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For the latest resources and breaking news, follow AMLE on:

AMLE Magazine was recognized with an Association Media & Publishing 2014 EXCEL Award for magazine redesign. The EXCEL Awards is the largest and most prestigious award program that exclusively recognizes excellence and leadership in nonprofit association media, publishing, and communications.
Recipe for Success

Peanut butter and jelly. Chicken and dumplings. Macaroni and cheese. Some things just go together. Such is the case with curriculum and assessment. You can have curriculum and you can have assessment, but they are best when combined with just the right proportions of each.

Through the years, curriculum and assessment have changed with the times. On the curriculum side, the basic ingredients of English, math, science, and social studies have endured, but they’ve been enhanced with the addition of not only content areas, such as technology education, but also skills, such as critical thinking and collaboration.

Educators have long known the importance of ensuring the curriculum meets the needs of our changing world. In his book The Curriculum, published in 1918, Franklin Bobbitt described what he envisioned as the necessary curriculum for a new age. Bobbitt called on education to:

“...train thought and judgment in connection with actual life-situations, a task distinctly different from the cloisteral activities of the past....It has the function of training every citizen, man or woman, not for knowledge about citizenship, but for proficiency in citizenship; not for knowledge about hygiene, but for proficiency in maintaining robust health; not for mere knowledge of abstract science, but for proficiency in the use of ideas in the control of practical situations."

Bobbitt considered proficiency to be a key element of an effective education almost 100 years ago. However, strategies to measure proficiency—assessments—were not part of his discussion. I can only imagine that he would heartily endorse today’s assessments, which measure what students know, what they are in the process of learning, and how they apply that knowledge.

No doubt, Bobbitt would be pleased with this month’s issue of AMLE Magazine, which explores a variety of ingredients necessary for a robust curriculum and assessment program. I hope you find some ingredients within these pages to add to your recipe box!
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What’s Appropriate?
The notion of having written dress codes for teachers really rankles me. Teachers are in the same league as doctors, dentists, lawyers, and others whom society has deemed to be professionals. As such, the responsibility for being properly attired rests squarely on the shoulders of the individuals in the profession.

Including a clause related to teacher dress in a contract or in the district policy handbook provides the school’s administration with a benchmark to call upon if a teacher goes rogue or chooses to push the limit in terms of professional dress. This marker provides the school’s administration with a reference point to warn or yank a wayward teacher into line.

But, before my liberal thinking gets the best of me in terms of assuming a position regarding teacher dress, the question that must be raised and answered is “What is appropriate dress?” Being a tad long in the tooth, my standards for professional attire are dated. Men in khakis, button-down shirts, ties, and maybe a sport jacket work. Women in dresses, skirts, pants and blouses or sweaters also pass muster.

I understand that dress is driven by fashion and there is a propensity for folks—teachers included—to follow stylish trends. But here’s where I draw the line. If middle school girls wear skin tight jeans and high boots to school, should their teachers? If boys wear sleeveless t-shirts, jeans with holes, and work

Start with the End in Mind
One of the most valuable lessons I learned as an educator was to start with the end in mind. This concept of backward design is typically applied to curriculum writing, unit planning, and lesson planning, but it can be used for many different purposes, including policy writing and implementation. Therefore, the concept of backward design can be applied to dress code policies for educators as well.

Policies can be polarizing, and dress code policies are no exception.

Policies can be polarizing, and dress code policies are no exception. People cling to their appearances with passion and sincerity, and they craft them in a way that reflects their self-identity. Whether they spend hours in front of a mirror each morning or mere minutes, the way people dress, apply makeup, and style their hair is deliberate and intensely personal, and it is a reflection of their core philosophical beliefs.

Effective policy writers are mindful of the streams that influence the success or failure of a policy. In this
boots to school, should their male teachers do the same... in the name of fashion?

**Educators as Role Models**

As a principal in an urban school in the early 1980s, I dressed for work every day in a suit or sports jacket and slacks, with a collared shirt and tie or turtleneck. My students often asked me, “Why do you dress up?” My answer: “For you.” This response usually brought a smile to the student’s face. My dress for work philosophy was not intended to get my name into GQ magazine but rather to convey to the students that I cared enough about them—and the staff and community—and about my position in the school to dress my best... for them. I embraced the same standard until my retirement in 2014.

Regardless of age or gender, teachers are role models to impressionable students.

Regardless of age or gender, teachers are role models to impressionable students and are held to high standards, which include ethical and professional behavior and proper attire. While tattoos, piercings, and hairstyles are all part of fashion and societal trends, doing what’s best for students transcends these trends and becomes a professional imperative for contemporary teachers.

If teachers choose to put their best professional foot forward in matters related to dress, tattoos, piercings and hair styles, a school’s policy related to teacher attire can remain in a binder on a shelf in the principal’s office and never opened... and that would be just fine.

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Spotlight on the Student & Youth Travel Association

We asked Amy Cannon, senior manager of member relations for the Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA) a series of questions about the important role travel plays in young people’s education.

1. What is SYTA’s vision and how does it support middle level education?
SYTA believes that education does not just occur within the four walls of a classroom, that curriculum-based travel is an important supplement to middle level education. SYTA promotes student and youth travel and seeks to foster integrity and professionalism among student and youth travel service providers.

SYTA is not a travel provider; rather it’s an association that represents the travel companies who provide those services and experiences for middle level students. SYTA is The Voice of Student and Youth Travel.®

Our official publication, Teach & Travel, has a readership of over 90,000 educators, 35% of whom represent middle level education.

2. Why do young adolescents need to travel as a part of their education?
SYTA believes that travel is essential to a complete education. Travel is just one of the ways to connect and inspire young adolescents’ growth. When students have the opportunity to see first-hand the monuments they read about in their history books, speak the language they are learning in school, and perform for an adjudicated board, their level of education reaches heights not possible in the classroom.

3. What do middle school teachers need to know about travel before getting their students involved?
Travel isn’t all about the destination; it’s about who you have beside you during your travels that can make the difference. Using a professional to help plan your trip benefits not only the teacher, but also the students. It ensures the trip includes the most valuable educational components available. By choosing a SYTA member company, educators can focus less on the details and more on what matters most: connecting with students and fostering growth through their experience.

4. How has student travel changed in the last 10 years and what do you think it will look like 10 years from now?
The biggest change in educational travel has been the need to justify to the administration why travel is important in the lives of students. SYTA and its members are a valuable resource to educators, and we encourage them to reach out should they need assistance.

5. What can middle level leaders do to help make travel possible for their students?
Travel is our ultimate freedom, but SYTA realizes that not all students have the financial means to experience the greatest educational opportunity. Therefore, most schools implement fundraising programs to ensure that all students can participate in the experience. For those students who are struggling to afford the cost of travel, the SYTA Youth Foundation provides financial resources and programming. Scholarship applications and program outlines can be found at www.sytayouthfoundation.org.

6. If travel was a food for middle level education, what would it be and why?
It’s difficult to think of one specific food, but it would certainly be something healthy, somewhat exotic, and less readily accessible... like a mango. When people make healthy diet choices, it affects their future. It’s likely they will feel better, look healthier, live longer, etc. Like a healthy and exotic fruit, travel provides enriched cultural and social awareness that quite simply cannot be acquired in the classroom.

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The movement toward standards-based grading is well underway, yet it is by no means complete. Some schools have successfully made the transition to standards-based grading by realigning their grading and reporting practices to their instruction and assessment routines. While not without challenges, the move is complete and the new routines have been fully accepted.

However, more common among schools looking to reform their grading policies and practices is a process of change bogged down in philosophical debates, underlying biases, and hidden agendas. Few discussions in education elicit the kind of visceral reaction as those about grading. Grading is an emotionally charged aspect of education that relies on intentional planning and finesse. The low-hanging fruit of grading reform is the creation of a new report card template. But, if the levels of quality (proficient) are determined via percentage increments (e.g., 80%-89%), nothing has really changed and the new report card is no more than an artifact of a promised change that never fully materializes.

The heaviest lift—and the essential first step—in any long-term grading reform effort is to shift the collective mindset about the process of grading, to develop a standards-based mindset. Until that’s done, grading reform efforts will be operating without the necessary net to keep individual teacher’s grading practices aligned with one another.

**Why a Standards-Based Mindset?**

Most of us have at one time in our lives started and subsequently stopped a new fitness plan. When our commitment to be fit is strong, we find reasons to exercise and we go out of our way to make time for a workout. When the motivation to be fit fades, we tend to find every excuse not to exercise.

The lesson here is that our actions typically follow our thoughts. Like the fitness plan example, when we think and feel differently about grading, we will change how we grade. When teachers are mentally committed to changing their grading practices, they will find every reason to make it work despite the limitations of the report card, the grading program, or the lack of buy-in from colleagues.
Without this change in mindset, teachers will find every excuse to explain why it can’t or won’t work. This is why long-term grading reform begins on the inside and works its way outward.

Developing a standards-based mindset accomplishes two things:

1. By overcoming this initial heavy lift, the prospect of actual standards-based reporting is much less daunting. The final thing that should change is the report card, and it should only change as a result of a groundswell of pressure to realign grading and reporting practices with our standards-focused instructional paradigm.

2. The standards-based mindset allows the flexibility some teachers need to work within a school whose shift toward standards-based grading is incomplete or not yet started. In fact, grading with a standards-based mindset is not contingent on the system ever moving to standards-based grading and reporting.

Teachers can grade with a standards-based mindset even when embedded in a context that uses a traditional system of reporting.

The Fundamentals

Quite simply, a standards-based mindset is about grading with only standards in mind. Rather than encapsulating all activities and attributes, the process of grading becomes singularly focused on determining student proficiency against the standards. Developing a standards-based mindset allows individual teachers to make immediate changes to how grades are determined, even if the system within which they work hasn’t.

It is both simple and complex. It’s simple because only a few fundamental changes are necessary to establish a standards-based mindset; it’s complex because moving away from traditional practices and establishing new grading routines is, again, the heaviest lift of the assessment conversation.

Grades must be meaningful so that the process of summative assessment can deliver on its promise to form an integral part of a comprehensive approach to assessment, according to P. Black, writing in J. H. McMillan’s SAGE Handbook of Research on Classroom Assessment (2013).

