

Friday, October 31, 2008

Professional Self-Development

Why Should Teachers Write and Focus Upon Goals?

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

No one cares, really? Do they?

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

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

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

Or, is the target pushing, coaching, training, tutoring every student to reach the "minimum cutting score" (just passing). Does the teacher experience pain, fear, loathing and dread and level criticism toward students that miss the minimum skills bar? Most teachers will draw the same pay if their students meet high-stakes testing targets, or not.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This works the same way for student scores on the high-stakes tests. If students make tremendous progress, then they should be rewarded and praised for their successes, even if they fall short of the "passing score." Strategy

Change Strategy change is about "tweaking" your performance tactics and the management methods that you employ to improve.

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

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

A teacher is stressed and over eats, gains lots of belly fat. He wants to lose weight. By using an elastic tape measure, he can't tell if he is getting slimmer. On the other hand, a fixed target doesn't help either. The person with a 40 inch waist cannot fit into the slacks with a 34 inch waist if his waist size is 36, 37, 35, 39 or 41. All he knows is that the size 34 slacks are too small.

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

before you can tell if you are on track. (The change could be accidental or related to outside conditions.) Making changes in strategy, because something is not working requires some knowledge of what does work, and how the results from applying that strategy were atypical (not what you and everyone else expected). Doing something else (because a strategy does not appear to be "working") only makes sense if you know what measurable strategy does work.

"Shot-in-the-dark" attempts to rectify a non-productive teaching situation seldom produce measurable gains. Sidebar "Shot-in-the-dark" activity changes are the mark of confused teachers that do lack written goals and don't know where they are going. They know that previous activities failed, but don't know why. So, they try something new, and another something new, and another, and another…

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

Teachers will deny that they hold fears, especially fears about losing their "almost locked into it for life, unless they commit a felony, and maybe note even then" jobs. It is common knowledge (an Urban Myth?) that school district can't dislodge "bad" teachers from their jobs, even with dynamite. This belief holds sway and is bolted into everyone's consciousness, especially in states with large memberships in teachers' unions. But whether this scenario matches reality is irrelevant when compared with the terrors and scary worries that inhabit the inner landscape of a teacher's thoughts and feelings. Every teacher knows colleagues (or has heard about the friends of colleagues) that were either "fired," forced to resign, or "made to feel so miserable by a principal" that they left the campus (or the teaching field). And, principals and school district administrators are "rumored" to attend lawyer-taught courses on how to use "within-the-law" methods of ridding a campus of the "deadwood, driftwood, rotten wood, and wood that just doesn't match the decor (or campus decorum)."

Fear of being fired? "My Union and I laugh at you!" Maybe such bravado masks a teachers' real feelings of vulnerability. Probably not. However, the fear of not knowing what to do to improve is real and palpable. Teachers are plagued with vying theories and repackaged instructional fads. Professors and pundits promulgate ever more intricate "solutions" from the podium and the PowerPoint presentation. These "authorities" believe that they are "teaching experts." And many believe that they alone possess the "secret" of successful teaching. Each expert wants teachers to change, but change to the way that the expert thinks is crucial. It is amazing that so many experts fail to figure out that change is personal and must be tailor-made for the person that is making the change. Change is difficult and change also takes time. Besides, the pace of institutional change makes the snail and sloth seem like speedsters by comparison. And teachers must work within the constraints (sometimes choking strangle holds) of those institutions. The lifecycle of implementing a viable educational reform (that really takes hold and delivers student achievement and instructional gains) is 20 Earth years. The path from Newbie to Master Teacher takes three (or more) years. The Path toward Self-Improvement Goals Knowing what to do by identifying a path to success through the forest and thickets of hidden possibilities can seem bewildering. And, what if, stuck in this maze of conflicting, competing, mutually canceling theories; a teacher doesn't know which direction represents "the way out?"

The answer is that teachers must write their own goals. Those goals then act like a compass. But, writing goals is different than writing lesson plans… the documents that are submitted to campus administrators or department chairs. One way that these differ is that lesson plans describe goals for student learning, i.e., what the students will do to learn. The goals that teachers must write are statements about what the teacher will do to be more effective. These are teacher's targets. Targets that teachers must commit to, and targets that teachers must constantly recommit to, like an every day renewing marriage vows! (And almost as important for your long-term teaching success. A Supportive Other After writing personal and professional goals, teachers need to find a sympathetic and harmonious other to share these goals with. But this sharing needs to be of the "once the honeymoon is over straight talk, hold you accountable-type;" not the "Your doing great and your perfect in every way" type of support. This kind of support comes from a friend or partner, not from a mentor (because the mentor-mentee relationship is unequal, with the mentor being the higher-up expert). A mentor sets targets and makes suggestions of what changes need to be made, while a supportive partner focuses upon set of accomplishments that the teacher sets for himself or herself. (Big difference!) This unequal relationship is also the reason that the supportive relationship cannot develop between the teacher and the

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

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

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

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

These are the items that can be counted and recorded.

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

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

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

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

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

These indicators must be personal, meaningful and specific.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Tuesday, September 30, 2008

Professional Self-Development

The Twelve Worst Planning Practices

Planning is the most important "non-outcome, non-output, non-urgent, non-teaching" task that you can perform. Planning delivers visible but difficult to connect and document paybacks.

So, planning is often deferred, put off or relegated to miscellaneous moments instead of to "prime-time, crucial, high impact thinking and high impact productivity" times. Major Planning Mistakes Here are twelve major planning mistakes that teachers make: 1.) Completing Urgent tasks before Completing Important tasks

Urgent tasks must be completed, just be sure that you find time to squeeze in the important tasks each day, preferably before starting on the urgent tasks

2.) Saying "Yes" too Soon, and too Often

This includes the "sins" of being eager to please, eager to help, eager to accept someone else's work or someone else's responsibility. Delegate instead of taking on more work

3.) Accepting Global, Idealistic Goals instead of Specific, Doable Goals

Reaching for the stars is great, but be sure to keep your feet on the concrete ground (pun intended). Pursuing ideals is the mark of a Master Teacher, but be sure to focus on the coordinates of doable, measurable specific tasks that prove your progress

4.) Mistaking a Schedule, Activity List, Lesson Plans and Curriculum for Goals

Schedules, Activity Lists, Lesson Plans and Curriculum Frameworks are tools, but these tools cannot substitute for goals. Goals must be S.M.A.R.T.; i.e., Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-Frame Oriented. Anything less is a pretend goal that is unlikely to deliver positive, desired results

5.) Targeting Activities that others claim to "Work" without testing, and without developing a Contingency Plan

Activity lists, target-focused tactics and secret strategies do not constitute a plan. In fact, these prized finds can become distractions and contribute to "Information Overload." Test everything that others share with you. Prove to yourself, for yourself; that each activity, tactic and strategy works at this moment, with your specific students. Don't generalize beyond what you have been able to prove, now

6.) Jumping into Programs, Innovations or Changes too Quickly

Think, Plan, Test; then implement. Avoid "Do first, regret afterwards." Remember that if you select one path, you prevent yourself from taking every other path. Be sure to have escape routes in mind at every turn

7.) Lack of a Tracking Process

Know where you are going and when you are supposed to arrive at specific milestones. And, know early that you are going in the wrong direction. Make corrections early, not "after the fact"

8.) Killing Great Ideas because they Require too Much Work

"Wrong work," not hard work is the enemy of efficiency and success. Rid yourself of non-productive tasks and zero in on high-payoff tasks. Avoid choosing the "easy jobs" instead of choosing "difficult but effective" tasks. Work on the right tasks will deliver more satisfaction and success

9.) Focusing on Short-Term Solutions when Long-Term Investments are Required

This is the mistake of grabbing for easy answers, picking only the "low-hanging fruit." Many teacher goals require the investment of a lot of time and effort, challenging logistics, and repeated trial and error. When the goals are right, the additional work is worth the effort

10.) Working Manually when Technology would Streamline and Automate Tasks

Spend the "up front" time installing and learning the technology that will speed up and automate your work. Avoiding the use of technology because the "learning curve is steep only leads to a sharp slippery slope at the back end of a project." (You will find yourself slipping, sliding and struggling when you should be coasting to success.)

