but Back to Fundamentals. A few years ago (before the high-stakes testing craze), there was a "Back to Basics" fad; the purported solution to low student achievement.

But, teaching the basics targeted a "left-handed, sinister" approach; a distraction.

The correct approach: Perfecting teaching fundamentals.

The "Back to Basics" approach was sinister because it distracted from the real question, the question that no one dared ask, "Which teachers are skilled and which teachers are not?" Or, "What do the teachers of students that excel do differently that teachers whose students stagnate?"

Besides being an "off-limit" topic for investigation (especially in teacher union dominated states), the question was never asked because discovering the answer would be too costly (or too embarrassing) to find out.

On the face of it, to the untrained, casual, or twice-a-year formal (district administrator) observer; the Master Teacher and the seasoned, but ineffective teacher are doing "almost" the same thing.

The observer would have to be more skillful than the Master Teacher (unlikely), and the teacher would have to

brief the observer before the observation concerning what to look for (also unlikely since the teacher would not want to clue the observer about what might need to be improved during the lesson delivery).

The benefit of most teacher observation exercises is to weed out those teachers who lack basic teaching competencies. These systems are not designed to assist teachers in perfecting unique and personal talents. Myth of the "Magic Bullet;" Teachers look for the "Magic Bullet" Method that will "really work." But this is a "wishful thinking myth."

The reality: "What you Choose to do Doesn't Matter" (that much).

The real issue is "How you do it."

Master Teachers, if ordered to teach using specific materials or administrator-pushed methods, will "tweak and alter" those methods so that students excel. Teachers of lesser caliber will struggle (and students' performance will be mediocre), no matter how many high-quality materials and support resources they can use.

If teachers have a smorgasbord of materials, the approach of the successful teacher is instructive.

The Master Teacher chooses a few materials from the stockpile, and uses them skillfully. The less effective teacher continues to swap materials, always looking for the one "special solution" to those "low-learning outcome ills."

The difference is in execution, not quality resources.

The Master Teacher can teach, no matter what the challenge. Summary The "90% Solution" is about doing the right teaching strategies "super well." This means perfecting individual skills in one area at a time, adding to the repertoire only when the first skill area reaches the 90% level of effectiveness.

Hopping from one strategy to another distracts less-skilled teachers from focusing on a single area of improvement. Instead, these teachers languish in a "sea of luke warm" mediocrity.

But, don't look for someone else's "Magic Method." Look at your strengths, and ask students how those strengths could help them learn.

Pay attention, then execute, observe and assess, execute, observe and assess again.

It is the "Execute-Observe-Assess" Cycle, repeated with the intention of improving instructional management and instructional delivery that enables teachers to perfect their skills.

Attention to the littlest detail, that is the mark of "genius." It is the mark of a Master Teacher, too.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Teacher Survival Strategies at 04:00

Under-the-Radar Teaching Skills

A Prosperous Mindset: When Learning is Like Farming

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Learning capacity is never used up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What changed? Your intention changed your perception.

Set Clear Learning Goals

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And, share this passion for learning with your student.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Manage your Time and Reduce Wasted Efforts

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

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

SidebarActually, your students are always learning, just as you are.

But, growing uncontrolled, erratic, random knowledge is not efficient. There needs to be an underlying logic, theme,

method that ties the chunks of learning together.

This is the reason that thematic units produce better learning outcomes than "every day brings new worksheet" strategies. Of course, planning themes with students is a marvelous way to align the curriculum content with students' interests. The opportunities for weaving curriculum-based content into almost any theme are endless. This approach takes more effort than reading the "teaching prompts" from the "annotated teachers' edition" of the adopted textbook. But, students will respond with eagerness and excitement. Besides, teachers who read, word for word, from the Teachers' Edition are just as boring as students who read their report to the class. Many teachers think that just by increasing the amount of work that students perform that learning will automatically accelerate.

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

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

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

Grow Learning by Planting High-Yield Crops

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

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

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

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

Protect your Investment in your Students' Learning

Once you see your students' learning blossom and flourish, "insulate" your students learning success against loss.

You never know what events can subvert or sabotage your success.