The simplicity of the standards-based mindset is that there are only four specific fundamentals that need to change in order to establish an entirely new culture of grade determination.

1. Grade only learning. The first step to clarity and meaningfulness is to ensure that grades represent only what a student knows or understands in relation to the standards. When grades include both learning and non-learning factors (e.g., participation, attitude, punctuality), they lose their meaning. The truth is that there are countless non-learning factors that potentially could contribute to a student’s grade, and if every teacher includes something different, students and parents are left wondering how their child’s grade was determined. The B in one sixth grade ELA class, for example, should be determined in the same manner as a B in another sixth grade ELA class. Standards are standards.

When grades reflect only learning, students can self-regulate their learning by using grades as a springboard for future learning goals. The third phase of self-regulation—after the forethought and performance phases—is the reflective phase,
Reassessment is not about hitting the reset button or establishing a series of do-overs.

Two aspects of the traditional homework routines threaten the accuracy of what is ultimately reported.

First, teachers can’t be sure that the student completed the work without assistance. If homework results were to factor into grade determination, then any assistance would compromise the integrity of the grade.

Second, for homework to productively contribute to a student’s growth toward proficiency, students must be reasonably familiar with the material, according to C. Dean and colleagues in Classroom Instruction That Works (2012). With traditional homework routines, the familiarity with the material or topic at hand is limited at best, which means those who need more time are disadvantaged.

Giving students full credit for what they know has also led teachers to use the practice of reassessment more effectively. Reassessment is not about hitting the reset button or establishing a series of do-overs. It’s about creating another opportunity to verify new levels of proficiency given the targeted instruction and learning that occurred after the first attempt.

Something must happen between the first attempt and the second. When that something is independent study, a series of tutorials, or more targeted class-wide instruction, reassessment can reach its full potential of positively contributing to the overall process of learning. Used effectively, reassessment can play a significant role in establishing a culture where if students learn takes precedence over when they learn.

3. Redefine accountability. A common misunderstanding of standards-based grading is that standards are no longer held accountable. Teachers with a standards-based mindset still hold students accountable, but it’s a different working definition of accountability—a definition that views accountability not as punishment for undesirable behavior, but as responsibility for learning.

Our traditional punitive practices (e.g., late penalties, zeroes for work not submitted) have the unintended consequence of rendering some standards as optional. If a student receives a zero but is still passing overall—and is satisfied with his new reduced level of achievement—there is no reason for the student to complete the work. That’s not accountability. If all learning is essential, then all learning should remain essential and there should be no mechanism by which certain portions of the learning emerge as optional.

Punishing irresponsibility doesn’t teach anyone how to be responsible. If we want students to learn to be responsible, we must teach them how to be responsible. Create expectations and criteria that give students a clear understanding of what it means to be responsible.

Characteristics like responsibility are important for students to learn if they are to be successful adults. Some schools go so far as to formalize this importance by separately reporting student development within
those areas. Students don’t understand less because they handed their teacher something three days after it was expected. If the proficiency grade is lowered as a result, that’s exactly what’s being communicated.

4. Grade for confidence. Above all else, grading with a standards-based mindset means using grading practices that establish, maintain, and grow student confidence about achievement. Confidence is not about lowering standards or inflating a sense of entitlement; rather it’s about a sense of real optimism about the possibility of success. Confidence increases the likelihood that people (including students) will try harder, persist, and feel optimistic when facing challenges and obstacles along the way, as Carol Dweck and Rosabeth Moss tell us.

With the implementation of more effective assessment, instruction, and feedback strategies during the past decade, it seems odd that teachers continue willingly to choose grading practices that could undercut that work and leave students feeling discouraged or hopeless. All that we do must leave students feeling hopeful about the possibility of success. Undercutting this confidence borders on reckless. Student confidence is fragile enough as it is; counterproductive practices will accentuate this fragility and leave students with little optimism going forward.

Toward Long-Term Reform

By grading only learning, giving students full credit, redefining accountability, and grading for confidence, teachers will be well down the road to establishing the standards-based mindset necessary for long-term grading reform. When teachers grade from the inside out to reinvigorate the meaningfulness of the summative assessment experience, school or district policy changes are unnecessary. How teachers grade will give or take from the culture of learning established in the classroom. For grading to give, we must first shift how we think and feel about the process of grading. Developing a standards-based mindset increases the likelihood that the process of grading is a productive aspect of an overall positive learning experience.

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“Class is over? Wow, that went fast!” That’s one of the biggest compliments a teacher can get. It means our students were engaged in their work.

Research shows that the average young adolescent’s attention span is between 8 and 14 minutes. If that’s the case, teachers who are trying to hold their students’ attention for the full 50–60 minutes may never hear students exclaim that “time really flew by.”

At Neil Armstrong Middle School in Forest Grove, Oregon, I am constantly thinking about how I can make sure my English Language Arts content is relevant and my students are mastering standards and engaged in their learning. So two years ago, I
flipped my classroom. In most flipped classrooms, some class time is spent discussing the previous night’s homework before students move into the application of knowledge with one-on-one teacher interaction. I added a mini-lesson between the discussion and the application to keep my students engaged. Our class time looks like this:

1. 5-Minute Vocabulary Activity
For the first five minutes of class, students work on a vocabulary game called Vocab SWAG developed by the ELA department. (Nerdy teacher alert: SWAG stands for Student Word Acquisition Game). The students define a group of words that are relevant to the units they are studying in their team’s classes (math, science, social studies, and language arts). They learn all the words in the group but choose a specific word to use as often as possible in conversations with their peers, teachers, and parents, and earn points for their efforts. This is a fun way to get the students to access new vocabulary.

2. 15-Minute Mini-Lessons
The mini-lessons change daily, but follow a basic structure for my content area.


Tuesday: We work on grammar. The specifics vary, depending on what unit we are working on and what the formative data tell me the students need. I use the grammar skills website www.noredink.com when I don’t have something specific planned.

Wednesday: It’s test prep day. In preparation for the new Smarter Balanced assessments coming out for the Common Core State Standards, we focus on skills that the students will need to be successful. For example, one item on the sample tests involves listening to podcasts and answering related questions. The podcasts we create are specific to our current unit of study and are short enough for students to complete in the 15-minute time frame.

Thursday: Students do a timed writing prompt within the construct of our current unit. If we are working on persuasive writing, it is a persuasive prompt. If we are working on identifying themes, I might ask students to read a short passage and then write about the theme.

Friday: I like to switch between mini-debates and analysis of poems to keep it fresh.

Comfortable classroom spaces help students engage in their learning.

*Sometimes students work better outside the classroom.*
3. Core Content Work
After the mini-lesson, we transition into our core work, where students focus on mastering standards in preparation for upcoming assessments.

More Tips and Tricks
We know that middle school students thrive on attention, both positive and negative. It helps to use personal stories, humor, fair treatment, and proactive discipline to create an effective learning environment. Keep your room, your activities, and your stories relevant. Nothing throws a middle school student off track faster than something that they can easily check out of because they can’t relate. Display student work as often as possible. Use all the available space and create alternate learning areas.

After watching a video series on Edutopia about remaking your classroom space, I created what I call my Genius Bar & Charging Station. We are a 1:1 iPad school so this area gets used quite a bit! I purchased eight stools that students can move around the room. Another area of my classroom has a couch. This space is well-used as we transition into the core content time at the end of class.

The transitions need to happen as quickly and quietly as possible. I often use timers —free online at [www.online-stopwatch.com/classroom-timers](http://www.online-stopwatch.com/classroom-timers). Students become familiar with the routine of getting set up and ready to go for the next activity, whatever it may be. Think about your lesson pacing. If the students have been sitting for more than 20 minutes, can you have them transition to a new activity or place in your classroom or surrounding area? Can you have them move to the hallway, library, or other available large space? I am known for leaking out into the hallway when I need to. I never allow too many students out at any one time, so they see it as a privilege, and as long as they meet my expectations to be working while out there; and since I monitor them several times during the remainder of the class period, it works well. If they abuse the privilege, they have to come back in.

Mini-lessons might not work for you and your population of students, but make it a priority to find something that keeps them engaged.

Nichole Carter is an eighth grade ELA teacher and technology coach at Neil Armstrong Middle School in Forest Grove, Oregon.

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A whiteboard, moveable stools, and plenty of room for students to move create a vibrant learning space.

The Genius Bar and Charging Station is popular in this 1:1 school.

Setting up a schedule or a routine is important at the middle level. While some of my students never pick up on the actual rotation schedule of each of the daily activities, they become used to the transitions.
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On a snowy Saturday at around 9:00 a.m., a stream of young adolescents stragglers into a Barnes & Noble book store. At this early hour, they are the only customers. Some walk in with their parents; others are dropped off. They make their way to the line at the coffee counter and start to look more alert as they see their fellow classmates.

Sipping their lattes and hot chocolates, they engage in small talk as they head to their real destination: the meeting area upstairs. Sixty chairs are set in a circle, and as the students take their seats, they greet their teacher, Karen Lessler.

Lessler invited them here this morning for a discussion about
the book *Salt: A World History* by Mark Kurlansky. After a few welcoming remarks, she begins by asking, “Why would a writer write a book about salt?”

**AP World History 1**

What kind of teacher can convince 60 middle school students to read a comprehensive treatise on the economic impact of salt from early times until today, and have them show up on a Saturday morning to discuss the book? A teacher like Karen Lessler.

A dynamic presence at William T. Rogers Middle School in Kings Park, New York, with her dark curls and her signature colorful scarf dramatically draped over one shoulder, Lessler has inspired students for the past eight years. But she hasn’t always been an educator.

Lessler began her career as a lobbyist for governmental affairs. She was working toward a master’s degree in public policy with an eye toward a management position in government when one of her professors convinced her that she should become a teacher. Looking back on this bend in the road that led to a career in the classroom, she says, “I was destined to do this my whole life.”

After Lessler had been teaching global history for two years, the district superintendent recruited her to teach Advanced Placement (AP) World History 1 at the middle school level. Although she went into it with “lots of reservations,” she soon realized that students can rise to the occasion and excel when called upon to do so.

