

Monday, March 31, 2008

## News Nuggets

Does your School District have a "Rubber Room"?

National Public Radio (NPR) ran a program about the "Rubber Room" program that is operated by the New York Public School System. So, "What is a Rubber Room?" you ask.

A "Rubber Room" program is an administrative option that reassigns teachers to non-teaching jobs until the school system develops an administrative solution to deal with the teacher that is assigned there. "We hear from New York City school teachers about a secret room in the New York City Board of Education building. Teachers are told to report there, and when they arrive, they find out they're under investigation for something. They have to wait in this room all day, every day, until the matter is cleared up. They call this bureaucratic purgatory "the rubber room." Some teachers have been stuck in it for years. This story was produced by Joe Richman, Samara Freemark, and Anayansi Diaz Cortes of Radio Diaries. We first heard about the rubber room from a documentary by Jeremy Garrett. There's a trailer at [rubberroommovie.com](http://rubberroommovie.com). Jeremy's looking for funding to finish the film, and a distributor. (23 minutes)"

Listen to the This American Life broadcast, #350: Human Resources

But that is New York City, with their massive inefficiency and administrative problems. This couldn't happen to in our school district, could it?

How could a school district operate a program with up to a dozen rooms, filled with between 700 and 800 teachers, each collecting their full pay and benefits...but doing absolutely nothing?

Sidebar For a general search of this topic, check out the search term...NY school district Rubber Room

Do you think that this couldn't happen in smaller school districts, but on a smaller scale? "I think that there are "Rubber Rooms" in every school district. We just haven't heard about them. For the most part, a waste of money and a waste of time. Yes, we should be protecting our students; however, too often, folks know how to play the system and the innocent gets caught up in this mess." Source Comment on the Teacher Forum., The Teacher Corner <http://tinyurl.com/2da4ke>

While not every school district maintains huge rooms with hundreds of non-working teachers reporting for confinement; this strategy seems to be widespread. Reasons for the Waste The cost of litigation is probably the main driver of the "Rubber Room" phenomena. It is probably less costly (cheaper) to pay a teacher for doing nothing for a year than to pay a legal firm to handle the issue for a few weeks or a month. (We have no actual data on school district personnel legal costs as much of this process happens "behind closed doors" and is generally exempt from "Public Information" regulations.

The extent of this money-wasting practice will remain hidden from tax payers and community members.

But, Classroom Toolkit offers a solution. Solution Classroom Toolkit is inaugurating the "Laptops for Rubber Room Inmates" Program.

In this program, we will provide laptops with wireless Internet access to every teacher that is assigned to a "Rubber Room."

Then, we will put this talent group of folks that have been "downgraded" (degraded undervalued and diminished) into productive curriculum designers, test item writers, lesson plan developers, and teacher tools producers.

All materials developed by this program will go into the public domain, and become the property of the world of education.

In this way, the "RR - Rubber Room" will cease to be the "RR - Restriction or Retribution" or "RR - Restful/ Restless Reassignment" to become "RR - a Responsible Resource."

Now, we just have to find a "fat-cat" sponsor with more money than brains (like the NY Public School District." Hmm. Sounds like a job for the Federal Government. Candidates, are you listening?

In this way, we will get real and useful work from these talented professionals, and leverage the investment in the laptops.

Sounds good. But, can we trust the NY City School System to be able to keep track of the laptops?

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in News Nuggets at 10:00

## Short Article

Time-Savers for Managing Teaching Strategies that the Internet in your Teaching

Here is a list of methods that can streamline the use of the Internet in your teaching. Method #1: Create and Use Templates Creating templates really saves time.

Any item that you believe will be used again is fodder for the template mill.

Look for items that don't change much, and convert them to templates.

Feel free to add other methods to this list, and share them with Classroom Toolkit readers. What tricks and techniques

have you found to be helpful?

You can do this with: Test Formats

Lesson Plans

Assignment Formats

Student Project Formats

Journal Pages

Portfolio Contents and Portfolio Conference Format

Parent Letters

Discipline Reporting and Tracking Forms

Rubrics

About Anything

Setting up templates (and keeping track of them) takes a tiny bit of time in the beginning, but really returns the investment in the long run. Create Memory Joggers: "Cheat Sheets" that Help you Recall Information. Teachers must remember lots of information to be successful. There are subject to learn and remember, color commentary items to research and recall, and countless bits of information.

All this information can lead to a "paralysis" that is commonly referred to as "information overload."

Develop a strategy for capturing and retrieving this information.

Check the Classroom Toolkit article, Let Google™ Manage Personal and Professional Briefings for You for more information on how to store and use Google's saved searches.