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

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

Graphic Organizers, Rubrics, Reproducible Modules

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

Profitable instruction (even creativity) does not benefit from an "wide open range, wild west, no fences" strategy.

Instead, reusable, repeatable structures raise instruction to higher levels of application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation…the Higher-Order Thinking Skills.

And complexity must be controlled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Questions to Keep Learning on Track and Profitable

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

What's good about _____?

What's bad about _____?

What background information is important?

What steps did you take to build this knowledge?

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

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

What is the best way to learn _____?

How long will it take to really master _____?
What advice can you give to someone wanting to learn _____?
What study methods for _____ will work for anyone?
What has your experience with _____ taught you?
What real-life examples can you share about _____?
What is one secret about _____ that almost no one knows?
What is one of the most common problems associate with _____?
What are the three best ways to overcome that problem?

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Under-the-Radar Teaching Skills at 03:00

Professional Self-Development

Why Should Teachers Write and Focus Upon Goals?

Why should teachers write and focus upon goals if they want to become Master Teachers? Why Bother

No one cares, really? Do they?

As long as your students pass the high-stakes, mandated test by one percentage point, you are a hero. In some states, this target could be a scaled score of 71 (out of 100 or more). Sidebar The high-stakes "teacher evaluation" math is skewed and confused. (Despite the fact that evaluating teachers based on students' performance is a misuse of the test.)

For example, if in a classroom of 20 students 19 students score 100 and one scores a 69 (passing score is 70), then the teacher has failed (because not all students "passed"). However if 20 students score 71, then the teacher is a hero because the entire class "passed."

So, what is the target? Is the target a score of 100 (getting every question correct)? Does the teacher provide praise and feel joy and thanksgiving that every student achieves to their potential, no matter the high-stakes test score?

Or, is the target pushing, coaching, training, tutoring every student to reach the "minimum cutting score" (just passing).

Does the teacher experience pain, fear, loathing and dread and level criticism toward students that miss the minimum skills bar? Most teachers will draw the same pay if their students meet high-stakes testing targets, or not.

If campus high-stakes pass rates are not achieved, will the teacher draw on the "It's the low quality of THOSE students' card; and blame the students for the "failure?" The benefit of this strategy is that there are often "mutual crying shoulders" of slacker colleagues to commiserate upon. Know what you Want to Achieve, then Develop a Strategy When you know what you want to achieve, you can develop an effective strategy for reaching that goal.

If you don't know what your achievement targets are; you lack an effective way to develop a viable strategy. You end up floating, disconnected, worried, and dismal.

It's the goals and targets that you set that suggest the tactics and drive the strategy that you employ. It's as simple as that.

Without those targets in place, you drift. You allow the textbook to drive instruction. You take the "trail of least resistance" (downhill, downward slide) to the bottom of the heap instead of the summit of satisfaction.

So, set definite targets. Become proactive. What if you Miss your Targets? If you set high targets, but fail to meet them, what happens?

And, how do you feel about yourself when super-high targets are missed? Isn't it better to set achievable, attainable targets (mediocre, average and so you won't be disappointed)?

What happens when you don't meet your goals? What do you tell yourself about your performance and your skills?

The answer is that it depends what you mean by, "Don't meet your goals."

What if you define success as moving toward your goal, rather than attaining a target?

For example, if you set a bank account balance of \$1,000,000.00 as a target (on a teacher's salary? Right!), but only saved \$975,000, did you fail?

If you define movement toward a goal as progress, you could judge nearly reaching a target as "success." If the target means reaching the exact numerical amount, then that same progress would be deemed "a failure."

This works the same way for student scores on the high-stakes tests. If students make tremendous progress, then they should be rewarded and praised for their successes, even if they fall short of the "passing score." Strategy Change Strategy change is about "tweaking" your performance tactics and the management methods that you employ to improve.

The idea is often co-opted by folks who believe in "formative assessments." This means keeping track of how things are progressing, and if results seem elusive, to make reasoned (informed, rational, research-based) adjustments.

