

Friday, October 31. 2008

Under-the-Radar Teaching Skills

A Prosperous Mindset: When Learning is Like Farming

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Learning capacity is never used up.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What changed? Your intention changed your perception.

Set Clear Learning Goals

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And, share this passion for learning with your student.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Manage your Time and Reduce Wasted Efforts

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

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

Sidebar Actually, your students are always learning, just as you are.

But, growing uncontrolled, erratic, random knowledge is not efficient. There needs to be an underlying logic, theme, method that ties the chunks of learning together.

This is the reason that thematic units produce better learning outcomes than "every day brings new worksheet" strategies. Of course, planning themes with students is a marvelous way to align the curriculum content with students' interests. The opportunities for weaving curriculum-based content into almost any theme are endless. This approach takes more effort than reading the "teaching prompts" from the "annotated teachers' edition" of the adopted textbook.

But, students will respond with eagerness and excitement. Besides, teachers who read, word for word, from the Teachers' Edition are just as boring as students who read their report to the class. Many teachers think that just by increasing the amount of work that students perform that learning will automatically accelerate.

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

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

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

Grow Learning by Planting High-Yield Crops

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

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

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

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

Protect your Investment in your Students' Learning

Once you see your students' learning blossom and flourish, "insulate" your students learning success against loss. You never know what events can subvert or sabotage your success.

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

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

Graphic Organizers, Rubrics, Reproducible Modules

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

Profitable instruction (even creativity) does not benefit from an "wide open range, wild west, no fences" strategy. Instead, reusable, repeatable structures raise instruction to higher levels of application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation; the Higher-Order Thinking Skills.

And complexity must be controlled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Questions to Keep Learning on Track and Profitable

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

What's good about _____?

What's bad about _____?

What background information is important?

What steps did you take to build this knowledge?

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

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

What is the best way to learn _____?

How long will it take to really master _____?

What advice can you give to someone wanting to learn _____?

What study methods for _____ will work for anyone?

What has your experience with _____ taught you?

What real-life examples can you share about _____?

What is one secret about _____ that almost no one knows?

What is one of the most common problems associate with _____?

What are the three best ways to overcome that problem?

Tuesday, September 30, 2008

Under-the-Radar Teaching Skills

Manage your Principal for a Positive and Productive Campus

Teachers are subjected to the "Chain of Command" and evaluated as effective teachers when they follow orders…especially the orders of the campus principal that supervises them. But teachers leave themselves vulnerable and on slippery ground if they fail to manage their principal.

Of course, this means providing help and support to the principal, not figuring out clever ways to delegate from below. Sidebar "Delegating from below" is the career-limiting strategy of getting your boss to do the work that you were assigned. We will not delve into the specific tactics of delegating from below because the tactics benefit no one, neither in the short-term, or in the long-run. A Mutual Success Relationship Managing your principal means building a relationship that is beneficial to your principal and to you.

This includes identifying how the principal operates, finding out what the principal needs from you, and delivering all the help that you can. This means doing your work in ways that meet the needs of your principal, and does not mean doing the principal's work.

This process does not include arguing with your principal (either in public or in private) and does not include exerting influence upon your principal to change to your way of thinking…or to change the principal to your way of operating. Campus Culture, Management Style and Sphere of Influence Skills Before you can get positive principal attention, before you can obtain approval for implementing your ideas and before you become recognized as a key member of the campus faculty; you have to produce results that benefit your students, that benefit your principal, and that benefit your school district.

Just "doing your own thing" is unlikely to provide a benefit to your principal, or to produce any support from your principal.

What is required is for you to pinpoint exactly what you need to do, then follow through with your support plan.

Once this relationship is established, you will be trusted; and you can count on your ideas receiving a positive audience.

Campus culture refers to understanding how the folks on the campus where you work interact and operate. For example, is the campus…Performance-Based or Test-Score-Driven?

Political, Bureaucratic, Centralized or Decentralized?

Planning-Based or Ad Hoc?

Clique-Driven or Best-Idea-Driven?

Collegial or Adversarial?

Stressed or Relaxed?

Adversarial or Supportive?