The program flourished under Lessler’s stewardship, becoming the only AP program at the middle school level on Long Island. Eighth grade students in this program take the first half of the AP World History course while in middle school, and complete the second half of the course in ninth grade. At the end of ninth grade, they take the AP exam for possible college credit.

In this eighth grade course, which is typically taught in tenth grade, students read college-level texts and write extensively. It is common practice for the students to complete two writing assignments a week. Lessler teaches her students to synthesize ideas from multiple sources, to generate thesis statements, and to use the texts to support their ideas. The students routinely prepare PowerPoint presentations to share with the class. In fact, her students were meeting the high expectations of the Common Core standards before the standards were introduced.

**Expectation of Excellence**

The students in Lessler’s accelerated classes are used to earning high grades in all their classes. Therefore, in the beginning of the course, Lessler explains to the students that there may be a learning curve and that their grades may drop as they become accustomed to reading college-level texts and writing content-rich essays. She assures them that this will be temporary if they are willing to put in the work.

Lessler is clear about her expectations for her students, and she shares those expectations with parents who are not used to such rigor. She invites students and parents to an orientation meeting where she describes the coursework, encourages them to peruse the textbooks, and proudly shares the mastery rate of former students in the program. She expresses her absolute belief that if students are willing to work hard, they will do well in the class.

**Her high standards are not reserved for her accelerated students.**

Her high standards are not reserved for her accelerated students. In her American history classes, the students recently worked in groups to analyze primary documents about the Great Depression and the current recession. The student groups are working with a consultant from the field of economics and a parent who works in publishing to develop a white paper that they will submit to Congress and the President. The students are excited to have such an impressive authentic audience for their writing.

When asked how she motivates students to put forth their best effort, Lessler explains that great teaching begins with the relationship between the teacher and her students. She continues, “I am a political science major so I teach very much with the human perspective of things. They (the students) see my love of history and human behavior” and it becomes contagious.

**A Culture of Caring**

Aside from her passion for her subject and her broad knowledge base, her special gift is that she
never gives up on a student. In spite of the encouragement and feedback she gives her students at the beginning of the course, inevitably a student or two will want to drop out of the program after a couple of initial low grades. But no one works harder than Lessler to convince a student that he or she can succeed. She calls and meets with parents at the first sign of trouble and works with students before and after school, coaching to help them meet their potential.

Lessler’s attitude toward her students brings to mind Carol Dweck’s work around the growth mindset. Teachers who have the growth mindset believe that their students can accomplish the desired results if they work hard. Research shows that when teachers convey the message that a student can accomplish something, the student will strive to meet those expectations.

What Lessler is developing in her students is grit. Angela Duckworth identifies grit as a trait that can predict future success. She describes grit as the tendency to sustain interest in and effort toward long-term goals. The two-year time span of the AP World History course, while not “very long-term” by Duckworth’s definition, is probably the first time that the students have been asked to sustain interest in a topic for four semesters (with a summer in between).

The assessment for this course is cumulative. When students perform well at the end of ninth grade, they are rewarded for their hard work and persistence. While Duckworth concedes that more research must be done to determine how to foster grit in students, Lessler’s growth mindset seems to instill in her students the desire to do well in long-term pursuits.

Historically, Lessler’s students are successful with the AP exam. The highest possible score is a 5; the average score for Lessler’s students has been 4.1, compared to the national average of 2.6.

Assessment scores aside, Lessler’s success can be measured in other ways as well. When the students move on to high school and take classes to bolster their transcripts, they credit Lessler for preparing them for the rigor of these higher-level courses. One high school senior, looking back on her middle school days, said, “Dr. Lessler taught me the importance of hard work and how it all pays off in the end.”

A Transformative Experience

At the book talk, the students and their teacher discuss the contents of the book in the context of what they had learned in their AP World History class, easily analyzing the social, economic, and political aspects of the history of this important mineral. The budding scholars sip their lattes as they refer to their highlighted passages and sticky notes, and their thoughtful comments take the discussion beyond the scheduled time.

Lessler invites each student to share one last thought about the book before she distributes the salt shakers she brought for them. As the students receive their salt shakers, it is clear that they will never look at those small white grains in the same way again. It is equally clear that Karen Lessler has changed the way these students think about themselves.

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TED-Ed: Tapping an Untapped Resource

TED offers myriad ways to reach and teach students.

BY AMBER CHANDLER
Students with imaginary light bulbs above their heads wildly waving their hands as they interrupt each other to make a point.

This is the stuff teachers’ dreams are made of. In those dreams, where are you standing?

As every teacher knows, promoting student engagement is not as easy as it may sound. Dream classrooms don’t just happen. However, you can help make the dream come true, and there’s no better place to start than TED (www.ted.com) and its many extensions.

TED is a nonprofit organization that spreads ideas and encourages people to explore their world and beyond, usually through short, powerful talks.

**Power of Peers**

TED-Ed (ed.ted.com), focused on education, offers a library of lessons—high-interest, captivating videos that users can view by content area, grade level, or duration. The site has a step-by-step process for building lessons around each video so teachers can create entire units.

TED-Ed knows, as teachers do, about the power of peer-to-peer learning. The TED Under 20 playlist (www.ted.com/playlists/129/ted_under_20) features talks from teen scientists, musicians, and innovators.

Through TED Under 20, your students can meet Tavi, a young girl who established a place on the web where teenage role models can find each other. Her TED-Ed talk, “A Teen Just Trying to Figure It Out,” offers a great example of a personal essay.

Then there’s Taylor, who built a nuclear fission reactor when he was 14 years old; Sirena, a 13-year-old violin aficionado; and Thomas, a 12-year-old who builds iPhone apps.

One of my favorite philosophical statements is “Meet people where they are.” Where are our students? What can we say to bring them along the learning path? Maybe “we” aren’t a part of every equation. What if we let Taylor, our nuclear physicist, do the leading? When Taylor says, “I started out with a dream to make a star in a jar,” his words may inspire our young adolescents.

I can’t think of a better way to inspire students than with the accomplishments and passion of their peers. We tell students they need to be “college and career ready,” and these talks are dramatized by students who exemplify that goal.

**Flipping the Classroom**

TED-Ed can be a valuable component of a “flipped classroom.” For example, suppose you’d like to pique your students’ interest in astronomy. Ask students to view the TED-Ed talk on Tycho Brahe (http://ed.ted.com/lessons/tycho-brahe-the-scandalous-astronomer-dan-wenkels). This video is what TEDTalk calls a TED-Ed Original, which is an animation that uses the words and ideas of educators, generally for educational use.

After viewing the video, students can self-assess using the “Think” button on the site. They are directed to answer five multiple-choice questions and two open-ended questions. This doesn’t have to be an assignment, but rather an opportunity for students to monitor their own learning and to have immediate access to remediation by re-watching the video with the particular questions in mind.

Then, students can join an ongoing guided discussion by clicking the “Discuss” button, immediately widening the scope of their audience and instantaneously making it an authentic writing and communication event versus a traditional conversation.

Finally, ask students to use the “Dig Deeper” button for additional information. This is a perfect feature for differentiation; it is not necessary for the classroom conversation and activity, but it will allow interested students to expand their learning. It is a rare combination indeed to find a teaching resource with built-in remediation and acceleration in the same assignment.

Students can enter class to find an engaging activity waiting for them. For example, challenge them to debate science’s ability to predict the future. Give groups additional articles for a jigsaw activity. Finally, the students can prepare arguments grounded in evidence, thus meeting several CCSS standards at once—across the curriculum.

**Curriculum Companion**

Students inspired by the talks can join a teacher-generated TED-Ed club (http://ed.ted.com/clubs). This club empowers teachers and students to become a global voice, not just an echo in a classroom. Students are so connected, so digitally aware, so undaunted by distance, that this club likely will be more comfortable for them than for the teacher.

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The Great Debate: Are You Ready to Rumble?

A cross-curricular unit about effective argument is a natural fit for social studies and language.

BY JUDI HOLST & HOLLY SPURLIN

Young adolescents seem compelled to argue—with their parents, teachers, friends, and even passing strangers. That’s why formal debate is an ideal project-based unit for middle school students. It has all the components that engage and challenge kids: competition, choice, collaboration, and exploration of controversial topics. Students soon recognize that the art of persuasion is a skill that will serve them throughout life.

Although it is easy to teach the entire debate unit in one content area, teaching it as a cross-curricular unit in language arts and social studies makes sense. Students build on prior knowledge of law and government in social studies and develop their research and writing skills in language arts.
First Steps: Planning

We begin the unit by determining what we want our students to know and put into practice in their own lives. We want them to learn:

- How to think critically about local, national, and world issues.
- How to find evidence to support a chosen point of view.
- How to evaluate evidence as to its honesty and validity.
- How to present a viewpoint in a debate.
- How to argue against views they disagree with.
- How to write that viewpoint in a well-constructed persuasive essay.

To best use the planning time required for two classes, we created a Google Doc so we can collaborate from home, and a Google folder in which we put all the documents we are using. We also set up a folder on Edmodo to house documents that students can access from anywhere, including home.

Begin in Social Studies

We begin our unit in the social studies class, where we provide students with a list of debate topics. They also have the option to suggest a different topic that interests them. Students form their own groups of four: two students for the affirmative team and two for the team arguing against the proposition.

Before the groups finalize their debate topic, they research the topics that interest them most and formulate three pros and three cons for their top two topics. We emphasize that a debate is based on research, not on argument.

A group might want to debate the skateboarding ban in public places, but can the members find enough research to support both sides?

Using the pros/cons research, the teams of four choose the topic for their debate. If another team chooses the same topic, one of the teams must switch to their second-choice topic. Letters to parents explain the collaborative unit and include the list of topics the students chose. Parents may protest any topics they would prefer their student not debate.

Once the topics are chosen, students roll a die to determine who will argue the affirmative side and who will argue the negative side within each team. Partners write their proposition statement and brainstorm at least six arguments for each side so they will be prepared for cross-examination and rebuttal.

A Google Doc called Debate Planning Form helps students divide up the arguments so each has three pros and three cons. Because it is a Google Doc, students can access it from anywhere, which is especially helpful if their partner isn’t in their language arts class.