Part of this tweaking strategy is knowing that the track you are traveling is not going to reach the target you set. To do this means setting some number-type indicators as milestones so that you know if you are on track. These indicators must be numbers because other indicator types are imprecise and as ineffective as a rubber ruler, i.e., you can't tell if they are accurate. Sidebar Here is an example of a rubber ruler.

A teacher is stressed and over eats, gains lots of belly fat. He wants to lose weight. By using an elastic tape measure,

he can't tell if he is getting slimmer. On the other hand, a fixed target doesn't help either. The person with a 40 inch waist cannot fit into the slacks with a 34 inch waist if his waist size is 36, 37, 35, 39 or 41. All he knows is that the size 34 slacks are too small.

But, targeting the successive holes on a belt (meaningful milestones) could serve to tell whether the diet and exercise routines are producing the desired results. The corollary to setting numerical measures is knowing what caused the change in the number that is measured. Making changes because of a numerical assessment that lacks a reasoned and rational basis is useless. You have to know what aspect of the strategy (or action) caused the target number to change before you can tell if you are on track. (The change could be accidental or related to outside conditions.)

Making changes in strategy, because something is not working requires some knowledge of what does work, and how the results from applying that strategy were atypical (not what you and everyone else expected).

Doing something else (because a strategy does not appear to be "working") only makes sense if you know what measurable strategy does work.

"Shot-in-the-dark" attempts to rectify a non-productive teaching situation seldom produce measurable gains.

Sidebar "Shot-in-the-dark" activity changes are the mark of confused teachers that do lack written goals and don't know where they are going.

They know that previous activities failed, but don't know why. So, they try something new, and another something new, and another, and another…

A Master Teacher knows what strategies work, develops a plan, and sticks to it. A Master Teacher knows that the challenge is figuring out what small, specific changes are needed to guide that plan to success. And, there are other obstacles such as fear that keep teachers from writing their goals and committing to achieving those goals. Overcoming Fear: What Fear? What fear? Answer: The "Twin Fears" are the "Fear of Getting Fired" and the "Fear of Not Knowing what to Do."

Teachers will deny that they hold fears, especially fears about losing their "almost locked into it for life, unless they commit a felony, and maybe not even then" jobs.

It is common knowledge (an Urban Myth?) that school district can't dislodge "bad" teachers from their jobs, even with dynamite. This belief holds sway and is bolted into everyone's consciousness, especially in states with large memberships in teachers' unions.

But whether this scenario matches reality is irrelevant when compared with the terrors and scary worries that inhabit the inner landscape of a teacher's thoughts and feelings.

Every teacher knows colleagues (or has heard about the friends of colleagues) that were either "fired," forced to resign, or "made to feel so miserable by a principal" that they left the campus (or the teaching field).

And, principals and school district administrators are "rumored" to attend lawyer-taught courses on how to use "within-the-law" methods of ridding a campus of the "deadwood, driftwood, rotten wood, and wood that just doesn't match the decor (or campus decorum)."

Fear of being fired? "My Union and I laugh at you!"

Maybe such bravado masks a teacher's real feelings of vulnerability. Probably not.

However, the fear of not knowing what to do to improve is real and palpable.

Teachers are plagued with vying theories and repackaged instructional fads. Professors and pundits promulgate ever more intricate "solutions" from the podium and the PowerPoint presentation.

These "authorities" believe that they are "teaching experts." And many believe that they alone possess the "secret" of successful teaching. Each expert wants teachers to change, but change to the way that the expert thinks is crucial.

It is amazing that so many experts fail to figure out that change is personal and must be tailor-made for the person that is making the change.

Change is difficult and change also takes time. Besides, the pace of institutional change makes the snail and sloth seem like speedsters by comparison. And teachers must work within the constraints (sometimes choking strangle holds) of those institutions.

The lifecycle of implementing a viable educational reform (that really takes hold and delivers student achievement and instructional gains) is 20 Earth years.

The path from Newbie to Master Teacher takes three (or more) years. The Path toward Self-Improvement Goals Knowing what to do by identifying a path to success through the forest and thickets of hidden possibilities can seem bewildering.

And, what if, stuck in this maze of conflicting, competing, mutually canceling theories; a teacher doesn't know which direction represents "the way out?"