Are Decisions Made Slowly and Deliberately or Quickly

Etc.? Management Style refers to.…Authoritarian, Democratic or Laissez-Faire Leadership

Accessible or Inaccessible Decision-Making

Open or Closed Budget Management

Formality or Informality

Importance of Paperwork vs. Informal Reporting Conversations

The idea here is to match your principal's method of working so that the principal is comfortable with the way you interact and relate. "Sphere of Influence" Skills Here are the questions to ask (of yourself) to determine if your management relationship with your principal is on the right track…Does the principal respect your work and rely on what you do?

Does the principal listen when you make suggestions or share ideas?

Do you know what is going on campus, and does the principal keep you informed?

Do you avoid rumors and trust the information that the principal gives you?

Do you solicit feedback about how you are relating to the principal? Do you pay attention and act on that feedback in a positive way?

Do you avoid cliques and keep on positive terms with all departments and factions on campus?

Do you treat everyone with respect, including students, parents, faculty and staff?

Do you focus upon facts and research instead of personalities if you disagree with decisions?

Do you listen before you answer?

Do you know what the principal expects you to deliver?

Do you keep your cool when disagreements occur or when temper fuses ignite powder kegs?

Are you prepared to do what it takes so that your contribution to the campus is positive and beneficial? Goal: What is Good for your Campus The reason for managing our principal is to work in harmony with your principal for the good of the campus.

Manage your principal correctly avoids schemes to get your way, avoids power plays to push your ideas, or avoids conniving to cut yourself a "bigger slice" of whatever is on the table (as long as it isn't more work).

Harmony, cooperation, collegiality and avoiding stress are hallmarks of a Master Teacher who is managing their principal.

A competent and fully successful principal will appreciate (and maybe reciprocate) in providing the help and support that you need when you manage the relationship with skill.

But, even a substandard, incompetent and less-than-fully-functional principal will be helped by your diligence in managing the relationship.

Managing your principal is in everyone's best interest.

Be sure to do so skillfully and wisely for a positive and productive campus.

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

Sunday, August 31, 2008

Under-the-Radar Teaching Skills

Steps to Controlling your Thoughts, Self-Talk and Emotions

Teachers should be able to say what they think, feel and believe; and in a world of real academic freedom, this would be true. But, teachers need to be sensitive to how their gripes, rants and offhand comments affect their students.

Self-censorship, in the service of professionalism, is ethical and the right thing to do.

More importantly, self-control to maximize positive thoughts and minimize negative thoughts, provides positive payoffs. In addition, emotional and behavioral control provides a positive model for students who understand that, "Do what I say, not as I do," is the trademark of a useless teacher. Control of your your thoughts, your self-talk and your emotions helps you follow your own recommendations and earns you the right to bestow platitudes and give advice to your students. Who Does Stress Harm? The biggest motivation for reigning in negative thoughts, negative self-talk negative emotions is the detrimental short-term and long-term effects that these stresses place upon our lives.

So, even if a teacher's outward appearance seems poised and controlled; if the internal landscape and environment is churned and "whipped up," health and vitality deteriorate.

The litany of diseases and maladies related to stress seems like a catalog of about every known disease. The list of diseases caused or exacerbated by stress is substantial and terrifying.

But, even more important are the effects that a tight lid on stress and frustration (in the professional arena) have upon personal and family relationships.

The key is to eliminate, counteract, prevent the accumulation of stress; but keeping a "tight lid" on stress (the opposite of relaxation and release) precipitates more harm than benefit.

Connections between Thoughts, Self-Talk and Emotions

Thoughts, self-talk and emotions are connected. These are maintained with rapid-fire interchange and tie in to our learned (Multiple Intelligences, Learning Styles) modalities of information processing.

This means that some complex of memories, images, beliefs and cognition interplay upon our feelings, sensations and reactions. This also means that we can control, alter and adjust this process if we choose to do so. (And if we develop the habits required to be successful with this control.

Strategies for Controlling Thoughts, Self-Talk and Emotions

Self-awareness, self-examination and self-discovery are the first steps in developing your self-control systems. But the intent of self-awareness, self-examination and self-discovery is the uncovering of talents, skills and abilities. This is a personal-resources-focused personal tools quest.

