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Teaching Can Be Like This

Teaching is one of the most challenging, yet potentially rewarding of all professions. With the implementation of the Common Core State Standards the very system of education has an exciting opportunity to be free of cumbersome practices, such as "teaching to the test." Teachers are challenged to think differently about learners and to design classrooms that honor the art of teaching and the science of learning. Every teacher and every student is worthy of a school system that is designed to care for and support deep learning and honor the needs of students, while they experience the expansive development of the human brain.

There are exciting things happening in education around the world right now. Education is and always has been something that everyone values and wants for themselves and their children. And almost everyone has an opinion of how the education system can best serve the people. At this particular time new terminology and new visions are emerging as the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) continues to make its debut. Once again there is a stir of excitement and some trepidation. To squelch all the jitters about this current thrust, it is time to look at some of the really great things that are happening in schools. Once the pieces of good classroom practice fall into place the common core fits right into how school works best.

Different Expectations

This is day three of a new study unit. Henry rushes down the corridor, hoping that none of the students have entered the classroom before him. He wants to be there before class begins to review his plan while the students are still mingling or playing outside. It is important that all the materials are laid out and accessible. He hastily reviews the questions he will ask. He analyzes how much time will be needed and if the plan for this lesson will fit into the time allowed. There are just a few precious minutes before the bell rings and everyone will pile into the classroom. This young teacher reflects about the content that was presented during the last class period. He decides how the new information will be provided and plans for a teacher-prepared talk that can be accessed by all the learning teams at 10:15.

As young and inexperienced as he is, he is aware that group interaction is critical as well as there must be time to practice. He is responsible along with the others that everyone in the group understands all content well enough to give it to another classmate in his or her own words. He reviews the plan one last time. When everyone in the group is ready, Henry, as the group leader for this week, knows to ask their teacher to come and review their work. He knows the final activity is for the group to report back to the whole class. Reporting back is scheduled to happen 20 minutes before the class period ends. His group has a mere five minutes to summarize how they worked together and what they learned. He sighs and breaks into a smile as the bell sounds and the doors to the classroom burst open.

This classroom scenario brings anticipation and excitement in a systematic, planned way.

- What is different in the way learning is structured in this classroom?
- What is expected of the students in this classroom?
- What grade level could be assigned for this scenario?
- What level of mastery on a scale of 1 (some) to 5 (quite a bit) could be expected from this kind of student responsibility? How did you determine this score?

Classrooms like this one are replicated when students are given the responsibility to own their own learning without minimizing the very important role of teachers. The professionals are all over this type of learning, but they do not occupy center stage.

REAL SCHOOL EXAMPLES

A perception change is needed as professionals in the field of education place their focus on real learning, deep and extensive learning. This change can happen when the emphasis for schools is changed from what the teacher needs to do to present a lesson to what students are doing to develop deep understanding. A new breed of schools is featured at the popular Edutopia website (edutopia.org). One such example is Mount Desert Elementary School in Northeast Harbor, Maine. This school has consistently outperformed other schools in the state. The school leaders attribute their success to a focus on Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Students' motivation comes from responsive classroom techniques, such as morning meetings, rules and expectations set by the students, focused positive talk, community-based activities, and various classroom choices for students.

At this school learning has been tailored to the needs of every student. This sustainable practice of focusing on social emotional needs has been in place for over 6 years. It is more than just a good idea; it is a way of doing school. A change has been instituted from focusing on how teachers teach to what students do to learn, and it is key to the success of this program.

Why Social Emotional Learning?

A bit of brain knowledge helps respond to this question. Children's, and adults' brains as well, have an emotional area that is primary to how they feel and react in any situation. Unless this area, the amygdala, is neutralized, it can override other parts of the brain, even the frontal areas where executive thinking and ultimately deep learning occurs. When a child feels safe, somewhat in control of the environment, and feels valued, then the primary needs of the social brain are satisfied. Reaching this plateau allows children to be open to the activities in the classroom. Learning has a robust potential to occur (see Chapter 9, Social Emotional Learning). When children are given the opportunity to contribute to essential activities in the classroom, such as setting the rules and expectations, being asked to define different ways of moving around the elementary classroom, selecting a learning activity for the unit of study in middle school, for example, they feel important and valued. When someone greets them with a sincere concern for their well-being, they are more likely to relax and be open to learning. Customizing the school day to allow students to pursue their own interests is a common strategy in districts that have received award grants

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from the federal government in the Race to the Top project. Learn more about activities that result from this government project in Chapter 3.