The answer is that teachers must write their own goals. Those goals then act like a compass.

But, writing goals is different than writing lesson plans…the documents that are submitted to campus administrators or department chairs.

One way that these differ is that lesson plans describe goals for student learning, i.e., what the students will do to learn.

The goals that teachers must write are statements about what the teacher will do to be more effective. These are teacher's targets. Targets that teachers must commit to, and targets that teachers must constantly recommit to, like an every day renewing marriage vows! (And almost as important for your long-term teaching success. A Supportive

Other After writing personal and professional goals, teachers need to find a sympathetic and harmonious other to share these goals with.

But this sharing needs to be of the "once the honeymoon is over straight talk, hold you accountable-type;" not the "Your doing great and your perfect in every way" type of support.

This kind of support comes from a friend or partner, not from a mentor (because the mentor-mentee relationship is unequal, with the mentor being the higher-up expert).

A mentor sets targets and makes suggestions of what changes need to be made, while a supportive partner focuses upon set of accomplishments that the teacher sets for himself or herself. (Big difference!)

This unequal relationship is also the reason that the supportive relationship cannot develop between the teacher and the professional that evaluates them. (The evaluation/ supervisory roles and the supportive friend/ partner roles (between district administrators and teachers) would represent a dual relationship. Translation: Teachers (can't/ don't/ shouldn't) trust the people that evaluate them by revealing inside information about their personal goals.)

However a trusted colleague, a friend, or a family member that understands teaching can keep a teacher on track by asking for a progress report, and by asking "tough questions." The key is that the support person focuses on the goals that the teacher wrote for themselves. This is the teacher's agenda, not someone else's agenda. Supportive Questioning:

Taking to Task What questions will this supportive person ask?

This should be obvious. "What specific steps did you take today toward the goals that you wrote for yourself?"

"Did you do what you committed to do?" "Did you follow through?" "What did you learn?" "What are you going to commit to do next?" The Concrete Goals are Written, Now, What do I Measure? Teachers must identify countable milestones of observable indicators that can be recorded.

These are the items that can be counted and recorded.

These are related to exactly what attitudes, knowledge and skills (of yours) that you are targeting for improvement.

These are not items like students' grades, students' attendance or other student-centered items.

These are the specific teacher-centered items that demonstrate to yourself that you are moving forward, seeing progress, and indicators that enable you to say positive things to yourself about your personal improvement.

But teachers are busy, and school day distractions abound. So, the number of indicators must be kept small, preferably five or less.

Sidebar The reason for keeping the number of indicators for measuring personal performance to five or less is due to the limits of our Span of Consciousness (the number of discrete items that we can hold in conscious awareness at one time; i.e., keep track of). These items are held in conscious awareness though a process of item switching.

These indicators must be personal, meaningful and specific.

And because these indicators are personal, they need to match your favored sensory processing mode (favored learning style, favored Multiple Intelligence).

And because there are so many variables, stock checklists and "one goal fits all" approaches always fail.

The goals that teachers write for themselves must really be for themselves.

Summary Writing personal goals and specific improvement targets is crucial if you want to become a Master Teacher.

Writing specific goals is more powerful than just thinking about what you want to do.

And, finding the right partner who will hold you accountable in a supportive way also accelerates your progress on the path to improving your performance.

Writing personal goals is a crucial tool for professional advancement. Focus upon, review and recommit to your goals by using this tool, daily.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Professional Self- Development at 02:00

Perfecting Personal Talents

Developing Self-Esteem: Targeting Your Students…and Their Teacher

Building self-esteem in children and developing self-esteem for teens, building parents' self-esteem, building self-esteem for the teachers who interact with students and who model mature self-esteem for them…esteem building is a "Team Sport." Creating activities that build and strengthen self-esteem in children, teens, parents and teachers requires a "Player-Coach."

There are millions of articles (in print books and on the Internet) that focus upon helping children and their families develop the positive traits that, collected together, are referred to as "self-esteem."

These traits coalesce around concepts such as confidence, esteem, a positive attitude and the mentality of a "winner." But, self-esteem is more a "state of consciousness" that the teacher wishes to "alter" in a positive direction, than a static set of traits.