11.) Focusing your "One Size fits All" Solution towards the "Average" Student

Plan for variability in student learning, plan for multiple reteaching sessions, plan to communicate to students using multiple learning styles (Multiple Intelligences). Assuming that you are "skillful enough to teach every student with one-trial learning" is not only a planning error, but an error in professional judgment. Allow time for all the reteaching and all the practice that real learning requires

12.) Planning for What Happened Before instead of What Might Happen

Positive planning is proactive and successful planners always assume that anything (or everything) can change (maybe instantly). Plans that leave you "blind sided" were created with a "blind eye" to reality. Expect to adjust your plans, and you will be ready for that eventuality. You are going to have to adjust, so build proactive strategies into your plans from the start.

Perhaps your planning process is clean and sparkling, and you can't find any of these major mistakes in your professional life.

If so, either open your eyes, or show other teachers how you can "walk on water" because just about every teacher is burdened and stressed with extra, useless work and out-of-focus directives.

And, even if you don't commit these "planning sins," refrain from casting stones on your colleagues because you didn't arrive at your Master Teacher status without your share of mistakes.

The benefit of knowing these 12 Worst Planning Practices is that you could learn to choose to practice each one…only once.

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Sunday, August 31, 2008

Professional Self-Development

Digital Portfolios: Will these Tools Ever Work?

Digital portfolios are a great idea. Feature sets are increasing in reliability, scalability and relevance. Digital portfolios help teachers make important instructional decisions, and serve as outstanding reporting tools. Digital portfolios are fantastic motivational and guidance tools for students.

Students, parents, teachers and administrators can show progress and make informed decisions about instructional options and performance targets.

In addition, portfolios provide an antidote for the mindless compulsion that our national learning community places on "one-slice-of-time," high-stakes test scores. Vermont was an early adopter of ordinary, run-of-the-mill "hard copy" student portfolios. Rhode Island has come to the forefront in the Digital Portfolios arena, focusing upon proficiencies other than tests. More than half of the state's 39 school districts have implemented definite portfolio requirements. With these limited successes, what are the prospects for widespread use of portfolios across our country? Digital Portfolio Success Depends on your Goals The strength of digital portfolios is also their weakness. For a digital portfolio program to be successful, everybody in a school district has to use the program. This means everybody; every teacher, every student.

And what does everybody mean? Each and every teacher

Every student

Every administrator who keeps track of students' and teachers' progress

Parents The "every teacher" is the "catch." "Every teacher" represents the sticky point, the hang-up for an entire digital portfolio scheme, i.e., plan.

The reason is that patchwork implementations; i.e. some teachers using portfolios this year, some student with portfolios from last year, some students with portfolios from two years ago; but not last year; you get the idea.

Unless portfolios are used year to year, by every teacher, the effectiveness of this tool diminishes. How to Ensure Portfolio Use Someone with authority and determination to see a digital portfolios project through to success must insist that every teacher starts and maintains a portfolio record for every student.

And, that person must check to ensure that these portfolios are started, must check to ensure that every portfolio is maintained, and must determine that the quality of each digital portfolio represents each student's finest accomplishments.

Without this "directed compliance," some (a few) teachers will "backslide" and abandon the portfolio juggernaut in midstream. Other teachers (quite a few), if given a choice, will decline to participate, still other teachers (almost every teacher) will set sail, then "abandon ship" when they see all the extra work that the portfolios require. The extra work will seem like too much to bother with, since little observable evidence will demonstrate that the extra work is worth the effort. Balance the Extra Work Everyone, especially teachers and students, will have surplus (extra) work to do once a digital portfolio project is implemented.

And, there will be few observable, measurable payoffs for a long period of time.

So, the success of a digital portfolio system depends upon; Compensating teachers for the extra time that they must invest

Decreasing other job requirements so that teachers work load is held constant (preferably decreases)

Implementing the "back-end programming and processing" system so that as much of the digital portfolio system is as automated as possible

Commitment to adequate technical support and Service Level Agreements (SLA's) because system requirements become "mission critical" and need to be "highly available" This means increasing servers, network infrastructure, database administrators, network administrators, technicians and help desk support staff; even if the digital portfolio system is hosted outside the school district (as a Web service). Summary Digital portfolios offer a valuable learning resource for students, a valuable communication resource for teachers, and a public relations resource for the school district.

But, all of these benefits are lost if implementation is spotty, haphazard, and erratic.

Digital portfolios are worth the extra time and effort, but only if there is a commitment to fully fund the digital portfolio project. There must also be an equal commitment to 1.) increase compensation to teachers for the extra work, or 2.) better still, to eliminate useless and time-draining, non-productive tasks from the teaching day.

Unless top-level leadership is strong, committed and eternally vigilant, digital portfolio systems will fall short of their potential. And, school districts that embark on a system that lacks adequate funding and leadership will suffer political and community relations damage.

The old adage: "Look before you leap" applies to the grand design and wishful thinking that goes into prescribing a digital portfolio system. With planning, funding and commitment a digital portfolio system can become the backbone of a

marvelous learning resource for students.

Without these basic requirements, the potential benefits garnered from digital portfolios turn into "egg on the face, let's find some teachers to blame" fiascos.

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Thursday, July 31, 2008

Professional Self-Development

School 2.0

Almost everyone hopes and wishes that our schools could improve. Of course, the various stakeholders of our schools hold varying ideas about how this should be accomplished. But two principles underlie these fantasies: The folks that want sky-high change for the better expect to accomplish this with budgets as low as a worm's arches

For idea that we support, adopt, implement; other choices, other options, other paths cannot be supported, adopted, implemented or taken. So, for example, even if there were unlimited funding; students cannot conduct research on the Internet, play the tuba and quarterback for the football team at the same time.

Students can integrate some things, such as the report that contains science, social studies, English, math and health concepts.

But, the Techies that propose the ideal "school of the future" seem to believe that technology can enable multi-task-learning.

Let's see, maybe the quarterback can have a heads-up display in his helmet (no pun intended) that allows satellite Internet access when the defense is on the field. And, maybe tuba practice can be virtual note-reading and fingering for a midi-enabled handheld keyboard that is stored in his or her shoulder pads during the time that the offense is on the field.

Of course, the old-fashioned football coach would object because he insists that the quarterback pay attention to the on-field action, and, keep his or her "head in the game." No Shortage of Ideas Although technology … Devices Networks

Applications have yet to become interoperable and scalable enough, or powerful enough to meet Technology Integration goals; advocates can free to dream that these (not yet easy enough) tools might make a positive impact on education.

The biggest dream (fantasy really) is that the various school district stakeholders are going to agree to focus upon technology … and agree to get things done.

What things? you ask.

Here are the important factors, as Techie Idealists see them: Engaged, Independent Student Constructing Knowledge Performance-Driven Administrators

Collaboration-Driven Teachers

Leadership and Continuous Improvement

Technical Support Of course, in this fantasy, everyone would amass such a high level of technical expertise that training and professional development will cease to be a necessary part of the Technology Plan. Sidebar These fantasy excursions into possibility thinking are not new. Apple ™ proposed such ideals a score of years ago with the Apple ™ Classrooms of Tomorrow (ACOT) program.

And this was when computers used floppy disks and when the most powerful Apple ™ computer was the Apple ™ Laser Printer. Today's technology is "light-years" ahead of the primitive equipment of yore, but still not easy enough to use. If Technology is the Focus, are People Important? As amazing as it sounds, Techie's implicit trust in technology leaves people defined in limited and traditional roles. These roles include: Teacher

Student

Parent

Community Member

Administrator

Policy Maker

Technologist So, what is missing from this list? Thinkers

Artists

Planners

Caretakers

Healers and Therapists

Entertainers

Farmers

Mechanics

Factory and Production Workers

Service Sector Workers

Financial Professionals

Law Enforcement

Military

Engineers

Technicians

Skilled Artisans

Entrepreneurs…the roles and ideals that teachers see as a desirable future for their students.

Learning consists of more than attitudes, knowledge and skills. Performance and execution are important learning components.

But, equally important are problem-solving, decision-making, cooperation, collaboration, creativity and communication.

So are kindness, love, poetry, the appreciation of peace and beauty, patriotism, and a belief in democracy.

Technology is an important "half-truth" that must support education as a an invisible (transparent) tool; but by itself, technology offers little more to education than a skillet offers to the meal. Maybe the skillet makes preparing the meat easier than poking the meat with a stick and holding it over a fire, but neither the skillet or the stick constitute the meal. Why Technology Folks can't Talk to Teachers
Techie folks face a handicap when they pitch technology solutions to teachers.