Techniques that work well (depending upon your skill with technology include: Linking materials to a hierarchy of folders with "shortcuts" that lead to each resource

Using a Mind Mapping program that allows inserting hyperlinks to launch any of these resources (This is a visual method for the same process as linking materials with shortcuts) These programs include: MindManager, MindGenius; Education (high-end, expensive programs) and Inspiration;

Using Word Processing Documents and Spreadsheets with embedded hyperlinks to connected resource, briefing and stored information. With Word Processing documents, if you create the document as an outline, and you will have a built-in menu system whenever you view the document from the "Document Map" view

Using a hand-held computer such as a Palm Pilot or Pocket PD; to carry your information

Using a program such as InfoSelect; to store information and a program such as SurfLater; to capture Web site's (with all links active)

Again, this may take time to set up, but the payback in time saved is huge.

Create a Personal Start Page

This strategy is similar to the previous strategy, but instead, you create a personal desktop Website, or Web page that is a portal to the rest of the information on your computer, and on the Internet.

Just about anything can be included and accessed in this way.

Online resources that you can access include: E-mail Accounts

Resource Websites

Search Pages and Saved Search Terms

Forum Accounts

Blogs that you Frequent

Free Online Storage Areas

And so on...

The benefit for the online launch pad Web page (or Website) is that it is portable and quick.

For a free, Open Source, and easy to Use HTML editor, use Nvu;

Link to download the Nvu; program; Some drawbacks include: You need a basic knowledge of HTML, or you need to know how to use a HTML Editor

The form can not remember all the passwords that you use. And, although you could list the log in name and password for each link, the Web page would not be secure.

One way to overcome the login and security process is by using a program such as RoboForm;. The RoboForm; software will create the links for you, and integrate these into the menu system of Microsoft's Internet Explorer or Mozilla's Firefox browsers. One drawback to this solution is that the RoboForm; software must be purchased, and to use the software on multiple computers, a second version of the software, for USB Drives, must also be purchased.

However, if you spend a lot of time accessing Internet resources, RoboForm; would be worth the money because of the time it saves you, even if it were ten times as expensive as its \$30.00 USD price tag. The USB program costs \$20.00 USD. Add-Ons for the Palm; and Pocket PC hand-helds cost \$10.00 USD.

You can also use the Web page technique for managing a portal to all the files and programs on your desktop computer. This launch page or personal portal also works for a personal Web page on your school district's Intranet or Internet site.

Using a personal portal, you can ensure that your students focus upon selected sites and approved resources since you can provide the links and search terms that you want them to use.

This approach can be used when your students are in your classroom, in a computer lab, in the library, and even from home (if the launch page is accessible from the Internet).

This approach saves time that would be wasted by having to repeat multiple Web addresses (URLs) to your students. Build FAQ pages or Wikis. Any information that you have to share over and over is ripe for inclusion in a FAQ page or Wiki.

This means writing once, and referring forever so that you don't have to keep answering the same question.

The FAQ page is similar to a Web page, but you can use a no cost Blogging program to set these up.

Sources of zero-cost Open Source FAQ Generators and Scripts include:

A Wiki program allows entry and searching for answers, but, often these programs allow others to edit, add to, subtract from or delete information.

Link to Open Source Wiki programs&hellip;

The negative issues surrounding FAQ and Wiki approaches to time saving are the amount of technology know-how that are required to get these strategies to function.

If you have the technology background, make these strategies work for you.

Plan and Choose Implementation based upon the "80/20 Rule"

The "80/20 Rule" is simple. Most of your results, benefits, measurable outcomes (the 80%) will be the result of a minimum amount of work and effort (the 20%).

So, as a time saving task, you just have to identify those "20%" tasks that pay off with greater outcomes.

Then, just do more of the 20% tasks and less of the other tasks.

Of course, teachers must teach 100% of their students, and each of these students is worth your investment of instructional time and effort.

But, the idea here is to find those high payoff tasks and to eliminate the low-payoff ones. Of course, the low-payoff tasks can also be considered to be "time-wasters." Summary Implement some of these strategies and and increase your efficiency in management of the Internet resources that you use to support your teaching efforts.

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

## Feature Article

Transforming the Grading System into a "Motivational System"

Assigning grades and wading through the mire of a grading system are odious tasks that plague teachers. Ask any teacher if they stay up until 11:00 p.m., 12:00 a.m. or 1:00 a.m. to craft dynamic, creative, exciting lessons. Are the late hours devoted to improving cutting edge teaching skills?

Of course not. The late-night tedium involves grappling with the "paper-grading ogre."