Each partner is responsible for three pro arguments and three con arguments; they may not argue the same points. Finally they are ready to start their research.

Researching and Writing in Language Arts

To prepare students to research their topics and write their propositions, we teach them about paraphrasing to avoid plagiarism. Students need to know that using someone’s idea without citing the source is considered plagiarism and has strong repercussions. Google has an EasyBib add-on that makes it easier for students to cite their sources.

Before doing their research, the students create a Google Doc for their constructive speech (proposition paper) and share it with their partner and their teachers. Google allows students to grant “suggested edits” instead of full editing rights to other people, so teachers and students can make comments on their
paper while they are writing it, giving them instant feedback; they can accept or reject suggested changes. Each set of partners also creates a Google Folder in which to share resources.

After students complete the rough draft of their 2–3 minute speech supporting their side of the topic, they highlight important areas on their Google Doc (thesis in one color, arguments in another color, etc.). They also make sure they cite their sources.

The language arts teacher reviews and returns the rough drafts to the students, with comments, at least a week before the debate. This way, students can make corrections and/or meet with teachers for help. She also spends some time going over effective public speaking skills, which may be a new concept to eighth graders.

The Debate in Social Studies

The final steps involve teaching students how to cross-examine an opponent and how to write their rebuttal. Sometimes, the students have a difficult time “thinking on the spot,” so it is helpful if students write out at least five possible cross-examination questions before the debate.

After the lessons are over, the real-world challenge of debates begins.

We plan for one debate per 50-minute class period. When assigning debate days, we have the students check with their parents to make sure they will be in school that day. If they are absent, they are required to present the debate material individually after school.

Students hand in the typed copy of their constructive speech on the day of their debate. They can write the speech on index cards for reference during the debate, but they are not allowed to take the paper with them.

After the constructive speech, the opponents have two minutes to cross-examine the speaker by asking questions regarding the topic. Each side also has an opportunity for a second speech to defend their arguments and refute facts, statistics, or research given by their opponent. They have five minutes after the constructive speeches and cross-examination questions to prepare this speech.

The Assessment Part

Although it would be nice to not have to “give a grade” to students since they are motivated by the debate itself, assessment is still necessary to document what students have learned. In language arts, the students are graded on their constructive speech; the rubric is based on the Common Core State Standards of persuasive writing. In social studies, students are graded during the formal debate, as the content relates to civics. The students earn a public speaking grade from the social studies teacher also, which is applied to the language arts grade.

Teaching What Matters

At first, we wondered if debate was worth all of the time it takes in both classes. In the end, our answer became a resounding “yes”! In fact, students voted the unit one of their favorites of the past year. As one student wrote, “I was like, wow, all that hard work paid off and I never even expected it to.”

A cross-curricular unit shows students that teachers also collaborate, and it builds a stronger sense of community on the team. The only thing that you may regret is teaching your students how to become better at debating issues with you.

If you would like to use any of our materials for setting up your debate, see our daily lesson plans, or ask us a question, join our Edmodo room at: https://edmo.do/j/kd9mjb.

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Would You Like to Make a Statement?

What should school leaders do when a reporter is at their door?

BY KELLY McBRIDE

“Hi, this is Larry Jones from XYZ paper and I would like to ask you a few questions about allegations of bullying by teachers at your school.”

“If you are a school administrator and you haven't already been approached by a reporter from the local media, you very well could be. And while your first reaction to media questions—regardless of the topic—may be to mutter “no comment” and move on, the first rule of thumb when dealing with reporters is never to say “no comment.”

So what should you do when a reporter comes calling? Be prepared long before you get the call or hear the knock on the door.

First Things First

The first key to dealing effectively with the media is establishing a solid relationship. If you’re there for them in bad times, they’ll be there for you in good times.

Early in the school year, invite newspaper, television, and radio reporters to meet with you. Discuss your education philosophy, your school vision and goals, advances in the curriculum. Remember, they are not educators, so explain acronyms and give them an overview of education budgets, contracts, and the negotiation process. The more they understand, the less likely they will be to misquote or skewer you with adversarial copy.

That’s not to say they won’t report negative information. Their expectations are quite different from yours. They have a story to tell. But if you have a good relationship, they’ll be more willing to hear your side first.

Key Messaging

Before you agree to any interviews, ask the reporters who they are, whom they represent, the topic of the interview, how much time they expect the interview to take, and who else is being contacted about the
Remember that you are in charge of the interview.

So, what do you say? Practice by anticipating questions, preparing your answers (but not memorizing them), having key facts readily available, and using key messages. Key messages are like mission statements: short, to the point, and reflecting positively on your district or school. Even in a tense situation, weave these messages into your statements.

For example, let’s say your key message is your school’s commitment to supporting the community through high-quality education. A reporter asks you, “Can you confirm that you are cutting four teachers from next year’s budget?”

Here’s your key message: “We are currently investigating ways to reduce our budget; however, please remember that we are committed to promoting a high quality of life in our community by educating our children—that’s our priority.”

You’re On

With the basics in mind, let’s look at several scenarios and some tips for making every interview a success.

Tip #1: Have a good administrative assistant. When I worked in a K–12 district, I was blessed to have an administrative assistant who recognized reporters’ voices when they called. When they asked to speak to me, she said without hesitation: “I’m sorry, she’s not in her office right now. Can I tell her what this is about?” Almost every reporter shared the reason for the call, providing me ample time to prepare my response or check with other experts in our district.

Tip #2: Clear your desk. When preparing for a telephone interview, clear your desk. If you have papers and calendars in front of you and a cell phone that’s buzzing with a text from your spouse, you’re not paying attention to the interview and may say something you didn’t mean to say.

If you are conducting a face-to-face interview in your office, in addition to clearing off your desk, close emails and documents on your computer screen. That letter, memo, or email open on the computer behind you should be for your eyes only.

Tip #3: Don’t be pressured by silence. That’s some reporters’ secret weapon—getting interviewees to talk through the “pregnant pause.” The reporter hopes you will find the silence uncomfortable and will fill it with information you hadn’t intended to disclose. Answer the question and say no more! As you wind down the interview, summarize and restate your points.

Tip #4: Don’t ever speak off the record. Journalists are supposed to respect the privacy of an off-the-record remark, but remember that they want the news, they want to lead over other media, and they may use whatever you say—on and off the record.

Tip #5: Relax and maintain composure. When doing a telephone interview, sit up straight and put both feet flat on the floor. Why? When you sit up straight, your voice is stronger and you sound more in command. And that’s what you want to do: be in command of the interview.

For a stand-up interview, keep your hands out of your pockets and don’t cross your arms in front of you. Instead, place your hands behind your back and interlock your fingers. This will not only make your posture better, but it will also give you a hidden outlet for nervousness or anger.

Tip #6. Have a crisis communication plan. Each of you will be involved with a crisis situation at some time in your career, and the last thing on your mind should be dealing with the media. Your district administration should designate someone to be the spokesperson. This person will be trained to deal with the media effectively. If, however, you do find yourself facing the media:

• Keep your messages simple, direct, and don’t speculate.
• Don’t be afraid to say, “I don’t know.” But follow that up with, “but I’ll find out and get the answer to you by______.”

By following these tips, you will be on your way to a much better relationship with the members of your press and you’ll know just want to say.

Kelly McBride is an assistant professor of public relations at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. She is the former director of communications for a K–12 school district in Pennsylvania.

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How Rich Is Your Classroom Discourse?

Effective class discussions focus on critical thinking rather than right answers.

**BY JELANI JABARI**

You ask the students, “What is the main idea of the passage?” Joseph responds, “Always persevere,” to which you reply, “Very good, Joseph.”

In the average classroom, as much as 70% of instructional time consists of these kinds of verbal exchanges between you and students or among students: teacher initiation, student response, teacher evaluation of the response/feedback. Classroom discussion, dialogue, and discourse are the principal means of exchanging ideas, evaluating mastery, developing thinking
Engaging students in effective classroom talk begins by creating a discourse-rich classroom culture. Begin the year by discussing what rich discourse is, the rationale for it, and answering the What’s In It for Me question by specifying ways students benefit.

Engaging students in effective classroom talk begins by creating a discourse-rich classroom culture.

Another key element of building a discourse-rich culture is embedding the spirit of collaboration versus competition. Classroom talk is not only a means of students supporting each other, but also of holding each other accountable by helping clarify, restate, and challenge ideas.

Students may not participate if their thoughts are ridiculed, devalued, or ignored. To that end, establishing norms of discourse helps develop safe spaces, establishes boundaries, and moves the discussion forward.

In my classroom, the norms included specifics on how to engage in active listening, address ideas versus individuals, and respectfully disagree/question. Role-playing appropriate and inappropriate actions can give students a better understanding of their expected role during classroom talk.

A third central element of developing a culture that fosters rich discourse is helping students appreciate the processes to get there versus simply the production of right answers. Make it clear that you value students strategically thinking about, discussing, clarifying, and elaborating on ideas rather than having someone simply state the correct answer in order to save time.

Complex Thinking Processes

Does most of your classroom talk consist of students recalling or reproducing facts? Or, do they often use complex thinking strategies such as making claims supported with evidence and reasoning, discerning the author’s purpose and its effect on the interpretation of text, and applying models to tasks? As you begin to reshape and enrich your classroom discourse, planning for and assessing complex thinking processes is essential.

To begin to engage students in more complex thinking processes, be clear about the distinction between difficult and complex. I ask teachers in my professional learning sessions whether the task of spelling a word such as antidisestablishmentarianism is difficult or complex. Many say it’s complex. However, if students have a good grasp of phonemic awareness (sounds that build words), spelling long words may be difficult, but not complex.

Webb’s Depth of Knowledge (DOK) model (recall, skill/concept, strategic thinking, extended thinking) can be used to plan and assess the complexity of thinking as well as the presence of rigor. This tool may help you plan for the type of discourse that evokes deeper cognitive processes. You might use it to:

- Prompt students to describe and analyze the characteristics of texts written during the modernism period.
- Identify and explain misconceptions around the discovery of America.
- Justify solutions for mathematical tasks involving equations with more than one solution.
- Cite evidence and use reasoning to support the claim that an unknown liquid is a mixture.