That handicap is that the Techies talk "Techie Talk."

But teachers have little or no interest in "technology for the sake of technology." And, "Techie talk" seems like foreign sounding, suspicion-provoking, confidence-shattering noise to teachers.

Techie folks are so enthralled by the specifications and features of the latest "breakthrough" devices, upgraded software, or "socialized" Web service that they fail to notice that these "specifics" leave teachers cold.

There are several models that we can apply to analyze this communications collapse, i.e., the Techie folks might just as well be "talking to the walls." The Neuro Linguistic Programming Rapport Model
One model that stretches our understanding of the non-functional communication dynamics between Techies and teachers is the Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) concept of rapport.

In the NLP Model, "Rapport" means more than just getting along. Rather, it means something like, "being on the same wavelength."

On the level of interest, teachers are focused on instructional management, classroom planning, measurable learning outcomes...and performing well enough to keep their jobs.

But Techie folks drone on about all the neat and nifty tricks that hoop-jumping software and paper-tiger-taming Online services can perform. Great! Except, what teacher cares?

Besides, teachers are sophisticated enough in the use of technology to know that this "three-ring" hot-shot stuff always takes more time than it saves; and that "doing it the old, tried and true, no frills, just-get-the-job-done" methods require no new technology, and no new learning curve. The "Person Like Me" Model
The other model that explains the "dynamic discontent" between Techies and teachers is the "Person Like Me" Marketing Model.

With this model, marketers explain that relationship, trust and influence are produced when people come to believe, "This is a person like me" (and all that such a belief might mean to a specific person), "and if they say that the product is great, I believe them."

However, when Techies speak "Techie talk" to teachers, the unconscious, visceral (even below conscious awareness) belief that bubbles up is, "This person isn't hearing a word that I am saying, this person isn't describing anything that is important to me, I don't understand anything that this person is saying; so why should I trust anything that they are saying?" ("The Techie is not like me! Everything that they say is suspect.")

"Besides, even if this technology stuff were to save time for me over the long run, in the short term, it will take more time than I have right now."

"And, I don't know if what the Techie says is true, anyway. And even if it proves to be true, the Techie wouldn't know because nothing that I hear from him has the least bit to do with instruction." Summary
Techies cannot effect change in education because they do not talk "teacher talk," i.e., instructional language. And, Techies fail to be sound believable to teachers because they eschew instructional jargon in favor of speaking technical lingo.

And while technical lingo is fine as a shorthand way for Techies to communicate to each other; "Techie talk" leaves teachers feeling uneasy, suspicious and resistant to the Technology Advocate's ideas...no matter how useful or potentially relevant.

The solution for this dichotomy is for the Techie to learn to talk "teacher talk" and for Techies to listen to teachers as though teachers have something important to say.

If the Techie would bother to listen, then learn, then speak teacher jargon; teacher's would begin to trust Techie communication.

But, if Techies listened and developed relevant solutions for teachers, they wouldn't be pushing technology. They would be improving instruction.

"Improving instruction by ignoring technology and focusing on student achievement," now that is an idea that teachers can "sink their gnashing teeth into."

Monday, June 30, 2008

Professional Self-Development

Make Cognitive Rebuilding a Summer Professional Development Priority

Summer tasks center upon cognitive rebuilding, especially at the end of a school year, or at the end of a college degree marathon. And, this rebuilding is "cognitive, conceptual" i.e., in the realm of memory, idea integration and consciousness. The building metaphor fits; but, if the wind-down from the stress and attention of the school year is followed by relaxation and release; insights and ideas can grow. After an academic and cognitive year; relaxation and reverie seem like a caravan that requires respite and recharging at an oasis.

The cognitive rebuilding is "foundation work." It is the cognitive restructuring needed to shore up the underpinnings of thought and professional performance.

This building should avoid research and study. Focus and concentration are inferior to musing, daydreaming, puzzling over memories, napping, and incubating meaning.

The idea (or blueprint) for building this cognitive foundation is simmer and stew the experiences of the prior school year, making meaningful connections, anchoring ideas to the foundation that support them.

In this way, when the foundation is renovated, remodeled with a fuller immersion and enriching experience, the professional cognitive framework is enriched, too.

This process is a collaborations and integration of internal professional talents and skill-states. Not Generally Noticed The layering of complexity during the integration of knowledge, skill and ability is a naturally occurring process that results (over time and through application and practice) into an integrations that can be called an "expert" level of performance. This process creaks along, usually unnoticed due to the flurry, scurry and stress of the daily grind's hubbub.

But, if you can sit back, relax, catch your breath, and just think-feel-be; you can reunite the visceral, mental, emotional learning.

The process accelerates, streamlines itself, if you avoid imposing pre-sets; and if you pose "What if's?", "What caused?", and "What happened?" questions; Instead of trying to squeeze or contort (or reject outlying information that doesn't fit the pat answer), instead of trying to align experience to the "current jargon-theory" about education; listen to your experience, and really learn about how to teach, communicate, relate to your students.

For example, at one time, chemical elements were considered to be a simple atom. Later, atoms were understood to be composed of three building blocks (i.e., protons, neutrons and electrons). Now, the building blocks are known to be composed of building blocks of their own; and some parts are even defined as left-handed, right-handed; and there are hints that certain building blocks may "pop in and out" of the material universe. Matter once was simple, i.e., it existed or not. Now, there may be "dark matter," "anti-matter" "proto-matter," and who knows?

Light was once a beam, then a particle wave, then both. Light was thought to be a phenomena, but now evidence suggests that light seems to respond (be influences, interact) be self-aware of the people who are observing it.

And at one time, Light was the absolute, fastest movement. Now, evidence suggests that the entire observable Universe grew to 85% of its current size in a few billionths (13) of a second. This means that the first light from one side of the infant Universe would take hundreds of millions of years to reach meet the light from the other side, and hundreds of millions of years to reach the far side. Clearly, this "super-bang" process occurred faster than the speed of light.

So, when older and existing theories no longer satisfy; constellations of thought and experience "morph" into theories that provide more useful explanations; explanations that provide greater accuracy for driving application, performance and achievement. A Contemplative, Meditative, Reverie Process Contemplation, meditation, reverie, daydreams; these activities (altered states of awareness?) contain the spark of creativity, the current of intuition, the incubation of ideas that knits, sews, folds, hems and resizes the cognitive foundation that next year's activities will be build on.

And, rather than stressing over how the fabric of these thoughts and insights will come together, the gentle art of intention is all that is required.

Intending that insight and understanding will resolve in the images, sounds, flashes and prompts of imagination is sufficient to launch this innate capacity.

Sufficient that is, if the process is free, unhindered, allowed to range wherever, allowed to roam without tether, untied to theory and previous learning.

And with the freedom to become whatever these open-ended thought processes create, the magic of ideas takes form in specific insights and objective reality.

In summary: Relax, trust your internal capacity for creativity, insight, intuition and problem-solving.

You may amaze yourself at your ideas. And, you won't let yourself down.

Saturday, May 31, 2008

Professional Self-Development

Embracing eLearning: Why your Career Depends on Online Skill Improvement Teachers are often ambivalent to eLearning. Why? One answer: Because bureaucrats often beat the "rhetoric drum" about how computer and online course material that will, one day, replace teachers. But, teachers should ignore this "never gonna happen" nonsense; or, just ask the basic question, "How old do learners have to be before computers and online teacher substitutes become effective?" Or, as the corollary question, "If school districts cannot afford the technology infrastructure (computers refreshed at least every three years, high speed data backbone, redundant and failsafe server farm, one IT staff member for each 66 computers) for a one-computer classroom, how will a computer for every student become affordable?" Advice: Ignore this debate and find a more productive focus for your time and energy. Online Learning is a Teacher's Friend Online learning is a teacher's friend because online content represents the only place that teachers can learn the survival skills that they need for the modern teaching world. College classrooms and district-sponsored in-service programs fail to target the "need-to-know now, must improve my skills of..." that comprise the day-to-day needs of teachers. Mandated school district training, if it targets anything useful, targets school district problems. But, how likely is it that the school district's challenge matches a teacher's need? Most often, the school districts problems are either... Bureaucratic snafus that teachers are being blamed for Problems related to one or two teachers, that all teachers (not only the offending ones) have to suffer for The result of long-term mismanagement and inept decision-making. (More of the same, applied to in-service training, will fail as well