But, this is as it should be. When a teacher has been awake for 18, 19, or 20 hours; squeezing a day and a half of work into their waking hours; their brains and nervous systems flop, go limp. Creativity and thinking go flabby and flaccid. So, teachers staggering in this state of mind don't have the energy, attention span or patience to produce anything that is creative or useful.

A "numb mind" fits congruently with a "mind-numbing" activity such as grading papers. Urgent, but Unimportant Teachers cling to the fiction that grades and grading provide a certain magic importance in education. Supporting this error in judgment requires a convoluted logic, similar to the one that teachers fabricate when they delude themselves about the benefits of homework. Sidebar

For an elaboration concerning the fallacy that homework drives learning, see the Classroom Toolkit article, Homework: Some Suggestions for Solving a Recalcitrant, Intractable Problem

The issue that teachers face is that grading is an urgent, but unimportant (to learning) activity.

So, why do teachers devote so much time to an enterprise that provides so little value or payback?

Grading is urgent because student rebel if the quiz, test, project, report, paper that they completed (copied, wrote, shared, fudged, studied for) are summarily trashed by their teacher.

Of course, most students would never discover that their work (papers, quizzes, exams, assignments) received a summary execution in the dust bin.

Unfortunately, teachers encounter an isolated, grade-motivated student that is smart enough to calculate grade averages. A student of this ilk can only make trouble for a teachers.

Grades as Parents' Complaint Repellent

Teachers are driven to perform the "grading ritual" to exacting standards to head off parents' complaints (or to ward off the threat of parents' complaints), or to to mollify a campus principal's fear of parent complaints. So, teachers perpetuate this elaborate ruse under the guise of: Fairness

Equality

Competition

Pseudo-Science (Statistics)

Motivation toward Excellence

No-cost (on the cheap, no money out of their pockets) Students' Rewards So, what is a teacher to do?

### A Motivational (Grading?) System

Factors that drive this convoluted state of interference with instruction (grading) can be "fixed" to make the system sane and sensible.

But, why bother to fix a broken, lame, anti-goal-achieving process? Why not just throw the entire mess out?

Answer: Because you want to keep your job.

So, if teachers have to continue spending (investing, wasting) inordinate chunks of time on a less than useful process (only one of many distractions, wouldn't it be useful if there were some instructional payoff and measurable learning outcome resulting from the effort? Sidebar Classroom Toolkit has coined the term "Distinctions" to refer to the "district's distracting restrictions" that school districts place as roadblocks to efficient and streamlined instruction. Remember: You read it here, first!

It would be wonderful if grades motivated many more students. Of course it would be wonderful if our teen-age children ate nutritious food, followed our advice and cleaned their rooms. It would also be wonderful if there was a magic pill that prevented a teacher's sedentary lifestyle from solidifying into cellulite. But, these are bouts of wishful thinking and fantasy. Human nature drives our students, teenagers and body fat in other directions.

So, let's adjust the current system to increase student motivation. And, let's not make a big deal about it. Remember, we want to appear to conform to all school district policies, no matter how inane a (or stupid) because conformity correlates with job security.

Here are some adjustments that may salvage the grading system for you&hellip; Give additional tests (or quizzes), and drop the lowest single grade

Allow just about any student-initiated project to be applied as "extra credit" to class grades

Conduct pre-test briefing sessions (disguised tutoring), and let a few test items "slip out." This strategy really gets students to pay attention

Allow students to earn extra points by bringing in just about anything that is related to class instruction

Allow students to earn points that can be applied toward their grades by re-writing or re-doing parts of the test that they missed Creative adjustments to the grading system can be considered "playing loose" and "wheeling and dealing." But, who will complain if students are motivated, and rewarded for re-doing assignments, for creating self-directed projects, for taking initiative to "bring up their grades?"

Listen to teacher talk in Teacher Lounges across the country, and you will discover that teachers already know that the current grading system fails to motivate most (actually a super-majority or more) students.

Isn't it time to adjust the system to take advantage of our students' human nature?

And, it is "frosting on the cake" if the revamped system allows the use of rubrics that enable holistic scoring so that a teacher spend minutes instead of hours with the grading chores.

The communication and the relationship between teacher and students also creates benefits because teachers shows students that they want to help. With most current grading schemes, teachers appear to be stingy, hard-hearted, punitive task masters that dole out high grades as if they were scarce, or as if by assigning high grades, the teacher was robbing food from their children's plates.

However, since high grades don't cost a teacher any more than low grades (actually low grades do cost more to assign), everyone's best interest is served when teachers offer ethical, learning-based alternatives for students to earn (and pocket) better grades.