Dredging up negative experiences, opening wounds, testing the tenderness of scars, reliving past trauma; all of these unpleasant enterprises are off limits, counterproductive and contraindicated

Our self-awareness, self-examination and self-discovery will assist in inventorying the personal assets that we can use. Personal Control Panel and Pattern Inventory The next steps is to pay attention to what you do, and to pay attention to what sets you off in doing it.

The task here is to develop a non-evaluative, matter of fact list. "This is what happens" is the extent of this list. "When such a situation occurs, I ____."

Avoid positive and negative evaluations, and interpretations. Sidebar Avoiding evaluations and avoiding judgment is a self-control skill that is excruciatingly difficult for teachers.

Everything about what teachers do seems geared to this highest of the Higher-Order skills.

Yet, sitting in judgment of our "selves" sabotages our self-control in insidious ways; and we can't see how this happens because we are too enmeshed in our own evaluation. For example: "I do a great job keeping my cool when …"

"I did a lousy job responding to …" Both statements in this set are less than useful.

Change both to …" This and this happened …" And listen closely to any self-talk. Just record what you are saying without categorizing, or judging, evaluating what those statements mean. (In the final analysis, the judging that you conduct through your self-talk creates more stress than the original event.) Next Step: Tinker with your Senses This is the indirect approach to controlling your thoughts, self-talk and emotions.

You just "monkey around" with your sensory processing. In particular, fiddle around with visual imagery, but manipulating your experience of sensations, sounds, smells and tastes can work to your advantage.

For example, change … Size

Shape

Size

Nearness or Distance

Perspective Point

Color

Temperature

Pressure

Clearness or Blur

Constant, Erratic or Intermittent

Stable, Rocking, Fluctuating
Get silly, be mischievous, express comic rebellion, stonewall, silently insult

Examples:

That new male teacher keeps insisting that you go on a date with him. Rather than feeling upset, languishing under a self-talk diatribe discomfort at a situation you can't control; just picture this insulting colleague as a fat, pink pig. Visualize his mouth and nose as a snout. Hear him grunt. Recognize that you are not the "sow" that he would like you to be. Laugh at the caricature.

Another example:

A colleague continues to complain about the principal and school district, her salary, her students, just about everything. The antidote: Just picture this colleague as a "toilet mouth, with the nastiest stuff overflowing from her mouth. This image alone should be enough to keep you away from her...far away. The Power of Simplicity
Elaborate procedures are unnecessary and unduly cumbersome if a simple procedure gets the job done.

Quick and inelegant, just good enough; these are often the most elegant solutions to problems.

People disbelieve the power of tinkering with mental imagery until they experience the rapid and immediate changes for the better that these techniques achieve.

And, it is these simple experiments in personal mental imagery that build a control panel for managing your thoughts, self-talk and emotions.

Feel free to experiment and find your own personal style.

And, if you fail a time or two before succeeding, who cares? Besides, since the mental imagery skills are internal, only you know.

Put some personal controls in place and you will increase the flexibility that you have in dealing with your students.

And, though your students will be grateful, you will be the person that most benefits.

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

Thursday, July 31, 2008

Under-the-Radar Teaching Skills

Catching Teachers Performing Well

Principals and school district administrators that evaluate teachers can have a snappy bit of technology in their hands. This technology ensures that teachers receive lots of credit for all the exciting and creative work that those principals catch teachers performing. This nifty strategy that leaves "no superior teaching moment unrecorded" is accomplished by a hand-held computing device, and a behind the scenes server.

Unfortunately, the self-same device can be used by stress-focused, vendetta-prone, "I'll clean house of all undesirable teachers" principals. Sidebar You wish that talent and effort proved to be adequate job security. But in the days of "NCLB-slapped" administrators, the insecure (or inept) among their ranks "sometimes go after teachers" to make the case that they are competent administrators. "It's only those no-account slackers that have to go, and I am on their case to ensure that they either do their jobs or leave." So, how does this sneaky hand held computer system relate to stealth teaching methods?