So, expect little from school district-sponsored training, and you won't be disappointed. How Teachers Really Learn - and Improve Sitting on the receiving end of an avalanche of "pearls of wisdom" during a training program has failed to demonstrate positive application outcomes for teachers. In other words, teachers learn something, but find nothing useful in most in-service training programs. The reason that seat-time training is the myopic bureaucrat's "solution" of choice is that the "pay once, document that many teachers were given a boost in skills" approach creates the illusion that the district is "addressing student outcome shortcomings" by shoring up "teacher shortcomings." Of course, teacher shortcomings are seldom the cause for the effect that these strategies are supposed to allay. (Telling teachers about a new theory or strategy doesn't boost student learning.) But, talk is cheap, and bringing in an "expert" to pontificate is the cheapest "pseudo-remedy" that has a modicum of face validity. But, online learning faces no competition from "politically connected consultants, even though online strategies connect authentically with real teacher needs. The reason: School district officials seldom wish to pay for online learning. In fact, teachers seem to resent paying for online learning, too. Sidebar It is a curious bit of irony that the very folks who hold to the mistaken notion that online learning can replace teachers are the same folks who are so reluctant to pay for online learning for teachers. Go figure... What about In-House Online Training Creating online training in-house is costly. Those pesky trainers want to be paid before they do the creation, and they are not even in front of trainees. So, this downtime (when the trainers are developing, rather than training) seems like a waste. And, developing an entire course is a waste because teachers are busy, and teaches seldom wade through the entire course. Teachers only want to extract usable segments of the training and skip the rest. How Adults Learn: Especially How to Apply Skills and Habits Adults waste their time if they slog through information that they already apply skillfully. But, repeat information that is not applied is intellectual-only ballast that only adds "drag" to any progress that the teacher makes in improving application and skill. If a school district wants to improve the skill sets of teachers, then folks in charge need to figure out how adults learn. And the fact that usable adult learning is global, holistic, non-sequential is important. These folks must also figure out that application of a skill by one teacher will take a different time track and application focus than for other teachers. Navigating a sailboat provides an analogy for the complexity of improving instruction for teachers. Different skills are required to navigate during the day than after dark, different skills are use in northern seas than in tropical currents; and navigation during storms differs from navigation during periods of intense calm. And procedures change in patrolled coastal waters compared to what must be done on lawless seas where pirates ply their barbaric trade with impunity. A sailor might be soothing sunburned skin one day and bailing storm water from the bilge the next day, and fixing the bilge pump the day after. Nice, orderly, sequential jaunts through a training curriculum with the leisure of a Sunday excursion in the park; as though the sojourn is a self-guided tour... neatly labeled, all interesting and pertinent facts researched... well planned, nothing out of place. Let's get real Online learning must be... Modular

Interactive

Focused on real-world teaching needs

Friendly

Confidential

Competent

If these word fail to describe any online course that you know, than you have experienced courses that are designed to

earn course credit. These courses are great for meeting certification and job advancement needs. But, these models of academic design are useless for practical, day-by-day, what teachers need to know how to do now, teaching. Enough "Gloom and Doom" Description of the Status Quo! Tell us "What Works!" Requisites for online training include: Confidentiality: The teacher must be assured that supervisors and upper echelon school district management cannot discover that the teacher is communicating, asking for, exploring, examining. All interaction that the teacher makes with the online system must be secret. Otherwise, teachers are not free to direct inquiries toward their real needs Personalized: The online instructors must know the teacher, know them intimately, and be able to devote an hour or two, that day; to each teacher's specific learning needs. If this means that someone must employ lots of online experts, that is correct. A body of knowledge, even with an artificial intelligence front end is still "stupid" when compared to human intervention.

Online Trainers with Real-World Experience: Hot-shot theorists who avoided classroom "boot camp and special forces" training by an academic charade are ill equipped to teach, let alone advise teachers. Colleges and universities my still employ these idea-oriented researchers, but Real-World units, such as classrooms in real schools are no place for them (or their influence)

Ad Hoc: On call, no wait for helping response. Answers to today's questions tomorrow means a missed window of opportunity.

Information Storage and Retrieval System: The online learning system learns from the experiences of others, and offers case studies (with confidentiality maintained) and best practices.

Follow-Up until Resolved System: The online learning system needs a "no stop until forbid or opt-out" mechanism. This means that once an teacher enters a skill-development challenge, the online system is relentless (and unrelenting) in providing support for learning that skill…until clear mastery is achieved…and the teacher has resolved the issue

Tested Focus and Referral System: A system cannot be all things to all people, and issues that are beyond the scope, expertise or legal mandates must be referred to other agencies. For example, a teacher may focus upon improving personal-supervisor relationships when criminal abuse, negligence or misfeasance becomes apparent. In such a case, the system must direct the teacher to the appropriate crime unit or whistle blower infrastructure. In other cases, it may become evident that a teacher needs psychiatric or mental health services, rather than improved instructional skills. The system must be able to deal with such issues

But, it is fantasy to expect that school districts develop an insightful and intricate online training system. And, legal issues and the cost of talented staff appear to be obstacles that would prevent a private organization from developing such a program without contract guarantees and retainer fees. So, teachers teachers will continue to get their training "catch-as-catch-can, piecemeal, and on-the-fly" as they have always done. Sure, school district employers have an obligation to their students and their community to provide superior training and focused help for their teachers. But, most haven't provided anything of value to their teachers, yet. So, it is delusion to expect that they have the wherewithal (or the intention) of starting now.

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

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

Professional Self-Development

"Do's" and "Do Not's" to Wind Down the School Year

May is the "home stretch," the "last inning," the "two minute warning time" of the school year. May is the time when you "make or break" all your efforts for the entire year. And this does not have anything to do with the high-stakes test that interfered (to a lesser or greater extent) with your instruction during the last month or so.

Every minute that you spend with your class in May is a "Midas Touch" golden opportunity for learning. (But, like Midas, you have to be careful!)

The items that you have to attend to as school closes down are urgent. Make sure that these chores and distractions don't interfere with teaching and learning. Final Checkout Leave final checkout tasks until it is time, but, prepare a checklist ahead of time, and in spare moments (you should be so lucky) take care of them with your students' help.

For example: The librarian or media specialist may collect A/V equipment. Tag equipment as you use it this month, and send any broken equipment in early

Textbooks may be collected early. Find out how many days that you will be without textbooks, and schedule lessons and assignments for each of those days. Copy text materials, Internet resources and worksheets as though you were developing a separate lesson plan. (In fact, that is what you are doing. You don't want to be stressed in preparing lessons without resources those last days. Take care of this, a little at a time at the beginning of the month.)

Get all assignments and papers graded. Even bring in papers and have students check work as part of a math class. (A social studies class can vote on answers as students correct the papers, a science class can discuss the "scientific method" as it applies to each answer that they correct, etc.) Take the first week of the month to ensure that your paper grading is up to date. If one or two peripheral assignments end up "lost in the trash at home (not school)" who can complain? If any student notices, give them an "A" for observation and diligence.

Save copies of lessons that were creative, functional and productive. Throw away any marginal materials. You will never have time to correct the flaws or figure out how to salvage those materials next year. (Of course this does not apply to materials that you have written or created yourself. You can always fix and improve those.)

Prepare your purge files early, maybe a few students or a class per day. No student work should remain anywhere except official files. Everything else should evaporate by the first day of the Summer Break

Schedule a culminating activity for every class. And, build preparation and participation for each of these. Allow students to manage and produce as much of the proceeding as possible. And, assign students with the lowest social rank to take key roles

Ensure that the district's Central Office has summer pay information if anything is changing. You want to get paid during the summer, and you don't want to wait until the "last day's rush" and hope that your information makes it through with the flood of other papers that the personnel clerks receive. Send your information early when those clerks have nothing else to do

Prepare a "take home folder, or folders" for yourself. This is everything that you will need for the start of the upcoming school year. Otherwise, you will find yourself returning to school two weeks early (unpaid) to get ready. Your goal is to prepare a package so that you have a cushion of at least one week (maybe two weeks) of assignments and lessons.