Try creative ways to get students to "up their grades" and see if this method works for you.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Featured Article at 08:00

### Quick Tips

April First Foolhardy? Try NuSpell on your Students

Students have a sense of humor that is commensurate with their age. And, some of your colleagues failed to grow up. So, expect April Fools jokes to be rampant on the "Day that Pranks Begot!" But, there are instructional ways to turn the tables on your rambunctious, "carried away by the mirth of it," students&hellip; teach them a lesson that they won't soon forget.

Sidebar Wouldn't it be "lovely" [sic] if all lessons were ones that our students didn't soon forget. Wishful dreaming?

Your strategy for "hot-seat role reversal" is to deliver a lesson on "NuSpell." Yes, there is such a thing, and the proof is online. Visit the NuSpell Site NuSpell Bingo Game Link to the evolution of the alphabet Poor Little Sick Boy Story Link to the Hogs Time Article And what to do for an encore?

Let students recite the "Dearest Creature of Creation" Poem for special April First Prizes.

Link to the Dearest Creature of Creation Poem&hellip;

Be sure to preview and practice reciting this poem yourself. And, look up the pronunciation of the words that you don't know, otherwise the joke will be on you.

One great method for introducing this poem is to offer a "nice prize," say \$5.00 to any student that can recite the poem all the way through without errors. Another strategy is to offer a consolation prize of \$1.00 to the student that gets the farthest through the poem without making a mistake.

And, what great math lessons in:  
Creating graphs of how far each student gets in the poem, by either words or lines  
Sorting lists of the missed words and creating sets of those categories  
Creating statistics of performance of teams, i.e., boys vs. girls  
groups based upon hair color  
student height  
Groups based upon affiliation such as, "Jocks, Geeks, Cheerleaders, Teacher's Pets, Eggheads, etc. Just prepare ahead of time, and watch the fun.  
Oh! And be sure to wear green to keep from being pinched.

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

## Top Tips

Professional Surveys: Outside the Scope of a Teacher's Work?

Data Driven Instruction is a&hellip;Cliche

Catch Phrase

Snippet of Meaningless Jargon

Meaningless Term

Unattainable Ideal

Useless Concept for Teachers

Outside the Scope of a Teacher's Authority

There may be a bit of truth (reality) in all of these choices. Sidebar Although the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) places a heavy bounty on "Teacher Accountability," Standardized Testing, and Data Analysis; most school districts do not allow teachers to gather data, conduct surveys, interpret data to parents, school board members or community leaders. Besides, crafting surveys, gathering data, and employing instructional decisions based upon data requires skills in the professional realm that most school administrators believe exceed individual teacher's capacity and competence. But, this confused role doesn't mean that surveys are useless, only that teachers can't put any survey in writing. Teacher surveys must be verbal and conducted "on the sly."

Then, armed with this "secret knowledge" teachers can never reveal their data to anyone.

The ways to share this surreptitious survey data are: State results as an opinion

State results as your best guess, hunch or intuition

State that you "heard something" at the PTA/ PTO meeting, in the teachers' lounge, on the radio

Etc. Surreptitious Survey How-Tof you are to collect survey data, you can't be seen or heard doing it. You can't let on that you are collecting the data.

For the Teachers' Lounge, you need to memorize your questions, one at a time, and ask one colleague, then leave (or go into the bathroom) and record the answer on a 3" x 5" card.

Repeat over many days or weeks until you have compiled enough data to develop inferences.

Surveys with parents are easier because you can call parents to praise and compliment their children. During the conversation, you may also be able to work several survey questions into the conversation. Just be sure to keep your data collection device handy and record responses as you hear them.

Recording student responses is easier Just develop a set of questions, and use them with a simple Yes-No response system such as two-sided cards.

For example, one side of the card is red for, "No." and the other side is green, for "Yes."

Then, during social studies, governments, health, math or other class; work the questions into the discussion.

Keep it simple and keep it surreptitious.

Using "underground tactics" such as these, you will be able to collect usable data that assists you in your professional job role. Professional Solutions If you would like to explore professional survey methods further, check these resources&hellip;

SPSS&#8482; offers an outstanding resource, SPSS&#8482; Survey Tips.

This document provides all the background information that you need to "play in the educational survey jargon space."

Link to the SPSS&#8482; Survey Tips Document SPSS also shares professional information in an Online

Webinar&hellip;

Listen to the SPSS Online Survey Tools Webinar Survey tools are important, and the fact that school districts do not allow teachers to conduct them is another symptom of the diminished professional status of teachers.

Or, maybe it is a symptom of the bureaucratic timidity and fear of controversy that comprise the job survival instincts of the districts executive management.