Answer: Whether the principal/evaluator is "packing an always on" evaluation device, whether the principal is Obsessive-Compulsive; whether the principal is still rooted in paper and pencil checklists; teachers must maintain vigilance to ensure that they perform in a stellar fashion each time that they are "vigilanced-against."

The principal with the paper and pencil checklist can accomplish as much as the principal with the hand held computer, only the hand held computer accomplishes more with less effort.

Whether the principal is supportive, a laissez faire leader that always looks at your sunny side; or a henchman planning to wipe out your job, you need the same strategy.

Teachers must conduct class (from the first student meeting) in an "always being watched," "always aware of the scrutiny" pretending that the "hidden cameras that are running" state of alertness. Why Wouldn't a Principal want Such a Device? Imagine if principals could: Always have access to student and teacher contact data

Record observation data in real time, without having to connect to wireless systems

Cut teacher evaluation and paperwork time in half

Improve the teachers' evaluation reports by listing more details

Have this system customized to the school district's evaluation conventions And, for large campuses, principals can also have mobile student data that includes: Student attendance and schedules

Student photos and IDs

Student disciplinary records

Parent contact information What's more, the development company offers "no extra charge" for this customization and for their stellar technical support.

Contact: Austin Sky 877-759-7335 or visit Austin Sky A Cynic's View of Evaluation Evaluation of teachers is based more on belief and bias than on a perception of reality. And what principal, while conducting a drive-by evaluation; can grasp the skills, talents and abilities that a teacher has in play?

Just as sound bites have diminished our view (and our assessment) of political candidates, shrinking our perceptions around ten second sound clips... maybe 20 seconds if the media is biased in favor of the candidate... maybe 30 seconds if the media catches their "un favorite" candidate with a "colossal foot in his or her mouth."

The "thin slice of time" style of observation fails to animate a picture of a teacher's performance... not even as well as the stick figure drawing, thumbed for a fake animation, on the edge of a pad of paper.

The caution against the random sample, quickie observation is the same caution against evaluating a teacher based upon one or two high-stakes test days in April.

But, who can argue against saving time for the principal? Principal's Challenges Time-savings, less paper work, less work-related stress--in theory, this might mean a calm, cool, more hospitable and mellow principal.

But, these personal factors are more habit and conditioned behavioral responses than a reflection of the job situation.

What actually happens is that principals will still find their school day jammed to overflowing with attention-seeking issues and clamoring folks. Like the closet that is always full, no matter how large we build it; principals' workdays expand to fill every crack and cranny.

So, stresses never leave the presence of campus principals, and wishing for principals to mellow into a jovial mood is fantasy.

However, if the principal can complete an observation with less work, then at that particular moment, the likelihood that the principal might project that irritation and discomfort upon the teacher that s being observed is lessened.

So, making it easier for a principal to conduct the observation seems to at least level the playing field for the teacher, instead of amassing obstacles that aggravate the referee (principal). Summary So, look into easing the evaluation load on your favorite principal by advocating the use of hand-held tools. Your principal will thank you for it… although your next evaluation may fail to show that undying gratitude.

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

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

Monday, June 30, 2008

Under-the-Radar Teaching Skills

"This will Change your Life" - Stephen Pierce Self-help Audio Program

Here is a link to an audio presentation that you owe to yourself to listen to. I call it the "Make More Money Model of Instruction."

Stephen Pierce is a dynamic speaker and platform presenter. But, he has a message for teachers.

Although Stephen Pierce focuses upon prosperity in this audio presentation, the same notions can be used to bring prosperous amounts of learning to your students. Economics and capital can be metaphors for instructional outcomes.

So, listen to the presentation.

Then, adopt Stephen Pierce's formula for…Affirming personal competency

Stopping negative self-talk in its tracks

Taking positive action

Here is the resource…

Examining the multi-sensory, multi-modal components of your thinking can extract you from self-imposed ruts, and keep you above substandard performance.

And, Stephen Pierce's focus on taking action provides a roadmap or blueprint for making better and more productive choices about what you invest your instructional time and teaching efforts in.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Under-the-Radar Teaching Skills at 10:00