Now teachers have an opportunity to break from rigid lists and step-by-step teaching to experience how they can be true facilitators of deep student learning. The common core advances education to bring out the innovative, creative teaching side of the profession and to apply it to what students need for deep understanding and learning. The educational experience is extended by encouraging inner connectivity among school subjects.

School Organization and Student Learning

Most children are eager to come to school as kindergartners. They want to know about the things they can play with and what they will learn that older friends and siblings already know. Although school curriculum and requirements align with the developmental social and learning aspects of the human brain, new thinking and higher expectations for rigorous learning have crept into even the early grades. The early school years, too, are being challenged with more comprehensive work. While there were naysayers about an increasingly serious academic curriculum for five- and six-year-olds, children have surprised parents and teachers with their resolve for learning. It turns out the abilities of the young, developing human brain have been underestimated. As the curriculum continues to be more demanding, the children filtering through the school system show capacity to master stronger learning skills and form deeper understanding. This wave of students will defy each ensuing grade-level teacher to provide more challenging learning activities. Learners with higher levels of competence moving through the education system can have exhilarating outcomes.

Another Strong Example

Nothing breeds success like being successful. Sammamish High School (SHS), in Bellevue, Washington, lets website viewers know of their success at the first look. SHS among “America’s Most Challenging High Schools” greets the reader. Another accolade is that this high school was among *Newsweek*’s list of America’s best-100 high schools. On the same first look, those seeking information have quick facts of enrollment, assessment information, attendance area, budget, and even when the campus was renovated, which was in 2004. Fine, but what makes this school stand out from others?

Initially it is learned they have linked with the George Lucas Educational Foundation and the powerful direction identified by STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). STEM's direction integrates the sciences, all these sciences, into a core focus, giving just as much attention to technology and engineering as formerly was allowed for math and science. It is the brain child from industry with lofty goals for American students by 2020.

Touting a mantra of *our school, our community, our future*, Sammamish High School lives out its vision by partnering also with Washington STEM and the University of Washington Institute of Science and Math Education. Teachers embrace problem-based learning (PBL). An extension of this thinking is extended into a summer program where students work with engineers and other professionals to look at global and local problems. And, yes, there is more support as the Gates Foundation and Valve Software collaborate with this program. While this combination of external financial and resource support is extraordinary and difficult to replicate, others can still seek the root of their success. The key to real learning is what is happening between teachers and students.

Teachers at Sammamish are characterized by their tenacity and connectedness among their colleagues and with both the local and global community. They willingly partner not only with others in the community, but also with their students. It is tricky business to maintain control of the curriculum, be ultimately responsible for student learning, and yet willingly let go of some of the classroom management issues, which incidentally plague classrooms everywhere. At this school, the classroom can be anywhere. For example, several groups from their advanced placement human geography class did research and proposed solutions to agricultural problems in Saharan Africa and South Asia through technology at their school site. Their solutions include new technology, an awareness campaign, and new government policy. Another course, in biology/chemistry, aligned with a research team from the University of Washington to work on a potential cancer drug delivery system. Students work alongside their teachers and STEM professionals in other intensive programs; each one is accomplished in a 7-day institute.

It is a bit overwhelming to think of the way classes are run and the connections that must be in place for a high school that is this dynamic and associates so effectively in the community and in the world. Remember, however, that Sammamish is only 1 of 100 that received recognition by a national magazine, *Newsweek*, in 2013. Other high schools are doing innovative programs that are equally unique and different.

A Brilliant Time to Be in Education

It is amazing to see engineering and technology take their place in the curriculum spotlight. Now students can experience a full range of experiences from the real world and be better prepared for the world they find after graduation. Teachers, through technology, have an endless supply of support and solid lessons for every content area that are based on what has already been successfully done in classrooms worldwide through websites, blogs, and tweets. One such website, <http://www.yourchildlearns.com/alpsci.htm>, provides active science learning lesson plans and activities for elementary age students. An example, this time for high school, is Share My Lesson by teachers for teachers. This site features all areas of the high school curriculum and is available at <http://www.sharemylesson.com/high-school-teaching-resources/>. Almost 170,000 different lessons are available and rated.

While these are two examples teachers know they can use Google to look up almost any learning-related request and get real answers instantly from real colleagues. And there is good reason to pull no stops to pursue a new deeper form of learning for students. The Common Core State Standards are roaring into schools with new expectations and an improved outlook for student accomplishments during their school years.