Whatever the reason, if you want usable information. Use survey techniques to get it. Only don't get caught when you do.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Top Tips at 06:00

## Teacher Resources

### Pacer Kids against Bullying

Bullying is a problem anytime that it rears its nasty bulk and stinking frame. But in times of stress, such as when high-stakes tests are in play, when tempers connect to short fuses "when stress high voltage levels&hellip; these inner tensions often precipitate outward demonstrations of frustration.

One of those symptoms of inner frustration is bullying.

What usually goes unrecognized is that the other side of the "bullying gig" is the victim's role&hellip; also often sensitized by stress.

Let's call a student that participate on the "receiver end" of the game a "Bullee" so that we recognize that they play an active (not passive) role in the drama.

In some ways, the bully and bullee (victim?) are similar&hellip; both exhibit: Diminished self-concept

Low self-esteem

Inadequate coping skills

Low frustration tolerance

Self-limiting behavioral and interpersonal options

Behavior driven by external pressure, rather than by self-directed goals

Unresponsive social support networks

Etc. Teachers to the Rescue? It is understandable, although a flawed strategy, for teachers to step in and "rescue" the bullee from the bully.

But bailing out the victim only perpetuates the integrated drama.

Sure, it is odious, and teachers can't sit idle while children are injured, maimed, bruised or battered. And, there are potential liabilities (such as lawsuits) if children lose hair, eyes, teeth, or when bones are broken while a child is under a teacher's vigilance.

Still, a teacher "coming down hard" with aversive punishment leveled against the bully can make matters worse for the bullee. Another Approach: Teach Coping Skills to both Bullies and Bullees We ordinarily think that the bully lacks coping skills and single the bully out for "social skills training." But this strategy misses the mark. The reason: This is a negative goal&hellip; removing something from the bully's repertoire instead of adding something to the skills of both participants. The reason that "teaching the bully to stop bullying" fails to work is that the goal lacks a direction. What is needed is an approach that identifies exactly what to do. The "don't know what to do instead" approach "lecturing the bully, telling bullies that they should care about the feelings of others&hellip; these are non-goals.

What to Do Instead of Bullying: The Real Teaching Opportunity Real teaching is where the prescriptions and the canned solutions fail.

Why? Because teachers never guess correctly about what is going on inside the minds and emotions of either the bully or the bullee. The only accurate strategy for determining a solution is to listen, not preach, not protect.

Prepackaged, one-size solution fit too loosely on some, squeeze the toes of others. Prepackaged approaches neglect the basics&hellip; resolving real issues.

Real issues include: Emotional impact of the dynamics of the bullying situation

Open communication with all parties and stakeholders of the bullying situation

Rapport building by the teacher or counselor with all parties

Coming to agreement, rather than capitulation and surrender by coercion Fake Students can't Help As nice as the concept of creating self-help materials is, the fact is that trained communicators that can develop honest and compassionate dialog&hellip; professionals that can maintain the role of "honest broker" are needed.

For example, Pacer Kids against Bullying offers plenty of Web sources.

"Kids Against Bullying is a Web site created for elementary school children. It is a creative and informative resource to educate students about bullying prevention and provide methods to respond to bullying situations. The site features an animated cast of characters, information, celebrity videos, Webisodes, games, animation, contest and other activities. Parents and professionals will find helpful tips, intervention strategies, and resources for use at home or school.

"Source: Kids against Bullying <http://www.pacer.org/bullying/kab/index.asp>

"PACER is creating an exciting new bullying prevention Web site for teens—and you can help. Designed to reach, teach, and empower teens, the site will feature compelling stories from students, parents, educators, and community partners across the nation when it launches this summer. Here are two ways you can make a difference and maybe even change how people across the country think about bullying. Submit a video, story, poem, artwork, or audio clip expressing your ideas on bullying prevention. It can be about what happened to you or someone else, how you feel about bullying, how you think it affects students and schools, what you have done to prevent bullying, or what can be done to prevent bullying. We want to hear from everyone—teens, parents, teachers, and others with great ideas who want to improve the world. Source: National Center for Bullying Prevention <http://www.pacer.org/bullying/mhs/index.asp>

The Pacer Program offers lesson plans, materials, and an interactive Web site. All useful and valuable resources for teachers.

But remember: to get to the heart of the bullying matter, the professional must speak from the heart, and hold the heart of the bully in as much regard as the heart of the bullee.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Teacher Resources at 05:00

## **Teacher Survival Strategies**

### Dealing with Nasty People

You don't have to teach very long before you encounter a nasty person&hellip;student, parent, colleague, principal, administrator, school board member, ad nauseam.And whether this is because&hellip;You work in the wrong place

Your students come from the "the wrong side of of your belief system"

You work with the wrong class of people

You work with a "bunch of morons"

You attract "dark-mood" people

You have a bad attitude

You behave badly and bring these unpleasant reactions upon yourself

You stumble into negative situations

You don't have a clue&hellip;You have to deal with the situations that dealing with nasty people creates for you.