Webb’s DOK is a powerful tool that can help you evoke complex thinking processes during discourse. You’ll find a comprehensive graphic at http://static.pdesas.org/content/documents/M1-Slide_19_DOK_Wheel_Slide.pdf

Engage Reluctant Students

You probably have a few students who need their mouths physically pried open before they will contribute. Some are fearful of being critiqued in the courtroom of classmate opinion and find solace in silence. Others are disinterested and prefer to think about everything else except what’s going on in your room. Here are a few suggestions for bringing such reticent students into the fold of rich discourse:

- Invite them to discuss a topic that is important to them. Interest inventories, heart maps, and informal conversation can help you uncover such topics.
- Engage them in partner talk (e.g., pair-share, turn-and-talk) or small group before whole group. More students participate in whole-group talk if first allowed to articulate, clarify, and reorganize thoughts with a partner.
- Appreciate wait-time. When you want to know how to repair that leaky faucet in your

processes, and reflecting on content and shared thoughts.

Engaging students in effective classroom talk begins by creating a discourse-rich classroom culture. Begin the year by discussing what rich discourse is, the rationale for it, and answering the What’s In It for Me question by specifying ways students benefit.
• Do you model and insist wait-time be used as a key component of dialogue?
• Do you send non-verbal signals to students based on your perception of their ability to give a quick or correct response?
• Does your lack of comfort with content lead you to pose more close-ended questions?

When you create a classroom culture rife with intellectually safe spaces and emphases on processes of strategic thinking versus production of right answers, you invite instructional episodes of rich discourse. Student-led discourse is a powerful way to let students take ownership of their own learning.

**Self-Checking Discourse Quality**
A few questions may help you self-assess the quality of discourse in your class:
• Is the emphasis on giving the right answers rather than processes and strategies?
• Do the verbal interactions follow the teacher-dominated initiation-response-evaluation pattern?
• Is discourse carried by the voices of a few where the others are reluctant to contribute?
• Do you often provide opportunities for students to lead the discourse?

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**Figure 1. Moving from Conventional Discourse to Rich Discourse**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional Classroom Discourse</th>
<th>Rich Classroom Discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convergent responses</td>
<td>Divergent responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Known answer questions atypically posed</td>
<td>Multiple answers/explanations possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predominantly teacher-driven and led</td>
<td>Students co-construct, drive, and often lead discourse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students rarely afforded latitude to build on peers’ thoughts</td>
<td>Students build on, challenge, revoice, and share ideas with peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher relies on a few students to carry talk</td>
<td>Many students eagerly participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim is to have correct answer given in shortest time</td>
<td>Goal is to have students articulate strategic thinking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

kitchen or where your favorite retailer is located, you want the **best answer** in the shortest amount of time. Similarly, in the classroom, you may be guilty of wanting the best answer in the shortest time, given the pressure of staying on target with the pacing guide. Hardly novel but wholly effective, wait-time has been shown to improve not only the proportion of students who respond but the quality of the responses as well.

• Name the strategy after a student. For instance, when a student provides a substantive contribution, call it the **Johnathan way**, **Maureen method**, or **Sharon technique**.

Releasing the instructional reins to your students can make you uneasy. Fear of letting go may conjure thoughts of less learning taking place, increasing disorder, and the discomfort of not driving the wheels of learning. However, when students lead discourse, they clarify their own ideas and increase their levels of cognitive and behavioral engagement. It makes their thinking visible and helps you determine the most effective subsequent instructional moves.

To introduce student-led discourse, explicitly model the talk. Have them lead discourse about a topic many are passionate about, such as social media rights for young people, as a way to get them more comfortable and familiar with leading discourse.

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True Teamwork: Cohesive Co-Teaching

Sharing the classroom with another teacher can bring out the best in both of you.

BY SAMANTHA DOOLEY

When the phone rings in the middle of summer and you see your principal’s number coming across the screen, you can’t help but wonder, “What did I do?”

A few years ago, when I answered such a call, my stomach dropped as my administrator cheerfully told me about a wonderful “opportunity” that awaited me during the coming school year. I was being assigned the eighth grade math inclusion classes and would work with a special education teacher for four
class periods each day. I would have general education students as well as students who have IEPs or 504 modifications.

My first reaction (like that of any good teacher) was “Of course, I would be happy to do this!” After I put the phone down, reality set in. I was going to have to share my space, my students, my entire world with a stranger. The feelings of being the kid in group projects who did all the work while my teammates goofed off quickly resurfaced. I had heard horror stories about how co-teachers never did any teaching or how they didn’t help with management or grading.

However, I’m a problem solver and an overachiever by nature. If I were going to get this “opportunity,” I wanted to do my best for my students and my school. I immediately began searching online for conferences, webinars, and books about co-teaching. I read, watched, and attended anything I could find that dealt with co-teaching or special education students.

Tips for Co-Teaching
Some common themes became evident throughout my summer research and by the time I met my co-teacher, I felt prepared to contribute to an environment that was built on partnership, trust, and mutual responsibility. These tips are gleaned from my efforts to prepare.

Start early. From the minute you know who your teaching partner is, get to know him or her as a person. Talk about family, pets, hobbies, work experience, childhood. You may not end up being best friends, but you can build a good working environment and establish mutual respect as individuals and as colleagues.

Discuss teaching styles and content background. Thankfully, my co-teachers have had strong math backgrounds, which allowed each of us to teach in our own ways. Other co-taught classes may not be as flexible; the strong content teacher may need to take the lead with the partner providing support.

Examine your teaching habits. Assessing and understanding your strengths and weaknesses will allow you to work with your partner as a support system in weaker areas and vice versa. In our classroom, we always knew each other’s weak side and quickly learned to compensate when necessary.

Take an honest look at your classroom management practices. You can’t expect to work successfully with someone else until you know your own deal breakers or trigger issues. Some of the first conversations I had with my co-teachers included questions like “Does it bother you for students to leave the class without pushing in their chairs?” and “What if a student gets up and sharpens his pencil during a lesson?” and “What color ink do you use to grade papers?” This may not seem like a big deal at the beginning when everything is still in the newlywed stage, but five or six months into a school year, issues like these can cause hurt feelings, tension, or a big blow-up that could have been avoided.

Respect each other. Mutual respect is a must in a successful co-teaching classroom. This person is not trying to “take your job,” but is working with you.

Co-Teaching Styles
There are many types of co-teaching or team-teaching models in schools, but one of the most common is similar to mine: a general educator is paired with a teacher who specializes in special needs students. Even if the co-teaching pair is structured in a different way, there are similarities in the types of teaching that most often occur in a co-taught classroom.

One Teach–One Observe. This model allows the members of a new co-teaching team to get to know each other or it can fully utilize one teacher’s strengths in an area. One teacher teaches and the other, the observer, monitors students for comprehension and behaviors, or makes anecdotal notes for future use. Just a note: This does not mean the general educator is always teaching and the second teacher is always observing. Try reversing the roles occasionally to provide a new point of view for the students and the teachers.

One Teach–One Drift. This model is great for new teams as well. One teacher is the main instructor while the other drifts around the room, interacting with students or groups. This type of interaction allows for more one-on-one time and additional opportunities for students to ask questions of a teacher without having to stop the flow of a class or the lesson. Planning time is minimal.

Parallel Teaching. In this type of teaching, students are split into two groups, each led by one of the co-teaching pair. This strategy allows for review or for special attention to a smaller group of
students who are learning a difficult subject. This method requires more planning because both educators have a common teaching goal.

**Station Teaching.** The use of stations in the classroom is not a new concept, but within a co-teaching classroom these stations can be tailored to the needs of the students. Two educators supervising and interacting with students at different stations can promote student understanding. In our math classes, these stations were often used for hands-on geometry activities with little “teaching” necessary. Station teaching requires quite a bit of pre-planning to be effective.

**Alternative Teaching.** This is similar to parallel teaching with regard to the amount of planning needed and the fact that students are separated. In this scenario, one of the co-teachers works in an alternate location with students who need a more intensive intervention or review of material before moving forward in the subject. This model is effective for re-teaching or for test review.

**Team Teaching.** Team teaching is an ideal situation in which both teachers are comfortable with the content, the students, and each other. Within a team-taught classroom, the teachers move seamlessly into roles throughout the lesson with neither dominating the other. Lessons are more conversational between the teachers and students and the environment is engaging. Teachers are able to fill whatever role or need is required at the time: Does a prompt need to be given? Does another student need a quick one-on-one review? Would another point of view help clarify a concept? In a successful team-taught class, an onlooker sees two teachers interacting with a group of students as a cohesive unit.

My teaching partner and I worked together many years before she moved on to a different school and I repeated the process with another special education teacher. As a math general educator, I can testify that my years co-teaching have been some of the most fulfilling, challenging, and worthwhile of my teaching career.

**SAMANTHA DOOLEY** is the math general educator partner of a co-teaching team at a 6–8 middle school in Arkansas.

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### INCLUSION TEACHING MODELS

#### PARALLEL TEACHING

- 1/2 Class
- Regular Ed
- Special Ed
- 1/2 Class

Same lesson taught to each group

#### ANNOTATED TEACHING

- Regular Ed
- Class
- Special Ed

SE teacher adds specific strategies to all students

#### ASSISTANT TEACHING

- Regular Ed
- Class
- Special Ed

SE teacher is a teacher, not an aide

#### SHARED LESSON TEACHING

- Regular Ed
- Special Ed
- Class

Utopia—both teachers share teaching the class
The FIFA World Cup captured the attention of millions of Americans last summer and chants of “USA! USA!” reverberated throughout the country. I felt the excitement build as the U.S. National Team competed in Brazil, and I wondered what middle level educators could learn by observing the success of the team.

1. The first lesson for educators is a marketing one. Every day, teachers experience the triumphant moment when a sixth grader learns what it actually means to divide fractions. Millions of people across the globe may not be watching, but the celebration...
should rival the jumping and screaming we witnessed by Americans with the Stars and Stripes draped around their necks. Tremendous events happen every day in classrooms everywhere. We need to share these positive events with the members of our communities.