And, while improving self-esteem is a process that is hidden from view and difficult to measure, it is observable and changeable (improvable) for students, parents and teachers.

Methods of Observing Self-Esteem Self-esteem is measured by the tangible behaviors that teachers can observe, and by intuitive and subjective "assessments."

Self-esteem is related to (meshed with) Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Intelligences, and lots of other variables.

Splitting self-esteem into traits results in a three-dimensional matrix

But this "trait-splitting approach" is apt to leave teachers with a splitting headache…hundreds of variables across 20 to 200 students…"data fodder" for the most robust supercomputer.

Fortunately, teachers modeling positive self-esteem functions better and streamlines the process.

All a teacher has to do is observe their own internal esteem landscape, improve the "scenery" there; and draw student along to positive self-esteem. This process is called "entrainment."

The process of improving students' self-esteem involves the teacher improving his or her self-esteem. Sidebar For a description of how teachers establish rapport and bring students to a stronger and more mature development level, see the Classroom Toolkit article, Rapport Building: How Personal can your Professional Persona Be? Methods of Changing Self-Esteem In order to change children's and teens self-esteem; the teacher/ coach must change themselves. (You had to know that was coming.)

But first you have to ensure that students' basic needs are being met. This is a teacher's responsibility because, even in this land of plenty, minimum basic needs of food, shelter, clothing, nurturing and love can be scarce for some.

Sidebar Teachers have a team that can help with these basic needs, school nurse, child protective services, local charities, etc. "States-person-ship" and empathy are necessary in communicating with families that don't or can't deliver adequate care for their children. Intend to help and remain open for opportunities to do so. Expect creative, rather than stock solutions.

But, once students' basic needs are met, teachers launch lessons that meet children's' higher-order needs. These include the need for:

Acceptance by Others

Adventure and Excitement

Community Membership and Belonging to Groups

Competence in Building Skills

Freedom to Create, to Act Independently, to be Spontaneous

Personal Power and Autonomy

Security and Feelings of Personal Safety

Self-Expression through Personal Choices

Sharing, especially sharing Information, Knowledge and Skills Teachers work these needs into lesson planning and classroom management to ensure that students strive for the rewards of these intrinsic motivations.

Tangible rewards pale in appeal as compared to satisfying these innate personal needs of students.

Teachers who facilitate these needs and prompt students towards the achievement of these needs enjoy an "easy time" in directing students toward positive academic goals. More than Meets the Eye … Also the Ear, Tongue and Lips

Self-esteem is more than the observable, measurable traits that can be sensed with the Five Senses.

Self-esteem centers upon IntraPersonal dynamics; and factors such as beliefs, habits, values, aspirations, and each person's spiritual quest.

Love, caring, sharing, belongingness and the response of others play a part in esteem building.

And, these self-esteem components must remain congruent with behaviors, communication and InterPersonal interaction; otherwise other people will react negatively to dichotomies, polarities and "out-of-snyc" personality patterns. (Others will believe that the incongruent person is lying, faking, being deceitful or is being manipulative, and the others always level social pressure against an "out-of-congruence" person).

So, external and internal honesty is a foundation for self-esteem. Remember that Self-Esteem is a Constellation

Self-esteem is complex, multi-faceted and powerful.

And building, maintaining and supporting better esteem in each student is an important goal for teachers. Teachers must also focus upon building and maintaining their own level of esteem.

Self-esteem benefits from caring, sharing, love and respect … qualities that teachers must hold and communicate in a congruent and professional way as they work to build and nurture the esteem of their students and themselves.

Positive self-esteem is contagious (easily entrained), and evidence of collective esteem building is found in the classroom of every Master Teacher.

And, leading the way, then drawing everybody to higher levels of esteem is that Master Teacher who keeps polishing, shining and harmonizing his or her own esteem. Resources To satisfy the "left-brain hunger" for cognitive content, here are links to several professional-level research-based sites.

Kids and Self-Esteem

National Association of Self-Esteem

Kids Health

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Perfecting Personal Talents at 01:00