
Foreword

True North is about empowering students with the wisdom and confidence to exceed expectations throughout their school years and beyond. True North is about instilling an unwavering desire in students to own their learning, as they discover the freedom and responsibility for their choices in learning. Teachers who aim for True North understand deeply that to educate means to draw out one's potential.

These words from the Introduction to *Partnering With Students to Build Ownership of Learning* capture the essential message of co-authors Mary Jane O'Connell and Kara Vandas. Using the symbol of a compass and its four cardinal directions—north, south, east, west—their purpose is to continually point teachers in the right direction that will enable *students* to confidently take charge of their own learning journey and ultimately reach “true north.” This purpose can be summed up in the statement at the center of their diagram, Teacher's Internal Compass: “I empower all students with the wisdom and confidence to exceed expectations.”

But this purpose doesn't end with the teacher's commitment. It directly transfers to the statement at the center of their companion diagram, *Student's Internal Compass*: “I own my learning to achieve worthy goals.” Both teacher and student must commit to and invest in this shared learning process—a dual responsibility directly reflected in this opening phrase from the book's title, “Partnering With Students.”

What impresses me most about this book is its thoughtful blend of rationale, supporting research, examples, exercises, practical applications, personal and collaborative reflection, and next steps to implement the processes—all presented in a non-threatening approach. It truly points the way for educators and leaders wanting to begin shifting the focus from teacher-focused instruction to student-centered learning. These ideas are realistic and doable. To illustrate, here are a few key points from the three parts of the book that I believe are especially important to emphasize upfront.

In Part I, “Defining the Journey,” Chapter 1 underscores the foundational necessity of building positive teacher-student relationships *first*. “We begin by surfacing the voices of students to understand the promise and hope offered when trusting relationships are formed and students are motivated to share the ownership and responsibility for learning.” Regarding student voice, one of the most thought-provoking statements the authors make is this: “As our partners, students need a voice in all the important decisions that affect their learning and the operation and management of the classroom . . . if students aren’t active contributors of the classroom, they are relegated to passive observers.”

Also in this chapter, the authors present their research-supported TRUST model, a framework for building collaborative and meaningful relationships with students that promote their ownership of learning. Teacher actions and learner actions appear together. One is never absent from the other. The TRUST model seeks to transform “forward thinking” into “forward doing.” It is rooted in the willingness and commitment on the part of teachers *and* students to exercise a growth mindset that acknowledges mistakes as a natural part of learning. This belief system manifests in the creation of a “class credo,” a flexible set of agreed-upon beliefs about learning that support collaboration, reflection, and risk-taking. Chapter 1 is so rich with ideas that I urge readers to spend as much time as needed to deeply process it.

In Part II, “Learning on the Journey,” Chapter 4 opens with a powerful set of questions that educators and leaders will find worthy of in-depth discussion: *The question is not about teaching, it is about learning*. The question is: “Did my students learn it? Did all my efforts as a teacher result in learning for my students?” *Instead of focusing on what was taught, the focus should be on what was learned*.

The educational literature offers a superabundance of teaching strategies for effectively delivering content. Yet the authors propose the need for students to develop a “toolbox of *learning* strategies” that will enable them to know when it’s appropriate to select one tool over another to advance their understanding of a particular concept or skill. Citing Jim Knight (2013), the authors point out that teaching students *how* to learn is as important as teaching students what to learn.

When students own their learning and set ambitious goals, the path may be initially unclear. However, a few roadblocks will not daunt students who have developed a resolute mindset intent on success. They will consult their toolbox of strategies or actively research alternative solutions and resources to learn and ultimately succeed. In other words, students with a personal toolbox of learning strategies know what to do when they “get stuck.” They know how to seek help, detect errors, question, access resources, explore, and so on. These are skills for a lifetime of learning.

Awakening in students the belief in their own capacity to think for themselves—and teaching them the requisite skills to do so—is a primary responsibility of educators. This important chapter provides readers with practical and commonsense ways to accomplish the goal of transferring “teacher-owned” strategies to “learner-owned” strategies.

Chapter 5 showcases one of the most important components of learning—feedback. One section, elegantly titled “Nourishing Learning Through Feedback,” underscores the truth that “feedback must be given appropriately and, more importantly, *received* and *acted upon* by the receiver of feedback. This applies equally to teachers and students.”

The authors deconstruct the word “feedback” to reveal its layers of value in the teaching and learning process, suggesting practical ways to utilize feedback effectively in the classroom. One key distinction they make is between *immediate* and *delayed* feedback, persuasively explaining and illustrating with examples the importance of and difference between the two. They emphasize the need for feedback to include exemplars of student work or, as they are often referred to today, “worked examples” to assist students in self-assessing their own progress and determining where they need to improve. Readers of this chapter are sure to come away with a wealth of new information about the critical role that feedback, in its various types, plays in improving student ownership of learning.

In Part III, “Retracing and Extending the Journey,” readers will learn in Chapter 6 how students assemble a “body of evidence” in a learning portfolio that shows to what degree they have achieved the Learning Intentions in focus. The authors present several types of reflections that students can use to assess their body of learning evidence. Pointing out the importance of reflection for teachers, the authors write: “Engaging in reflection with students regarding the effectiveness of the instructional structures and practices used throughout the unit provides meaningful evidence about what worked best, as well as potential changes for future instruction. If teachers skip this step, they are left to infer what was or was not effective based upon observations and assessment results alone.”

For the students, “providing feedback to the teacher while proving learning solidifies their important role in the classroom as partners in learning. In addition, it teaches them to be reflective and thoughtful learners, and ultimately, leads to the development of Learner Strategies. As students reflect and think about what worked and what didn’t work to move learning forward, the learner toolbox grows.”

In Chapter 7, the authors provide school leaders with suggestions for learning and planning systemic and systematic implementation. The book culminates with a very useful set of resources that includes a chapter-by-chapter book study guide; district examples of belief systems

related to learning; worked examples of learning progressions aligned to Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK); and a glossary of terms used in the book that will help schools develop a shared language of terms associated with student-centered learning.

It has been my privilege to know and work with Mary Jane O'Connell and Kara Vandas as fellow education consultants for many years. They are true learning leaders with extensive experience in schools, genuine practitioners who understand the enormous challenges facing educators, leaders, and students today. As you are likely to conclude from your own reading of this important book, they are inspired realists who are eager to share with others what they have learned—how teachers can indeed partner with students to embark upon the challenging but exciting journey towards True North.

In conclusion, I have taken the liberty of combining two statements from different sections of their writing to sum up what I believe is their essential vision—a vision that *can* be realized through commitment, unflagging enthusiasm, and perseverance:

"The 'handoff' of learning represents the moment in the classroom when students are able to take ownership of their learning and become partners with their teacher and peers. It can only be achieved when teachers intentionally empower students" . . . "It is time to change the way we think about the role of students in the learning process. Students must move from being simply receivers of teacher knowledge to fully vested partners in constructing learning and becoming their own advocates and even teachers in the learning process."

With this book as your guide, you now have the means to turn this vision into your own reality.

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November 2014