Your goal, at the start of the next year: walk in, spend four hours decorating and be ready to teach your first class
Sidebar Classroom Toolkit provides a strategy of classroom project planning and modular materials that make this possible. The idea is to build a library of generic materials that can be used with any assignment. In this way, you create a few generic assessments, build lessons with materials (such as Graphic Organizers) that you can use with multiple assignments, and you teach students procedures for projects and assignment that will be in play for the entire year. The start of school the following year will be relaxed and stress-free if you lay the groundwork ahead of time. Spending a few minutes here and there from the start of the month will pay huge dividends in days retrieved during the days that you might ordinarily have to waste coming back to clean up once school is out
Maximize Learning At the same (parallel) time that you are gearing down with all the non-essential, but urgent trivia, you can maximize student learning

The last month of school is the most productive time of the year. Use it to your students' advantage.

Schedule higher-order thinking skills projects, assignments that you were not free to pursue earlier because the "limited-thinking, high-stakes tests" were in the way. Be creative, reward student thinking and creativity. Allow art and artistic expression, integrate knowledge with lots of journal writing assignments and "reflection-response" time.

May is the time when you can revisit your own ideals, especially the ones concerning the reasons that prompted you to migrate into teaching. Recapture your idealism, and put some of that energy into practice during instruction. Take Cues from your Students And, May is the perfect time to engage students in decision-making, in democratic choice-making, and in collaborative assignment development.

Trust your students to know what they need to study. Connect curriculum goals with students' interests and watch meaning and relevance blossom among the facts and figures of the content-area curriculum.

And, pay attention because you can start the next school year on the same note (conduct a symphony of collaborative, cooperative learning, enjoy the melody of engaged learning), before the high-stakes threat pressurized your learning environment and you are shoved back into the rut of "teaching to the test."

Follow just a few of these suggestions, and you will be at the mall or on the beach days before your colleagues, and they will be back in school days ahead of you while you soak up a bit more sun and lounge next to the pool.

May is the culminating month of a school year of success and achievement. A little focus in the right areas can magnify the benefits of this month for you and your students.

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

Monday, March 31, 2008

Professional Self-Development

Textbook Adoption: Blessing or Curse?

Ominous thunderclouds often herald Springtime, a time when Spring rains promote flowers (and weeds). Spring often sees teachers asked (ordered, volunteered) to research textbooks for a "new adoption. Whether the adopted textbook produces a bounty of positive student learning outcomes, or is just so much "spin, fluff and sales-talk", is up to you (and the committee, or the district's politics).

Unfortunately, researching anything at the time when high-stakes testing looms larger than those thunderheads is a distraction, (as if the high-stakes tests were not distraction enough from your important curriculum). Sidebar Sure, student outcomes and content-area learning are important for your students' life-long economic welfare. But, keeping your job is crucial to your immediate, bill-paying, food-on-the-table needs.

Capitulating to the "Teach-to-the-test pressures" is a "no-brainer" when perceived in light of "full-stomach, roof-over-your-head" pressures. However, textbook adoption stakes are high, too.

Choose unwisely, and you are fated to trudge a rut of your own choosing for years to come, i.e., most textbook adoptions run from three to five years. Can you stand using an "albatross around your neck" textbook for so long? The Textbook Selection Process The textbook selection process varies, depending upon whether the state purchases textbooks (such as California and Texas), and the selection is among a set of "optimized of the state" selections; or a wide open, free-for all. Sometimes teachers receive "free samples" that they don't have to return to the publisher, sometimes they have to give these back

Sometimes the publisher invites textbook committee members to a "free training seminar" (thinly disguised sales presentation) and "free lunch" at a nice local hotel

Sometimes the textbook publisher invites Directors and Principals to lavish "learning" opportunities

Sometimes promised training and "free" technology add-ons don't arrive after the textbook is adopted (get these agreements in writing before signing the official "adoption papers")

Sometimes the textbook publisher employs real teacher "consultants" who can afford to leave their classrooms and conduct the textbook training (Imagine how much the consultant teacher must be paid to be able to leave their classrooms)

Most times the hints of how easy the textbook is to use, and how successful students are in learning the content of the textbook require objective evidence

Most times the textbook content, value, usability and add-on features differ little (in terms of actual benefits) from competitors' products Pitfalls of Textbook Selection The major pitfall of textbook selection stems from "buying in" to the psychological belief that you "made the right decision," then attempting to defend the decision once the books arrive and the promises for huge student performance gains fail to develop.

There is a psychological principle that describes the defense mechanism that "twists our evaluation of basically similar items" and convinces us that the item that we chose is superior to all the others (that we didn't choose). Avoid this fallacy. The adoption choice textbook candidates were essentially equivalent before you chose. They remain essentially similar after one was selected.

Another pitfall for making a textbook choice is the fallout that you might receive for the next three years (depending upon your rank and standing in the campus clique structure. If you are "top dog" in rank, you may be immune to overt criticism, but if you are an "underdog," be prepared to shoulder blame for years to come.

Yet another pitfall is the tendency to act upon the "hype and spin" of the textbook publishers' marketing materials and sales representative's "representation" about the quality, soundness and research-validated features (that underpin the foundations of the textbook). If this language sounds like "long-winded drivel," why didn't you notice the stripes, spots and blemishes about this textbooks instead of letting the textbook representative camouflage these flaws by their sales and marketing language? Take heed when the publishers representative represent the product to you. Why? They are representing "to you" but "for the textbook publisher."

Whose welfare is the representative's first priority? What sales and marketing methods did the publishers representatives use to convince you?

Sidebar Explaining the details of the many pitfalls of the textbook selection process would require a book, not a newsletter article. Instead, refer to these resources... Textbooks in the Age of Standards

Another criticism of US textbooks is the "Mile Wide and an Inch Deep" catch phrase coined by the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) Textbook Reps: Spin, Slight-of-Hand, Nuance-Based Obfuscation Remember that the publishers' textbook representatives have to put food on their tables and roof over their head, so they often speak with "less than forthcoming" accuracy portraying the "closeness of fit" between the product that they are pushing and your students' learning needs.

Caveat Emptor (buyer beware) is important if you are only "buying-in" instead of purchasing.

Exercise the same caution in adopting a textbook as you would in purchasing a new car. Technology Enhancements: Real Honey or Artificial Sweeteners Avoid any textbook decision that is based upon promised technology enhancements that come free, or are bundled with the textbook for an additional cost.

The "free" materials are seldom a bargain, and often consist of outdated technology and unsold materials that the publisher wants to "dump."

Be sure to obtain Service Level Agreements (SLAs) for any server-based technology enhancements; and, if the technology enhancements do not include server-based components, consider them to be "almost worthless" to your teaching program.

The reason that technology enhancements (such as one CD that you can copy, or one CD that you can install on as many computers as you wish) is that your school district's IT Department does not have the staff to tinker with individual installations on selected computers.

In addition, the IT Staff cannot devote the time to testing and creating an image for the hard drive of a system unless every computer that the system will be installed on is exactly the same. Server-based in stallions resolve this issue and create a scenario that is more likely to ensure that the add-on components can be used.

Another issue with the use of these technology "freebies" is compatibility with the computers that teachers use at home. Since most of the preparation and planning work that teachers perform is done at home, there must be a way for teachers to preview the technology materials and programs, and there must be a way for teachers to use, add to, or create test bank items. Sidebar Classroom Toolkit explained the contrasting roles of instruction and technology in our article, Teachers to IT Departments: "You have Homework" . Link to the article...

The upshot: never purchase a textbook based upon promises of technology add-ons.

Set objectives and targets for measurable student outcomes before sitting at the table with the prospective textbook publisher's representative (Rep).

Ensure that the textbook targets your measurable outcome objectives, then ask exactly how the add-on "technology toys" move (enhance, expand, augment, extend) the textbook with additional student outcome improvements.

Hint: Publishers throw a lot of "bonus features" into the textbook adoption mix, and most of those "deal sweeteners" are "junk" that "turns sour" when teachers attempt to make use of them.

Due Diligence Due diligence is difficult for public school teachers since few teachers have the luxury of: Visiting other districts with the same student demographic to observe the textbook in use and to examine the student learning improvement data

Enough authority to speak to program directors and high-level district administrators

Discussing the textbook adoption with school board members

Discussing the implementation of the add-on technology with other school district's network engineers and support technicians.