You need to determine what is going on during these situations, and you must also determine what role you are playing&hellip;inadvertent, by design, accidental bystander, whatever.

What you must do is prevent the nastiness from escalating into either:A Power Struggle

A One-Up-Person-Ship Ploy (Note: Politically correct but silly description)

Revenge

Mistake

Personal or Professional Slight

Depression or Mental IllnessDiffusing a Bomb, or Bombing Out?You encounter nasty situations from time to time. If you find that the people that cause this upset and turmoil are in your life every day (such as a student, or family member), then you need life skills and coping strategies that are beyond the scope of this article.

On the other hand, if these "nastiness binges" are infrequent, you might need to prepare so that your reaction is pre-meditated, professional and career stabilizing.

Miscalculate one of these "nasty numbers" and you can find yourself:Explaining (and giving excuses) to your supervisors

Providing endless pages of documentation of your recollection of the incident

Blaming yourself for being "stupid" and getting beat in the "one-on-one" game that the nasty person "sucked" you into

Ruining the lack of administrative support that you receive from folks higher up the chain of command

Seeking legal advice

Looking for another jobThe first task you face is to perceive "reality."Blame's the Name of the GameYou might think that you are in the "Right Corner." You may be right, and you may be able to prove it (at least to yourself, and to your long-suffering spouse). But being right often means loosing.

The reason that being "right" is most often "wrong" is that "dealing a loss" to the nasty person generally means a "rematch," often on a new court or playing field chosen by the nasty person, and on their terms.

But, avoid loosing, too. Loosing only encourages the nasty person to set you up again for another round.

So, the key strategy for dealing with a nasty person is to avoid laying blame in any direction.

This means readjusting your vocabulary, if not your belief system.

Can you see the issue from the other person's side? Does their point of view make sense, even if you think that it is in error?

Or, is the other person's point of view so "out of touch with reality" that you think that they are crazy. Guess what? They may be mentally ill.

But, if a person is mentally ill; you have "zero chance" of changing their mind and and even smaller chance of helping them to see the errors in their thinking, and a still smaller chance that they will accept blame.

Give up any pretense of convincing the mentally ill nasty person that you are right. And, if you believe that you can convince such a person that they are to blame; you are just as much out of touch with reality as they are.Tact and States-Person-Ship (Note: Another politically correct but stupid phrase)Whether the nasty person brings an "off the wall" accusation, or a dossier of substantiated facts that incriminates you; your response skill set must be pulled from the same strategy, i.e., a professional response with all the characteristics of a "guilty candidates spin on yet another revelation of wrongdoing."

You require tact, discretion, and valor when a nasty person precipitates an unpleasant situation. You must exemplify "courage under fire," even if the barrage and fusillade is verbal and accusatory. Your skill in dodging in an elegant manner prevents you from being "cannon fodder" that is pulverized by the nasty person's verbal pyrotechnics.

The techniques that you use to prevent gouging your stomach with an ulcer include:Identify common ground

Accept accountability, liability, culpability (but, only if you are responsible)

Keep the conversation focused upon what outcomes the nasty person wants and what outcomes the nasty person would like see

Hear the complaint out&hellip;all of it

Come to some agreement&hellip;either a resolution, or the next step

As odious as this may sound, you gain the advantage by agreeing with the nasty person on some level. Agreeing creates a sliver of rapport, more than you had before the incident, and more than you have if you disagree. Agreeing also gives you a slight negative reinforcement advantage; i.e., you now are in the "driver's seat with the ability to pull your agreement." Simple, Professional Techniques Here are some techniques for dealing with nasty and irate folks without stooping to their level and telling them that you hope they get hit by a truck and die!

You may find it useful to: Keep from "taking it personally." The nasty person will try to attack you at a personal level. Don't take this bait!

Diffuse the situation with kindness (as much as you can)

Attempt to reschedule (when you can muster reinforcements or find allies, or at least witnesses)

Affirm (to yourself) that you do not need to tolerate abuse.