Tremendous events happen every day in classrooms everywhere.

2. “I believe. I believe that. I believe that we. I believe that we are going to win!” That simple chant resonated throughout restaurants, homes, and stadiums across the United States. What’s the lesson? Enthusiasm can be contagious. The chant changed the nation’s perspective of the team from one on the brink of bowing out in the group stage to one of the final 16 teams left in the competition.

As educators, we have the opportunity to make a difference in the world. Let’s be enthusiastic about this unbelievable opportunity and chant with our students that “We believe. We believe that. We believe that you. We believe that you will achieve!”

3. As educators, we have a responsibility to teach our students to work as a team. In the end, Germany won the championship by defeating Argentina despite the fact that Argentina’s team boasts a player by the name of Messi who is regarded as the best player in the world. Even with the best player in the world, Argentina was unable to triumph against Germany because the German players worked as a team. Young adolescents must understand the value of teamwork, and the World Cup provided an excellent example.

4. The final lesson is one that may not gain me any friends in the soccer world. Look at the data about the U.S. team. Their final record in the FIFA World Cup was 1 win, 2 losses, and 1 tie. Examining only the data, we see the picture of a team that failed to win as many matches as it lost. In the sports world, this is a losing record, and teams with losing records are usually not celebrated. How could a team composed of extremely talented soccer players be able to capture the attention of an entire nation, lose more matches than they won, and still become national heroes? In this world of data-driven decisions, most would say, “Let’s dismantle the team and fire the coach.” The lesson for middle level educators is that the data do not always tell the entire story. We must continue to focus on the process of teaching and learning.

Bringing It to the Classroom

In the end, the FIFA World Cup garnered massive attention across the globe and made soccer fans out of millions who otherwise would not have paid a bit of attention. Let’s work together to create this same excitement within America’s classrooms. Our enthusiasm will lead to a generation of young adolescents passionate about learning and working together to make this world a better place.

PHILIP BROWN, a former middle school principal, is now the principal of North Oconee High School in Bogart, Georgia.

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Positive Behavior Support in an Urban Middle School

Schoolwide commitment is the key to a successful PBS program.

BY RODDRAN GRIMES, KATHLEEN OESTERLEIN MCCAFFREY, & BRADLEY V. BALCH

Successful middle grades schools provide a safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environment. Educators know that for the most part, punitive measures such as silent lunches and in- and out-of-school suspensions (ISS and OSS) do not contribute to this positive atmosphere. What does contribute, however, is a school-wide positive behavior program, supported by teachers and administrators, that fosters a productive learning environment for all students.

Consider the example of an urban middle school located in the southeastern United States. The grades 6–8 school serves about
After three years, teachers began to question the value of the PBS program. They saw few positive outcomes—in fact, there were almost 1,000 disciplinary actions during that time. Some teachers described the students as “out of control.”

A Revitalized PBS Effort

During the 2011–2012 school year, the school’s new administrator asked teachers for their feedback about the PBS program and for recommendations to address student misbehavior. Based on that feedback, and with the help of a committed PBS committee, she supported the implementation of an incentive system that rewarded students for exemplary behavior on a daily basis.

Working with a PBS consultant during the summer prior to the start of the 2012–2013 school year, the committee of teachers fleshed out the program, created the guidelines and the PBS-related documents, such as Good Behavior tickets, and announced the initiative on the school’s grade-level bulletin boards. Here are the basics of the program:

- Teachers recognized students for positive behavior by writing their names on a ticket and putting the tickets in a box.
- Every Monday, each grade-level assistant principal pulled a ticket out of the box and that student received a free ice cream as a special reward. The students’ names were also displayed on the grade-level bulletin boards.
- Teachers who submitted “good conduct” names could choose a day to wear jeans. This established some buy-in among the staff.
- Every week, each teacher chose a student who modeled positive behavior and awarded that student a certificate. Each teacher also identified a Student of the Month.
- The program’s buddy system provided each teacher with a colleague to whom they could send a student who needed “time out” for reflection.
Monthly PBS celebration parties honored every student who did not have an ISS/OSS infraction or a “time out” for reflection. Students were able to attend a 15-minute dance held in the hallway and to eat lunch at a park located next to the school. Students who had been assigned ISS/OSS or who had experienced a “time out” ate in a silent lunch setting during the celebration time. The teachers determined how they would administer rewards within their own classroom by designated point keeping systems for each class period. When the goal was met, the students received rewards such as 10 minutes of electronics usage or 10 minutes of time on the sports field. Teachers reasoned that the improved class time on task over a 10- to 14-day period was well worth the 10 minutes of reward time for good class behavior.

The Second Time Around
The middle school’s PBS program was successful the second time because it was based on an individual, a class, and a school-wide system carried through with fidelity. A core group of teachers on the PBS team was able to foster goodwill among their colleagues. The grade-level PBS representatives continually asked teachers questions such as, “How is the program working with our students?”

When the new PBS program was initiated, teachers modeled the expected behavior. For example, during the first week of school, teachers showed students how to conduct themselves in the hallways during class changes. Teachers revisited and continually modeled how students should behave.

Teachers also displayed their behavior expectations in their classrooms. Expectations included “be on time,” “come prepared to work,” “complete your warm-up activity,” and “bring your textbook.” The constant reinforcement made a dramatic difference in the school’s discipline referrals.

The guiding principle of the school-wide PBS program was to make a conscious effort to reward good behavior. When a student repeated inappropriate behavior, the teacher called the parent about the issue and explained that the student had been given a chance for correction and reflection. The teacher then completed a reflection spreadsheet with the behavior noted. The PBS team looked at the spreadsheet to identify measures that might help the student.

Now that the PBS program has the support to be fully implemented, not only are specific behaviors identified as focused targets for correction, but the needs of particular students are modeled how students should behave.

Teachers created their own classroom goals and rewards systems.

Teachers recognized good behavior with student of the week and student of the month certificates.
identified for a targeted “check-in and check-out” program. Within check-in and check-out, teacher mentor checks in with each intensive-need student on a bi-weekly if not daily basis. These intensive-need students are repeat offenders within the PBS system who need additional support and do not seem to be responding to positive rewards. The educators hope these students can be individually coached and encouraged to be more successful in the school setting.

The grade-level teams record their data daily and their observations weekly. The PBS team meets monthly. Moreover, the PBS team continues to welcome new members and to seek guidance as they become increasingly more responsive and data driven; they realize that their continued commitment is necessary to impact sustainable change.

The second implementation of the PBS program was successful because it focused on changing the culture of the middle school and a new community was formed in the process. During this cultural change, teachers stated their behavior expectations, administrators supported the instructors’ efforts, a PBS team provided the supportive structure necessary for success, and students strived to perform according to the norms of the new culture. The PBS program has fulfilled its promise to reduce the number of days students were assigned to ISS/OSS—from 1,527 in 2011–2012 to 1,292 in 2012–2013.

**Conclusion**

When establishing or continuing a successful school-wide PBS program, consider some of these recommendations:

- Include a student on the PBS team. This student could provide valuable insight regarding student behavior such as bullying, cafeteria interactions, and hallway transitions that teachers might not see.
- Work with colleagues at feeder schools to establish a PBS program there. That way, incoming students would be used to a school-wide PBS program’s expectations prior to their arrival at middle school.
- Engage parental and community support. Solicit feedback from parents. Publicize opportunities to celebrate.
- Work with the school or district’s behavior specialist to provide a different perspective of data.
- Continue to train new teachers to provide consistent professional development in the school’s PBS methods.

No one person can build and sustain a successful school-wide PBS initiative. Positive outcomes are contingent on strong faculty/staff investment, supportive and transforming leadership, and an overall culture that is healthy, flexible, and open to change.

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BRADLEY V. BALCH, a former K–12 educator, is a professor of educational leadership and Dean Emeritus at the Bayh College of Education, Indiana State University.
“Keeping all students engaged in their learning is a challenge in and of itself. Budget cuts in many districts have resulted in dramatically increased class sizes. What can teachers do to make sure every student in the class is actively learning when there are 30+ students in a class?”

CAROLYN BUNTING
EDUCATOR/AUTHOR
DURHAM, NC

As a teacher, you find yourself getting better and better at doing more with less in the classroom. But when the problem escalates to include class sizes of 30 or more students, you begin to worry. You ask yourself, Can I teach so many students with so little support and still maintain the standards I hold for myself and my students? You can, and you will. Creativity will be your most gifted ally as you plan; flexibility will be your most useful support.

Talk with Students
Speak encouragingly, but realistically about what increased numbers and decreased resources will mean for them. If students are willing to work hard, ask for the help they need, and pass help on to others, their experience can be a case of less being more as independence deepens, community strengthens, and new possibilities for learning develop.

Consider Using Student-led Groups
Groups are powerful extensions of the teacher when the number of students to be taught is overwhelming. While much of what happens in your groups will be flexible, one expectation is nonnegotiable: students must come prepared to participate. Having students keep simple journals with brief entries about takeaways and contributions to the group can help groups work more purposefully.

Do What You Do Best
Rely on teaching techniques you have success with and enjoy. If your strength is leading discussions, draw on it. If you’ve mastered the five-minute lecture, use it. If you’re good at organizing content and developing activities around teaching points, find ways to honor this skill often and well.

Your goal as you look for openness is to find ways to make activities that reward and inspire you as a teacher work creatively and engagingly for your students. Discussions, for example, might be more beneficial with half the class evaluating as the other half discusses.

Simplify
This is not the year for big projects, heavy homework, or weekly essays. So be good to yourself and to your students by focusing on assignments flexible enough to honor your circumstances. Remember also the advantages of verbal “quick checks” that let you know where a student is with a topic at any given point in time.

As you add to your arsenal of ideas for surviving cutbacks, don’t forget the most important, nurturing your own well-being. Who you are in your heart and head as you enter the classroom each morning will mean much more to your students than an armload of lists and plans to be accomplished by day’s end.

CAROLYN BUNTING, is a former teacher and middle school administrator. She has written widely about teaching and is the author of the new book, Getting Personal about Teaching.