Due diligence is difficult, especially when factoring technology into the adoption equation because of the roles of IT Specialists and Teachers. In most cases, these roles are contaminated, and important boundaries are breached. Sidebar Classroom Toolkit explored the roles of IT Specialists and Teachers in the article, Teachers to IT Departments: "You have Homework" In particular, the section on "Obtain Requirements and Specifications from Educators" describes how educators should never "prescribe" technology, and how IT Staff should never "prescribe" technology solutions to education. The proper role for teachers is to develop instructional objectives including requirements, specifications and target student outcomes. It is then the IT Staff's job of developing a project based upon delivering and measuring those student-performance, outcome-based measures. When either teachers or IT Staff members overstep these boundaries, fail to specify exactly what students will learn and how that learning will be measured; then the investment in technology (or the investment in free textbook add-in enhancements) falls short. So, as the "Who wants to volunteer to be on the textbook adoption committee?" bait is cast into the faculty meeting sea; keep the hook out of your mouth by keeping your mouth shut.

Enter the waters of the textbook adoption with trepidation, and if you can't swim with sharks, alligators, barracuda and stingrays; don't go wading.

The water is deeper than you think, and the chance that you will wander in "way over your head" is great.

We know that adopting a new textbook is a "dirty job" that someone has to do, so just be careful that the "dirty job" doesn't soil your job security and career advancement.

Proceed with caution in any dalliance with the textbook adoption. It's safer that way.

Friday, February 29, 2008

Professional Self-Development

Let Google Manage Personal and Professional Briefings for You

Researching background information to spice up the dull and bland content of most textbooks; to add human interest to an otherwise flat course; eats your time in "big gulps." Sidebar Empirical experience is the reason that Colleges and Universities calculate two hours of preparation time for each hour of face-to-face instruction that instructors and professors. Much of this time is spent in research.

If public school teachers were treated as professionals, then public school teachers would teach far fewer hours, and receive more than one 45 minute "conference/ planning" period per day. Of course, many public school teachers teach 5 1/2 hours and spend another four, five or more hours in uncompensated class preparation. But, much of this amounts to scoring papers, evaluating work assignments and calculating grades.

But, what "flight plan" can the over-booked teacher follow? Maybe library visits the entire weekend, plowing through books and journals is unrealistic. Why not take a cue from professional pilots, and put your research on "autopilot?" Internet surfing, even at broadband speeds, only saves commute time. Individual topic searches (especially for relevant information that enlivens course content or current events) still wipes out teacher free time.

So, hire Google as your personal "color-commentary coach." Or, rather, Google; and friends.

Let these "research big guns" do much of the leg work for your research. Coaching and "Gophering:" Not your Basic Search But, don't plan on searching for what you want using the Google; search engine. This type of searching takes far too long to sift through each individual topic. Culling junk from a search that returns 85,000,000+ Web pages cannot result in a time savings.

Instead, you need to avail yourself to a number of free services.

Here are the tools: Google; Alerts

Google; Advanced Search

Google; Scholarly Information

Google;

The Ultimate Google; Interface (Fagan Finder)

Google; Weather

Google; Glossary

Desktop Shortcuts

A Plethora of other Google; Specialized Info Resources What Google; and the Ultimate Google; Interface do is simplify Google;'s Advanced search with a streamlined interface. By using either of these interfaces, you avoid needing to remember the advanced Google; search syntax. What these Specialized Searches Do for You Google; Alerts:

Google; Alerts is a service that delivers search results to your E-mail inbox.

The kinds of information that Google; will deliver to your E-mail inbox, on schedule include: News Alerts:

Provides headlines from Google; News

Web Alerts: Provides links to new Web pages that meet search criteria

News and Web Alerts: Combines both types of search results

Groups Alerts: Provides links to new messages that are posted in Google; Groups

There are multiple schedules that you can set up for receiving these free Google; Alerts. These include: As it happens

Once a Day

Once a week The frequency that you select depends upon your needs.

For example, News alerts provide only the top ten results while Web Alerts provide only the top twenty search results.

If you need more results than these, the the "As it happens" is the most appropriate Google; Alerts query.

The most useful way to use this service is in conjunction with a free Gmail account, also from

Google;. Automated Search There are two approaches to automating search: Save searches as "bookmarks" or "favorites"

Create desktop shortcuts

Stored searches are ways to return to search results within one or two clicks.

The benefit of using "bookmarks" or "favorites" is that this strategy enables you to store searches in a outline or hierarchy

Of course, this hierarchy structure can be developed with desktop shortcuts that launch specific searches, too. However, nested desktop shortcuts require multiple "clicks" to sift through the hierarchy.

The benefit of nested shortcuts is that these shortcuts can be stored on a USB drive (or other removable device).

Other strategies include creating a free Blogger; or WordPress; and storing search results as links within

the Blog.SidebarGoogle®; also offers other services including Google®; Notebook.Classroom Toolkit cannot recommend the Google®; notebook because of our aversion to installing toolbars that record our Web activities.If you already have the Google®; toolbar installed, then you can add Google®; Notebook to this toolbar.The Google®; Notebook will save notes as you search the Web.Smarter ResearchHere are some resources for automating a smarter search system…Ten Tips for Smarter Google®; Searching Google®; Search Operator Guide Using Google®; for research (From the University of North Carolina - Asheville) A Scholarly Guide to Google®; (From Harvard) Googling to the Max (From UC Berkeley) Google®; Scholar Help (From Google®;)

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

Thursday, January 31, 2008

Professional Self-Development

Can you "Psych" your Students for Success with Neuro-Linguistic Programming?

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is a form of suggestion. NLP strategies are based upon: Subliminal language, i.e., Subtle communication through channels that we usually are unaware of

Persuading though patterns of thought, i.e., Motivating folks to do what you want them to do by avoiding reactions to your message by NLP strategies launch "absent minded responses," automated thinking, or the "habits" that we are unaware of.

So, NLP uses a communication process that bypasses conscious awareness and impacts the Unconscious Thought directly. This is called "hypnotic communication".

NLP is scientific, repeatable, testable, not "hocus pocus" stage-show magic. It is not a "deep trance" or an "altered states of consciousness."

Rather, these are processes that we engage in all the time, similar to day dreaming, similar to remembering, similar to imagining.

So, teachers that use NLP simply direct their students to natural thoughts and behaviors. We are affected by NLP all the time because advertisers, politicians, coaches, counselors, clergy, charismatic orators, sales people, and master teachers move us to action and motivate us to "do it now." These folks use our own patterns of unconscious thought to persuade, sway, guide, redirect, focus, target our decision-making processes in ways that they want. Of course, master teachers use the NLP techniques only for the good of their students. We cannot generalize the same altruism for all users of the technique. Is Teacher Use of NLP Ethical? Teachers seldom teach a class in "fire walking" or conduct motivational seminars for business people, so why would they use NLP?

And if teachers had a reason for using NLP, would doing so be ethical?

Of course, we could ask the reverse question, "Is failure to motivate students sufficiently so that students learn to the best of their ability ethical?"

Some folks think that NLP is a kind of "mind control." And, some slick (and rich) marketers have lead people (especially salespeople) to believe this myth so that they could sell seminar tickets at a hefty price. Other people think that NLP is "un-democratic," and the kind of tactics used to brainwash suicide bombers.

None of this is true.

But any tool or technique can be misused, or used for less than ethical purposes.

For example, some folks claim that they use NLP to "Pick up Women".

But, just as explosives can be used to clear roadbeds, quarry stone such marble or granite, raze dangerous and obsolete buildings, or set off avalanches in a safe way; explosives also can be used to kill tourists, embassy staff, police recruits and wedding guests.

The purpose that the tool is used for determines the ethics. And, many psychologists, therapists, hypnotherapists, pastoral counselors, clergy and master teaches use the principles of NLP in their daily work. Some of these professionals were trained in NLP and understand what they are doing. Others professionals learned the communication patterns by modeling their mentors, and others just happened upon the communication strategies, and integrated them into their behavior repertoire because they found them to produce positive results for their clients, congregation members or trainees. Practical Applications The reason that teachers might wish to learn to apply some basic NLP techniques is that teachers might want to sensitize themselves to subtle levels of student and colleague communication. NLP offers many strategies for improving teachers' … Communication

Perception

Listening and relating skills

Rapport with students and colleagues

Self-confidence

Self-control

Creativity

Intuition If these possibilities feel right, look good, sound great; perhaps you could investigate NLP further, finding just the most comfortable ways that are suited for you, and best for you, as much as you might wish.

Classroom Toolkit and Neuro-Linguistic Programming

If readers of Classroom Toolkit express an interest, in learning more about NLP principles, then we will devote many future articles to the the topic.