Picture your self-concept and self-esteem as strong and stable, like a seaworthy ship in a storm, pulling out just fine Do what you can to accommodate (within reason)

Look for a way for the nasty person to save face

Keep "the customer/ boss is always right" in perspective, too. Don't allow this "sunny day" concept to "go too far"

Realize that this may not be your problem. If not, refer or get help

Don't fall for the "fear tactics" of "taking the complaint to your supervisor&hellip;or higher." Call their bluff, and ask to jointly invite the supervisor in on the discussion

Restate any threat to hire a lawyer as one that the nasty person has a right to do at any time, but that there might be other ways to arrive at a solution without the nasty person going through the expense of hiring an attorney and placing control in the slow mechanism of the legal system

Sometimes the nasty person is just looking for an easy target to subject to their frustrations, anger, hatred, resentment or mental aberrations. Don't be that "easy mark"

Listen to the ranting and raving, then respond kindly. Respond in a congruent fashion and state that you understand their frustration. Honestly relate that you want to work with them and resolve the issue. This step can often diffuse anger and release a rational human being. Of course, sometimes it won't.

Be prepared. Decide whether or not to seek help.

And know the boundaries of the situation.

For example, issues involving Emotionally Disturbed and Learning Handicapped children may require Special Education and Planning Committee meetings. Or, students may need to be referred to the Special Education testing program.

This means that you have allies, helpers, counselors and friends that can help you through some situations.

But, avoid any steam-frustration-valve releases in the Teachers' Lounge. Consider any statement made in the Teacher's Lounge to be as private as a post card or E-mail message. Final Advice And, though dealing with the perpetually nasty person, may be a fact of life for working professionals such as teachers; be sure that the grit and grime of the interaction stays at work. Keep the stress and pressure of the event or interaction at work. Don't carry any of this interpersonal grime home to contaminate the positive, loving, caring, trusting relationships you have with your family and friends with Keeping the issues and emotions at work means avoiding rehashing the incident at home. Do not use family and friends as sounding boards for your frustrations.

Your work environment may contain industrial-strength interpersonal pollution, but your home environment can be pristine. Keep it that way for your well being.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Teacher Survival Strategies at 03:00

## **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&hellip;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.

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

## **Open Source for Education**

Kidspiration: The "Why" of Educational Technology that Open Source Forgot

Inspiration; Software released Version 3 of Kidspiration;. This software is the preeminent "concept mapping, mind mapping" resource for young students - Grades K-3. (Actually, there is no other software program that does the job of instruction young children as well as Kidspiration;.)

Concept maps and mind maps are visual tools for structuring thought. Colorful diagrams and images show relationships in concrete and understandable ways that prove to be effective teaching tools.

So, what could Open Source folks learn from the release of Kidspiration; 3.0? (Flip Answer: The same thing that they should have learned with the release of Kidspiration' 1.0, or 2.0. the same thing that they should have learned from examining Inspiration;"s flagship product, Inspiration;, or Inspiration; Software's Inspiredata;.

Here are the basics: Software must be multi-platform (Windows; and Mac; at a minimum)

Software must run on a school district or campus network, as well as on individual computers

File Format Compatibility for file sharing, and access to created data and images must be usable (preferable interchangeable) with other programs; especially Microsoft; Office (The Word Processing and Presentation Programs in particular)

Software development must continue so that newer versions are compatible with the latest releases of computer operating systems, i.e., Windows; and Mac;

Output from the software must be compatible with methods for demonstrating pre-post learning progress, such as use within students' online portfolios

The technology must be transparent so that the attention of students and teachers remains focused upon instructional content (The technology must not be so difficult that it calls attention to itself.)

Software releases must be announced well in advance to allow school district administrators to budget for the software

Software must be released by the Spring of the year to allow school district IT Departments to test the software and roll out the updated software during the Summer

Software must function correctly with a network install, i.e., only requiring one server-based installation (as compared to installing the software on each desktop and laptop computer). But, the software must also be available on laptops that students and teachers use at home Take-home licenses for the software should be available so that students and teachers can use the software at home. Of course, this is the argument for selecting Open Source software in the first

place. But, if the software does not meet the instructional needs of students, there is no justification for wasting students' and teachers' time (or network storage space) by installing it.

Kidspiration<sup>®</sup> is available from many dealers and resellers. But, don't buy the software yourself since school districts receive huge discounts on site licenses. Site licenses allow campuses to install the software on as many computers as they wish. But, don't install the software on every computer, either. What you should do is install the software one time on your campus server; then, create a link to the program from your campus or district Intranet page. This solution eliminates plenty of hassles, and allows students to access the program from any computer that is connected to the campus network.

>The Curriculum Connection

Kidspiration<sup>®</sup>; can be used by young children. But, so what?

The question is, "What do young children learn from software that is engaging (and so easy that it doesn't draw attention to itself) that children learn crucial concepts?"