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Reversing the Trend—When Assessments Trump Curriculum Connections

BY JACK BERCKEMEYER

It’s no secret that students in the United States lag behind other countries in their abilities to score well on standardized assessments. Please note: I purposefully said, *in their abilities to score well on standardized assessments* and not “*in their abilities*” or “*in their knowledge of content*.”

I have the privilege of being invited to work in schools all over the country, and it’s impossible for me NOT to notice the extreme preoccupation (Dare I call it “an obsession”?) with students’ standardized assessment scores. And it’s impossible for me NOT to wonder: With all the time and energy focused on practicing for such assessments, what time or energy is left to thoughtfully plan for the big picture of what we (as a school or district) teach and how and when we teach it?

Here’s the problem as I see it and as numerous educators across the country have expressed it (said expression often accompanied by the tearing out of large clumps of hair): In too many schools, the approach is: “Just give us the curriculum. We don’t think about content as a whole—we just need to know what we have to do to get kids ready for the assessments.”

State standards, including the Common Core State Standards, are not intended to define curriculum. Indeed, statements within the standards documents emphasize that the standards are not intended to dictate what content to teach or how to teach it.

Nevertheless, in too many places, the instruments that assess the standards are treated as the heart of the curriculum. Teachers, committees, or administrators are not sitting down together to talk about what needs to be taught when and where and how—about aligning curriculum across grade levels or connecting content across subject areas or about what their students, as a whole, need for relevant learning experiences. Instead, they are frantically trying to extrapolate content from the questions they see on the tests. Assessments trump curriculum connections.

Recently, an experienced teacher in Florida told me that her students were required to take some form of a benchmark test, district assessment, or state-mandated test every 18 days. Wait! It gets better (or worse)! A school district in Ohio has created a district-wide, color-coded calendar that highlights all the expected tests and assessment dates. The colors indicate what type of test is to be given and when. Just looking at this calendar gave me a migraine. And we wonder why students are losing their love of school. Could it be that just when they might experience the joy of learning something, they have to stop and take a test, and not the authentic, formative assessment that belongs in every classroom—but something that practices for “the big test”?

And we wonder why teachers are burning out at an ever-increasing pace. Maybe it’s because they did not choose this profession intending to spend every 18th day prepping for a high-stakes standardized test.

Making Connections

In American education, standardized assessments remain a constant, while curriculum is an ever-changing variable. It seems to me that the oil-change rule has been applied here: Every 3,000 to 5,000 miles, it’s time for new oil. Every three to five years, it’s time for new curriculum. And in the hurry to try something new, when we barely had time to get our feet wet with the last set of solutions—we start assessing the new set of curriculum standards before we’ve even had time to train the teachers well or allow our students time to adapt to a new paradigm. Then the whole society screams because test scores flounder!

The poor students (and their teachers) can’t keep up with this curriculum “predetermined” by what’s on the tests! What’s the solution? Too often it’s this: Hey, let’s add to the pressure! Let’s slap a pacing guide on students and teachers. Let’s create a rigid schedule of when and how to teach each chunk of content! That’s
how we’ll force these teachers to force their kids to cram this stuff into their brains!

Yet, are those pacing guides aligned to other subjects so that students can see the sense and use of the content they learn...so that they can integrate it into their lives with those “deep understandings” we all say we revere? Have we connected the science, language arts, and math curricula to the social studies content so that teachers can parallel teach topics—helping students sustain understandings and not compartmentalize what they have learned? Are we communicating within departments, across departments, on core teams and school-wide teams about this?

In many cases, the answer is, “No.” Yet we all know that students need to see connections in the curriculum in order to make the content relevant. (We learned this in Education 101, didn’t we?) Once again, the frenzy to get ready for assessment trumps connected curriculum; the result is that our students leave math at the math classroom door (and the same with all other subjects).

It was no surprise when a teacher told me, “Samantha can give the factual answers about water conservation and climate control in science class, but she has no idea how that information connects to her own house or living environments around the world—let alone to broad environmental or social issues.” Sure, we can blame some of this on the teacher, but it’s also a major result of the school not having connections across subjects and grades to foster relevant learning. A single teacher, even the sharpest and most creative, cannot do this alone.

**Breaking Down the Walls**

Without the cross-subject communication and alignment, we have created what I call “subject bunkers.” It occurs at the state and district levels where subject area gurus focus only on their own content. We even hire reading, math, and literacy coaches to help with individualized subjects. This increases the bunker mentality. To solidify this, we base most curriculum discussions and decisions within departments.

Okay, so the social studies teachers know about students’ achievement successes and struggles in social studies. But why shouldn’t all the teachers know about the students’ needs in all subject areas? Maybe, just maybe, achievement and scores would go up if all teachers within the building knew that students struggle with fractions and measurement or statistics. Perhaps, PE teachers could then incorporate work with fractions and measurement into their activities or could help students collect, analyze, and display data about their sports performances!

But, wait! Wait! That would mean we might need to blow up a bunker and break down those cement walls around departments!

Educators can do this! We are clever and wise enough to make such content and curriculum connections. What we need is the belief that it’s necessary—that it will make a difference in our students’ success. And we need the time to work outside the bunkers. Here are three easy ways to start to break down the barriers:

First, stop setting yearly learning goals. These are created to appease the school and district hierarchy. How often are those yearly goals discussed once they are created at the beginning of the year?

Next, work on core teams of teachers (not department teams) to set 10-day educational goals based on student deficiencies. The data and information can be supplied by subject-area departments. The team decides what concepts and skills will be interwoven throughout all the subjects within the team. This allows all core teachers in the building to help improve student achievement and success. Plus, it keeps everyone focused on the learning goals of their own students.

Finally, have the essentials teachers (This is my nomenclature, as self-appointed Ruler of Education, for those absolutely essential colleagues sometimes called electives teachers) also create 10-day learning goals for students, based on data and knowledge of student deficiencies. This helps students see the connections outside the core subjects and further contributes to the demise of curriculum bunkers. Again, data can be supplied by the departments; but understand that these teachers also observe student needs. Allow for the essentials teachers to pick the focus over the 10 days.

We have been inundated with enough student achievement data that at any moment any one of us could burp up a binder filled with scores, assessment results, and academic trends. But are we actually using those data to make any difference? Presenting these data to the staff at a once-a-year meeting has this effect only (from what I have seen): It bores the staff and leads to mass tune-out, as proven by the glazed eyes and fingers busy texting. But these simple steps that use real data instantly and constantly to make relevant connections right now actually do make a difference.

Empowering grade-level teams and core teams to tackle content and connect curriculum is a much-needed win for our students. And you know what? When learning experiences are relevant, connected, and inviting—students engage! They want to learn! And a
side benefit of that is that kids do way better on those assessments that used to control your life.

I don’t advocate a change to: “Curriculum should trump assessment.” That’s not the answer, either. Well-planned curriculum connections and assessment are powerful partners. Schools must find ways to integrate the two, working together across grade levels and subject areas to set and implement learning goals relevant to students’ academic needs.

JACK BERCKEMEYER is an author, humorist, and speaker with Berckemeyer Consulting Group. He will be a presenter at AMLE2014.

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Bring Jack Berckemeyer to your school. Contact AMLE Director of Middle Level Services Dru Tomlin at dtomlin@amle.org for more information.

Student Voice

Young adolescents—evolving, developing, blossoming, taking risks, pulling back, doubting themselves, growing into themselves—on the path to who they will be. The way your students see themselves today may bear little resemblance to the way they see themselves weeks, months, or years from now.

Here’s how students at St. Joseph Academy in Brownsville, Texas expressed themselves.

Proud of your students’ work? Of course you are! Share it with middle level colleagues through AMLE’s Student Voice. Visit www.amle.org/studentvoice for more information and to submit online.

Amanda N. Barbara Z. Marissa G. Ana Gaby D.

Marlo J. Harrison M. Amanda N.
Taking Education to the Cloud

BY CHUCK MCGILL

“Why would anyone want to compute in a cloud?”

That was my first reaction to hearing the phrase, *cloud computing*. Clouds are ethereal, temporary, ever-changing. Hardly sounds like a good environment for doing computer work or storing precious digital data.

Despite the misleading name, cloud computing has proven reliable, efficient, and full of potential for education.

Cloud computing refers to software applications, storage, or other resources that exist online on remote servers and are available to multiple users via the Internet rather than being installed on local computers. The online, remote nature of the cloud allows users to perform three main functions:

- **Store** data online to be accessed from anywhere.
- **Create** products online with online software applications.
- **Collaborate** with partners, even at a distance, to create or modify products.

Let’s look at each of these functions and how they can be used in the middle school.

**Store Data**

Have you ever noticed that middle level students tend to lose things? Assignments, books, USB drives, laptops? In fairness, middle level teachers have been known to do the same thing. Consistent use of the cloud for storage can mean that you and your students will never lose a file again.

Instead of saving files to a local computer or server, you simply save it to an online server. Dropbox ([https://www.dropbox.com](https://www.dropbox.com)) is one popular storage service. I keep all my work and personal files on Dropbox and can access them from any Internet-connected computer.

At Dropbox you can set up a free account and download free software that looks like a folder on your local computer but is actually synched with your online Dropbox account. Many content management systems (CMS) that schools use, if they are hosted on offsite computers, also include online data storage that can be used in the same way.

Using cloud storage, students can easily access and download digital files from computers at school or at home. Teachers grant access so students can submit assignments by putting them in a teacher’s Dropbox or other online account, such as on a CMS. This eliminates the physical transfer of files and facilitates the often-problematic transfer of very large files like videos.

**Create Products**

The most exciting trend in educational technology, in my opinion, is the proliferation of sites and online applications that allow students to create and display their own content and products. This trend is transforming the Internet from a place where students consume content to a place where students create and share content. This role-shift puts our students closer to the center of the educational process, which is where they should be.

Some online platforms offer entire suites of productivity software like word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, and website creation. Google Drive is the most common of these platforms. With a Google account and a browser, a student can use any of the software applications without having any other software installed on the local computer. Students can access and work on their projects from any computer connected to the Internet.
Along with these suites, many individual sites allow students to create and share in the cloud such as Prezi (https://prezi.com), Piktochart (http://piktochart.com), and Popplet (http://popplet.com). This introduces the third function of cloud computing: collaborate.