In fact, we reserved a domain name just in case you want more information on applying NLP in your classroom. "Sign up for the Classroom Toolkit Resource Bulletin "

This month's Resource Bulletin Package contains over 27 MB of no-c@st articles and eBooks.

Blog Export: Classroom Toolkit Newsletter, <http://classroomtoolkit.net/serendipity/>

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

Monday, December 31, 2007

Professional Self-Development

Communicating with Hispanic and Minority Students: You can get by with Limited Language Skills, but Learn the Culture
Communicating with students is the most important professional development skill that teachers can improve.

Communicating in ways that build positive and trusting relationships is an independent variable influencing a teacher's success. Learning theory, discipline theory, management theory, and skill at using technology are OK; but theories and gadgets don't motivate students to learn to their potential.

What motivates students is a meaningful relationship with their teacher…a relationship based upon trust, confidence and communication.

But, what happens when teachers and students speak different languages. Languages are "Vocabulary Shallow" and "Culture Deep" The vocabulary of a different language draws attention to itself (in the same way that a cat draws attention to itself at a dog show). It is "up front and apparent."

But, vocabulary is only the surface level of a language, and like an iceberg, most of the mass (the culture) rides below the surface.

And, although learning the language of your students is a first step, the real relationship building starts when their teacher learns each student's culture. Sidebar Of course, when teacher and students use the same language, i.e., English, it is easy to assume that communication will occur naturally. But, as any teacher of African-American students can verify, the languages use the same vocabulary: but the cultures use different assumptions and meanings. Actually, there are really two (or more) different dictionaries; and therefore, the similar sounding words represent different vocabularies. A teacher's job is to teach the vocabulary of each content area subject. But, the road to increasing the content area vocabularies of students is paved with the culture of the language that students bring to school.

In fact, it is easier for a teacher to make the mistake of believing that he or she is communicating to students when the students use the same language and vocabulary, than when the teacher and students speak different Native Languages.

If the teacher speaks only English, and the student is a native Spanish speaker, it is easier for the teacher to recognize a communications gap than when both the "Middle-Class-English-speaking" teacher encounters a "Ghetto-Speaking" African-American student.

Whatever the native language or languages of the teacher and student, teachers must "get a grip" on the culture of each student, because culture is more important than language in building a trusting personal relationships between a teacher and his or her students. Study Students of Different Cultures by Listening Unfortunately, teachers cannot launch a Website or check out a library book and learn the principles of culture that will enable them to direct and motivate their students.

This kind of learning is "face-to-face, heart-to-heart," and listening to students is the ticket to the "trusting relationship game." Of course, the more the teacher knows about each student's native language, the more the teacher is able to comprehend the culture of each student. But this relationship building is more about interaction and mutual respect than it is about developing knowledge and theories. Socio-Economic Strata and Communication It would be nice (but shortsighted) to think that all students that speak the same language grow up in the same culture.

Take Spanish, for instance. There are 21 countries where Spanish is spoken as the primary language, and the United States just happens to be the country with the third-largest Spanish speaking population (soon to overtake Spain for second place) in the world. Spanish is the third most used language on the Internet (after English and Chinese); and Spanish is the third most influential language in the world (after English and French).

To assume that Puerto Rican culture (remember that Puerto Ricans are American citizens by birth and that Puerto Rico is an American Territory) and a Mexican American or Mexican immigrant all come from the same culture because they speak the same native language is to be "self-deceived."

However, some patterns of students' belief and behavior seem to transcend culture, e.g., students from the lower socio-economic groups demonstrate some similar characteristics.

Sidebar For example: Students from the lower socio-economic groups (White, Black, Hispanic, Native American) seem to exhibit similar school-motivation characteristics. These similar patterns of belief and behavior seem to include: A desire and preference for more immediate reinforcement and gratification

A desire and preference for tangible rewards

A lot of anger when punishment is delivered by anyone, especially from teachers who come from outside the native culture

A distrust for intrinsic motivation and a distrust for waiting to receive future rewards Teachers who listen to students "with an ear for language and a heart for culture" begin to understand their students on a level that builds a relationship of mutual respect. Brain Matters: Ditch the Theories When teachers bother to learn the culture of each of their students, a pattern of understanding and mutual trust evolves from the relationship.

This is a "learn as you go" type of on-the-job training that cannot be pieced together ahead of time. The cultural understanding that is based upon face-to-face and heart-to-heart interaction is idiosyncratic and does not fit into neat, theoretical packages.

This relationship building develops a "Higher-order Interaction Process" with a message-by-message (deductive rather than inductive) level of cultural communication.

The reason that this relationship process cannot be inductive (general knowledge, i.e., from theory to the particular) is that every student is unique.

It is only after gaining experience that is built from personal and individual interaction with students that a teacher earns the right to generalize cultural knowledge and form "compare and contrast" working hunches.

When teachers listen "person-to-person and heart-to-heart," and when teachers focus upon "higher-order understanding" of each student's culture during this relationship building, teaching takes on a "whole new" timbre, texture and twinkle that is impossible with theoretical analysis.

Take the time to learn the culture of each of your students. The tapestry of your teaching will become richer and more luxurious. Language Learning Resources Transparent Language Free Before You Know It™ Software Download Rosetta Stone Rosetta Stone Spanish (Latin America): Language Learning Software.

Rosetta Stone Endangered Language Program

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

Friday, November 30, 2007

Professional Self-Development

Trouble with Data: Don't be Fooled by the Numbers
Data seems solid, substantial, productive, professional. And, there is so much of it.

Sources of data are everywhere, and teachers are exhorted to use data in making instructional decisions and educated choices. No "true professional" would leave problem-solving and decision-making to intuition, creative serendipity, hunch, or chance when they could engage the superior qualities of their mind in goal-directed, data-driven executive-like skills.

But, there are leaks in the dike that solid data is supposed to provide, and the legs of the data step-stool are a bit wobbly; the underpinnings of data could crumble or collapse at any time.

Data would seem to fit "hand and glove" with the Science of Teaching; but, instead of a mortise and talon relationship, data and teaching are often "strange bedfellows." Problems with Data
What are the problems with data if data is so scientific and professional? Data accumulates fast. It floods our minds and requires time and resources to collect and manage

So much of the data that we collect is raw, uninterrupted. By itself, data is without meaning

Data take time to collect, and even more time to separate, sort, and make sense out of it

Data can be trivial, but can look like it is meaningful. For example, grades and test scores
Grades provide "constantly generating" data that has little meaning without the interpretation of the teacher that created them.

For example, does that "D" in English mean that the student

Nearly failed the big test

Was absent too many time and missed a couple of quizzes

Didn't turn in his or her homework. Hint: The dog ate it!

Didn't complete the research report on time and lost 20 points

Just moved from Mexico and doesn't speak English well, yet

Etc. Who know but the teacher? Test scores can also be misleading.

For example, the scores on the high stakes test can all be 71 in one class and 100% of the teacher's students passed.

In another class, the scores can all be 69 and 0% of the students passed. These teachers would look to be miles apart in their success, yet, their scores are statistically "dead-even."

In another test score example, the average classroom scores for one teacher are 4.7, exactly at grade level. However, another teacher has a class average of 4.8. When these scores are reported to the local newspaper and published by

teacher name, community members come to believe that the second teacher with a "0.1" higher class average is a

better teacher. But, nothing of the sort. These scores also indicate a "dead heat." A Little Data is a Dangerous

Thing
Limited understanding of the conditions and environment where data were collected, and meager control upon

how the data were collected can result in unwarranted assumptions. Here are some pitfalls: Comparing "square pegs" with "round pegs"

Comparing unstructured data to structured data

Comparing data related to "fuzzy" categories

Comparing data where subjects reside in multiple categories

Comparing minor differences because the numbers

Finding "false positives" and rejecting "false negatives"

Bogging down in data collecting and getting sloppy in data acquisition because it is too much work

Becoming stressed and overwhelmed by too much data, i.e., information overload

Collecting data without a clear plan for how that data will be used

Creating reports and presentations based on correct data but false assumptions

Missing the intervening variable

Identifying the wrong independent variable (The one you can change)

Measuring the effect of items that are beyond your control

Etc. ad infinitum
"Grain of Salt" Data Management Plan
The "Grain of Salt" Data Management Plan can also be called the "Information Overload Survival Plan."