Look at some of the items that Kidspiration<sup>®</sup> 3.0 includes:

Symbol Collection - over 3,000 symbols related to concepts that are taught in Grades K-5

Support for Multiple Subjects - It's not just for Math anymore

Views include - Picture, Math and Writing Views

Math Functions include: Color Tile Manipulation

Pattern Block Manipulation

Base-Ten Block Manipulation

Fraction Tiles

Fraction Boxes Symbol - Keyword Search

Support for Audio Input - Teachers can record instructions

Support for ELL and ESL students

Included Dictionary and Thesaurus -- over 13,000 words

Included Sight Vocabulary - Dolch and Frye's Word Lists

Over 150 cross-curricular teaching templates - with Standards-Aligned Lesson Plans In addition, Inspiration<sup>®</sup>; released a companion teacher resource book, Kidspiration<sup>®</sup>; in the Classroom: Reading Essentials.

If you think that Inspiration<sup>®</sup>; Software understands the learning process for young children, and understands the needs of teachers in this high-stakes test-crazy world of education, you are right.

If you notice that Kidspiration<sup>®</sup>; integrates visual, auditory and hands-on learning across multiple curricular content area subjects while decreasing students' attention to the technology, you perceive the correct model for "Technology Integration." That is, the technology takes a backseat to learning, the technology delivers learning experiences and positive learning outcomes by disappearing from view. Transparent technology is integrated technology. Link to 50 uses of Inspiration<sup>®</sup>; and Kidspiration<sup>®</sup>;

Link to Graphic Organizers on Classroom Toolkit Exercises with Kidspiration<sup>®</sup>;

Graphic Organizers in the Classroom on Educscapes<sup>®</sup>;

Graphic Organizers at Graphhic.Org

Conducting Google<sup>®</sup>; searches for Curricular uses of Kidspiration produces over 14,000 resources. A

Google<sup>®</sup>; search for Curricular uses for Open Source produces 540,000 entries. But, the Kidspiration<sup>®</sup>;

resources are focused upon instruction, more targeted and more useful. The "Open Source" entries are focused upon the technology.> On the face of it, "Open Source" would seem to win as a resource for teachers. In practice,

Inspiration<sup>®</sup>; software "out classes" difficult-to-use Open Source software that is geared toward "Techie" adults, software that draws attention to itself." (No pun intended.) Multiple searches with variations of search terms containing the words "Open Source software" produce plenty of results, but fail to focus upon direct instruction in a usable way.

Sidebar

If any Classroom Toolkit reader finds a suitable search phrase that produces links to resources that teachers can actually use (besides Classroom Toolkit, of course) please comment to this article entry.

Note: The Classroom Toolkit strategy is to provide Open Source instructional materials, not software development.

These materials are developed in a modular format to save time for teachers. Once teachers salvage some personal time; instead of being trapped in the personal drudgery of daily lesson planning, teachers can devote more energy and focus upon improving personal teaching skills. The Professional Development "Snowball" The other area that Kidspiration<sup>®</sup>; beats Open Source solutions is in the area of professional development.

Kidspiration<sup>®</sup>; focuses upon creative and innovation ideas for moving the curriculum towards higher-order learning skills. The Open Source "Techie strategy" focuses upon saving money with software that can be "tinkered with."&hellip;that is, software that allows programmers to rewrite its "source code." Teachers to Open Source

Developers: "Who cares if we can rewrite software source code? We don't have the time or know-how to do that, and we don't want to learn. We love children, and we want our time to be spent communicating with children, and teaching them. We don't want to spend our time interacting with a computer screen. Just make the software do what students and teachers need, don't show off your technical prowess. We don't care about 'technology for technology's sake,' and never will." Sidebar This "stilted" focus upon "free and cheap" leads to the "biggest sin" of the Open Source for Education

Movement; i.e., forgetting to spend about one-third of the project budget upon instructional-focused (not-software-focused) professional development. See the Classroom Toolkit articles&hellip;  
Teachers to IT Departments: You have Professional Development Homework Lack of Educational Intelligence: The Major Problem with Open Source Software  
Teachers to Open Source Advocates: "You have Homework!"  
But, Inspiration&#8482; Software has a full range of professional development options that focus upon instructional outcomes.SidebarKidspiration&#8482; professional development sources include:  
The Inspiration&#8482; Software Professional Development resourcesTeacher Created Projects from the University of WisconsinUsing Kidspiration&#8482; in the Classroom  
Kidspiration&#8482; Make and TakeKidspiration&#8482; Free Trial  
But, don't take our word for it. Download a free trial of Kidspiration&#8482; now!Download a free trial of Kidspiration&#8482; now&hellip;

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Open Source at 01:00