Collaborate with Others
Many of the cloud applications that allow you to create online also allow you to work on the same project with other users simultaneously. This allows for genuine and meaningful collaboration, whether they are in the same classroom with you or on the other side of the world.

In some applications, the collaboration is simple. In Popplet, for example, permission is granted to other users to add and modify content; their contributions are labeled with their username. In other applications, like Google Drive, the collaboration can have many layers. Permission to edit is granted to particular users or to any user who has a link to the document. While collaborating, the contributions and revisions of different users are tracked and recorded. Users also can leave comments in the margins of the document linked to certain words or passages. Other users can respond to these comments in a threaded, asynchronous (not in real time) discussion.

While editing the document, users can use a chat function that allows for synchronous (live) chat within the document while they are collaborating. A colleague refers to this as the “trifecta” of online collaboration.

This type of online collaboration has practical advantages, such as eliminating the need to keep track of versions or e-mail documents back and forth. It also allows deeper and more meaningful collaboration in real time and over time. It aligns teachers and students with progressive educational approaches.

Advantages and Disadvantages
The advantages of cloud computing stem from the anywhere, anytime online access through the Internet.

• Files can be accessed from anywhere.
• Students can use the same computer environment at home and at school.
• Applications are online and software does not need to be installed on local machines—a huge potential savings.

• Real and meaningful collaboration is possible. Ironically, the disadvantages of cloud computing also stem from the anywhere, anytime online access through the Internet.
• Cloud computing depends on the availability of reliable, high-speed Internet access. Without it, students cannot access their files or applications.
• If you can access your files from anywhere, anytime, then so could someone else. This is the security concern. I believe that cloud computing is worth the potential security risks when weighed against the advantages, but this is a calculation that you and your school will have to make.

Strategies for Implementation
If you are new to cloud computing, I suggest taking an incremental approach organized around the three functions of cloud computing we discussed.

Store: Try putting some of your and your students’ files on the cloud. Start with the files around one project or assignment and have students save to and submit to a Dropbox account or use an existing CSM at your school. Later, you can move existing files to the cloud if you choose.

Create: Take an existing project that uses software like word processing, spreadsheet, or presentation. Instead of the usual software, have students create on Google Drive using the Google software.

Next, try to think of a new project or activity for which students need to create a presentation to display their learning. Then use a new application like Prezi, Popplet, or Piktochart to support the project.

Collaborate: Use the same approach for online collaboration. If you have an existing collaborative project, have the students create it on Google Drive with permissions to collaborate. You will soon think of new collaborative projects.

When you realize the advantages of cloud computing, I predict you will not be able to stay off the cloud.

CHUCK MCGILL is coordinator of the endorsement program for K–12 teachers of computers, keyboarding, and related technology applications at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul.

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Teaming for Vocabulary Development

BY BRENDA J. OVERTURF

Some students seem to have an enviable knowledge of vocabulary, but many others are quite literally at a loss for words. And, as all educators know, misconceptions about word meanings abound in every classroom with native speakers as well as English language learners.

Vocabulary is not only important for understanding and interpreting an author’s meaning, it is critical for content area learning. When students can use accurate words to explain concepts in mathematics, science, social studies, or the arts, they have deeply learned those concepts.

So how do we include vocabulary study as part of an already packed schedule? Quick vocabulary activities can provide exposure to new words, but isolated activities are not going to help kids achieve the depth of word knowledge they need. Middle level schools often use an interdisciplinary team structure for students’ emotional, social, and academic development. Using a team approach can also be an effective way to implement vocabulary study across the curriculum.

Plan Together as a Team

During a team meeting, have an honest talk about the importance of vocabulary development. If your team is like most, teachers in all content areas (including English language arts) believe knowledge of vocabulary is imperative in their classes but admit they don’t have much background about how to approach it. Regular discussions about vocabulary strategies will help teachers feel more comfortable about including word study in all disciplines.

It is important for teachers to work together to connect instruction. Create a team schedule that includes time for vocabulary instruction in all classes at least twice a week. As you plan for instruction, keep in mind the developmental needs of middle level students as described by the Association for Middle Level Education. These include needs for active, purposeful learning and multiple learning and teaching approaches.

Doing worksheets and looking up words in the dictionary will not help most students learn words. Middle level kids need to experience new words and phrases in ways that are integrative, relevant, and motivating. Vocabulary study should be enjoyable!

Select Words for In-Depth Study

Each teacher on a team can easily think of hundreds of words that are important in his or her subject area. It seems counterintuitive, but less is often more in vocabulary instruction. In a recent article entitled “Effective Academic Vocabulary Instruction in the Urban Middle School,” Joan Kelley, Nonie Lesaux, Michael Kieffer, and S. Elisabeth Faller suggest it is best to choose a small number of high-utility words for students to engage in in-depth study and use those words as a platform for deeper word study.

Six to eight words for in-depth instruction in a two-week cycle seems about right for most teams. Deciding what words to include is always tricky, so consider that all words are not created equal when it comes to vocabulary instruction. In Bringing Words to Life: Robust Vocabulary Instruction, Isobel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Linda Kucan suggest that words can be placed in one of three categories: Tier 1 words are words students already know, and should not be selected for study; Tier 2 words are words students will see in texts across subject areas, like analyze, impending, and multitude; and Tier 3 words are those words that students will encounter mostly in the content areas, such as isotope or equatorial.

According to these researchers, teachers should concentrate on Tier 2 words, adding Tier 3 words as they are encountered in content area instruction.

The team can choose Tier 2 words for half the words for in-depth study. Each content teacher can then choose at least one word that represents a major concept in an upcoming lesson to make up the rest of the six to eight vocabulary words.

To help fill the vast unknown word gap, teachers also can help students develop “word
consciousness” by flooding the environment with exposure to essential words in various content areas. Adding activities such as content word walls and reading aloud intriguing texts rich with interesting terminology and expressive phrases can help students become more motivated to learn new words.

**Introduce Vocabulary as a Team**

Introduce the small number of selected words in a way that works best for your team. On some teams, each content area teacher introduces his or her respective content area word and the English language arts teacher introduces the selected Tier 2 words. On other teams, each teacher introduces the list of words chosen by the team teachers at a given time in the schedule.

Vocabulary words should be introduced within the context of a sentence or text passage. Students should then have opportunities to explore the words and their relationships. For example, inviting students to use reference materials (either print or digital) to find at least two synonyms or examples and two antonyms or non-examples for selected vocabulary words can help kids create more substantial networks of related words. And a bonus: if students concentrate on only seven vocabulary words across the team, adding related synonyms and antonyms means that students are actually deeply learning 35 words.

Besides introducing words for in-depth study, emphasize word-learning strategies in all classes. The ability to use context to figure out the meaning of unknown words and phrases is a strategy for independence and a powerful tool for lifelong learning.

**Add Active Vocabulary Practice**

Decide how students will practice word meanings within the overall team schedule. Will each teacher on the team allow a few minutes for vocabulary practice of selected words? Will teachers take turns scheduling time for vocabulary practice? Or will each teacher emphasize practice of vocabulary words introduced in that particular content area?

Students usually enjoy vocabulary instruction if it includes some fun. Plan for students to engage in hands-on, minds-on activities that allow them to engage with classmates while practicing the meanings of words. As Jeff Wilhelm describes in You Gotta Be the Book: Teaching Engaged and Reflective Reading with Adolescents, dramatizing words and phrases can often bring terms to life for kids. Invite students to create a “tableau” where students act out a word and then freeze in place, and then encourage other students to guess the word. Art activities where students illustrate definitions and defend their illustrations often help them internalize meanings and connect new words to their own lives. Creative teachers can think of many ways for students to have fun in order to better learn vocabulary.

**Assess Vocabulary Progress**

Plan to develop, administer, analyze, and evaluate vocabulary assessments as a team. Informal assessment, such as observation, individual response systems, or analyzing student work, can help teachers get a gauge on vocabulary knowledge and be a guide for re-teaching. According to Katherine Stahl and Marco Bravo in “Contemporary Classroom Vocabulary Assessment for Content Areas,” more formal assessment is often difficult because vocabulary development is so multi-faceted. These researchers encourage teachers to create vocabulary assessments based on their own curriculum needs.

Brief assessments can be structured in the same ways that students will be assessed on standardized tests to help them practice test-taking skills as well as evaluating vocabulary progress. Teachers can take turns administering and scoring assessments, or a particular time in the schedule can be set aside for team-wide vocabulary assessment. Assessments can be saved from year to year and can be revised to reflect changes in curriculum or student needs.

Also, develop ways for students to keep track of their own vocabulary progress. Middle level students need opportunities to engage in self-assessment.

**The Final Word**

There is no doubt about it--vocabulary knowledge is essential for student achievement. Kids need time and intentional instruction to acquire and use networks of words and to know how to implement independent word-learning strategies. When we as middle level teachers work as a team to “spread the word,” we help all students become better readers, writers, speakers, and thinkers.

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“Great teachers, to borrow from Walt Whitman, are large; they contain multitudes. Why, then, are our policies so small and narrow?”


“The human spirit is more powerful than any drug – and THAT is what needs to be nourished: with work, play, friendship, family. THESE are the things that matter.”

— Robin Williams as Dr. Malcolm Sayer in the 1990 film, Awakenings.

“Punishment and rewards shift students’ focus away from learning and toward avoiding one or seeking the other.”


“Remember, when the world grabs your hand and yells this is important, it is your job to pull it away. Have a plan, be intentional, and keep perspective.”

— Jeff Delp, “Is your Teaching (or Leading) out of Balance?”, from his Molehills Out of Mountains blog, May 18, 2014.

“At some point, ignorance becomes a choice. When teachers reject evidence-based teaching practices in favor of outdated traditions, it’s a choice.”


“It’s not that willpower makes certain kids successful; it’s that the same loose cluster of mental proficiencies that helped them with distraction when they were young also helped them score well on a test of reasoning when they were older.”


“If tenure was a problem in American schools, teachers would support abolishing it. Nobody hates a bad teacher more than a great teacher.”

— Mark Clements, @edunators, August 17, 2014.
Lauren Francese & Rebecca Marsick

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