Here are the rules to follow:

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Wednesday, October 31, 2007

Professional Self-Development

Rote Memory: Drill and Practice Road Kill

A bird's eye view over an educational timeline, no matter what parameter we examine, would appear to be like the swing of a pendulum. And, this is the state of direct instruction strategies that are related to "drill."

"Drill" currently enjoys a level of disrepute as thinking skills, problem solving, constructing higher-order knowledge, learning through literature or project-based communication or Multiply Intelligent styles.

So, what happened? How did the "quick-repeated-practice baby" get tossed with the "overdo-it-to-the-exclusion-of-all-else" bath water?

Easy. We pumped in another quick-fix, overdose of "teaching to the test" as we let drill in all its forms, morphs, iterations and disguises flush down the drain. Good Reasons: Not Good Riddance Of course, there were good reasons to limit the stifling, unrestricted use of drill. For example, drill was used... To keep minority students quiet and under control, never mind that they learned very little by means of this method

By inexperienced teacher, by uncreative child dislikes, and confidence-challenged teachers in lieu of risk taking, personal interaction and experiment-to-see-what-motivates-students-to-achieve professionals

AS an "easy way out" by the "walking-retired," by the somnambulant moonlighters who focused more of their personal time and resources on the other job, and by the folks with couch-tomato energy and skill who believed that they were hired to oversee seatwork

By the lazy, the burned-out, the bitter, and the "trapped-in-the-job" folks who marked time to the &I can't wait 'till I'm outa [sic] here" drum Memorization: No More Allure Blame it on the Internet where billions of pages of content can pop on screen with the typing of a few choice search terms.

Blame it on knowledge expanding so fast that no-one can keep up, or on knowledge becoming so fluid that there are no constants. Sidebar Just 50 years ago, everyone knew that there were nine planets and that an atom had three parts that could not be divided (now we know that protons and neutrons are made up of quarks and leptons). Saturn had two rings (now countless), and Jupiter had nine moons (now 63 and counting). Since you are NOT using "Drill" Strategies, Why do we Bring it Up? The reason that we bring this issue of the "death of drill" up is that we need to re-introduce some drill (within reason).

For example, people used to have to remember several telephone numbers. Now, their telephone or their PDA remembers these numbers for them.

Likewise for addresses.

And to find the latest facts, Google is able to provide up-to-the-minute access to the most relevant, authoritative and timely information. Even better, a search of Wikipedia, the most "authoritative" site that Google can recommend; can result in an army of minion editors revising the content, on-the-fly, as you watch it change! Stress of Complexity Many students experience stress when confronted with a world that is complex, intricate, fluid, ambiguous, evolving, dynamic and unstable (if only cogitatively).

Providing knowledge that seems solid and stable is soothing and comforting to children at the "concrete" level of cognitive development. Sidebar We haven't forgotten that children seem to pass through a series of cognitive stages before they are ready to run the high-stakes test marathon, have we? Giving some students the security of knowledge that will remain stable for a short time will increase their ability to focus. This is especially true of the 75% of students that prefer hands-on, tactile, kinesthetic leaning modes. Visual learners may be comfortable with picture-screen images that change every ten seconds, and auditory learners get to adjust to the transient nature of sound. But, our physical universe should not be changing at electron speed, and hands-on learners would like for that bit of their learning environment to remain static. Memories worth Knowing Basic Building blocks of knowledge are worth memorizing, even if drill, flash cards, buddy practice encompass a sliver of the daily learning schedule.

For example: The names of the teacher, principal, classmates, brothers and sister, maybe even the name of the current president are worth memorizing

It would be nice to know the room number, and which seat is assigned

Knowing the school bus number corresponding to the route home, and an emergency telephone number for contacting parents would be a plus

Remembering the steps of the Scientific Method makes sense, as does remembering the steps to renaming (borrowing and carrying). and the steps to long multiplication and division (students might not have their cell phone when they need to perform a calculation)

It might be nice to remember that our number system is Base 10, and that computer use a "Binary System," i.e., Base 2 Basic formulas for perimeter, area, circumference, etc.

Add your own crucial facts to this list The Raw Ingredients of Creativity and Problem-Solving What drill haters often overlook is that memories are the raw ingredient for creativity. Most creative people have sparkling and snappy

memories. And, the unconscious mind needs a storehouse of memories, readily available, if ideas are to be incubated, hatched, nurtured to fruition.

Not every skill is enhanced by a key press. Mental acuity and the ability to think, communicate and interact engage components of learning that require more than an online interface.

Help your students memorize useful information in fun and stress-free ways, and they will appreciate you for it.

Besides, friends and family often amuse themselves at get togethers by asking questions and quizzing children about items of common knowledge. If the students can't recite basic knowledge, friends and family will... Assume that you aren't teaching your students anything

Question whether they are getting their money's worth from the school taxes that they pay

Think that your students are slow learners, are falling behind, or are mentally retarded Prepare your students for the holidays, and they will appreciate you for that, too.

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

Sunday, September 30, 2007

Professional Self-Development

Learn from your Students: Pay Attention
When teachers think of "teacher survival," their thoughts migrate to all the attitudes, knowledge and skills that constitute "Master Teacher" levels of instructional delivery. Unfortunately, something more important than instructional delivery is often overlooked. What is that?

Answer: A teacher relationship with students trumps instructional delivery as a component of teacher success. Sidebar
For a free sample of the attitude, knowledge and skill approach, check out these eBook resources
Elementary Teachers' Survival Kit
Secondary Teachers' Survival Kit
This is not a recommendation for the purchase of these books because Classroom Toolkit offers many of these same types of teacher tools at no cost. So, why are these instructional delivery tools not enough? Free Agents
Consider each student to be a "free agent." This means that they have their own (unique) interests and motivations. The days of compliant, "Let's struggle at learning because doing so will please the teacher" never were; but modern students are more vocal at describing just how "out of sync" such a belief is.

Instead, teachers need to establish a relationship with their students. Then, teachers need to listen to what their students are saying. This includes "listening between the words" to

Establish a connection with students, communicate, person-to-person, let real caring and commitment shine through during personal interaction and instructional dialog. Talk to a classroom group of students, but still communicate one-to-one. Avoid lecturing, let the dialog be

Students pay minimal attention when teachers talk at them, and when teachers care more about the instructional content than about the "instructee."

It is short-sighted for a teacher to preach that dogma of "caring about students," then commit sins (i.e., do and show) that demonstrate that the caring is only a scheme to manipulate and trick students into cooperation. Even students with challenged academic ability see through these ploys and are not fooled. And, teachers cannot afford to lose the trust of their students by acting out a deception.

For the teacher that thinks that insincere manipulation will motivate student learning here is one bit of advice, "Find another profession where deception is the norm (maybe politics or selling used cars) because anyone who believes that students can be fooled about what is in the heart of their teachers lacks the "Intrapersonal intelligence" needed to perform the job. The Real Key to Learning
Research shows that the teacher, rather than
Technology
Philosophy

The Amount of Effort and Extra Hours the Teacher Devotes
The Amount of Materials in the Classroom

The Number of Students in the Classroom

is the key (independent) variable that is responsible for increased student achievement. But, what teacher characteristic exactly accounts for the improvement?

Answer: It is the relationship that teachers have with their students that makes the difference between mediocre student learning and stellar student outcomes and outstanding performance.

And, one of the best ways that teachers can relate to students is to listen to them, listen to each student as an individual, listen from the heart. This is "no tricks, no manipulation" listening. This is "no rules, no formula" listening.

This is take the messages as you find them, alter your teaching style when addressing each students.

This is in-the-moment, fully present (my-mind-is-here-now) awareness of the interaction, and no distraction of thinking about the future or the past.

And don't worry if this interaction fails to fit into any of the theories of education that you learned in your college classes. (What do college professors know and what do textbook author-committees know about the personal lives, loves and motivations of your particular students?)

In fact, what do you know about your students until you listen to them, until you suspend pre-judgment, and until you know who they are.

Sidebar
At best, the professors and the textbooks can give you a clue to "what your students are." What you need is to know "who your students are."

If you will "be you," your students will like you and respect you.

Students see teachers mostly as "phonies" and role-model actors during their school careers. It is amazing how students flock to real people, almost the way that moths head for a light bulb.

This student behavior would seem to indicate that students are "hungry" for personal, human contact. Give your students this personal contact by listening to them.

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