Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

October 2016 Volume XIII Issue X

Education's Greatest Hits 2016

Bruce Oliver, the author of **Just for the ASKing!**, lives in Burke, Virginia. He uses the knowledge, skills, and experience he acquired as a teacher, professional developer, mentor, and middle school principal as he works with school districts in across the nation. He has written more than 150 issues of **Just for the ASKing!** He is also a co-author of **Creating a Culture for Learning** published by Just ASK.

When using web-speak, a hit is defined as a request to a web server for a file. With that thought in mind, I am devoting this issue of **Just for the ASKing!** to what I have learned in recent weeks of identifying the educational topics that have often been requested online. Hence, the title: "Education's Greatest Hits."

Equity

The ultimate goal of educators is to make high standards and powerful learning opportunities available to all students. UCLA Professor of Education Dr. Pedro Noguera believes that in order to provide equity and deeper learning for every student, we must incorporate a set of beliefs into our practice. Some of his views are summarized below:

- Dr. Noguera sees equity in the classroom as addressing not just the academic needs of students but their psychological, emotional and social needs as well. In order to accomplish this goal, teachers must recognize the differences in learners and also compensate for individual disadvantages. thus, the focus must be both academic and developmental.
- Social and emotional learning must be integrated into the academic arena if students are going to achieve at higher levels. Such behaviors as impulse control, deferred gratification, empathy, and the ability to develop positive relationships with others must be an integral part of helping students make significant advances in their learning.
- Depriving some students from access to high standards is unacceptable; we must recognize intellectual ability in all our students.
- In order to truly involve students in their learning, we must practice three types of engagement – behavioral, cognitive and affective.

To achieve equity, Dr. Noguero asserts that we must make a concerted shift in our thinking as represented in the chart that follows.

Need for a Paradigm Shift

Old Paradigm:
- Intelligence is innate
- Schools measure intelligence and sort accordingly
- Students expected to meet the requirements of school — learn passively
- Failure is normalized
- Discipline is used to weed out the bad kids

New Paradgim:
- Intelligence and ability are influenced by opportunity
- Schools focus on cultivating talent and resilience
- Schools organized to meet student needs and teachers adopt strategies to meet student needs
- Discipline is used to reinforce pro-social values and norms

Makers

It seems that everywhere I look lately, I see titles like "What is a Makerspace?" or "Building a Nation of Makers." Not being familiar with the term, I decided to explore it in more depth and here are three things I learned:

- The week of June 17-23, 2016, was designated as **National Week of Making**. In acknowledging the celebration, President Obama said, "We celebrate the thinkers and dreamers whose talent and drive have brought new ideas to life, and we recommit to cultivating the next generation of problem solvers."
- In schools, making "refers to both traditional outlets for creativity such as metalworking, woodworking and drawing, as well as to digital fabrication made possible by computer design tools, robotics, laser cutters, 3D printers and other tools."
- A makerspace is defined as any collaborative work area inside a school, library or public/private facility designated for the purpose of sharing or using high tech or no tech tools.

Further exploration led me to understand that the maker movement goes hand in hand with other current educational practices including STEM, project-based learning, and the application of 21st century skills. Since it offers students the opportunity to work individually or collectively to explore personal interests, some schools are designating specific spaces for "making" in libraries, labs, or separate available classrooms. The maker movement has great potential since students are inspired and engaged in practices that enable them to explore their curiosity, work together to solve problems, and build personal confidence as an innovator. As one proponent of the movement has stated, "We need to support the next generation of innovators and work to ensure that all have opportunities to learn how to design, invent and fabricate just about anything."

Feedback

The term "feedback" is ubiquitous in periodicals, blogs and workshops, and has been for quite a while. Although educators hear the term frequently, do they really stop to think about how feedback impacts student learning? The volume of material students submit to teachers for evaluation can be staggering, thus limiting the amount or kind of response a teacher might provide. Nevertheless, the importance of meaningful feedback cannot be diminished. It is the key to true learning.

British researcher Dylan Wiliam pulls no punches when he writes, "The only important thing about feedback is what students do with it. If our feedback doesn't change the student in some way, it has probably been a waste of time." Stated a different way, a teacher should not give a test unless she plans to use the results and not simply to record a grade. Wiliam expands on the topic by asserting that it is important for teachers to use the information they glean from looking at a student's work to provide suggestions, advice, thinking points, or next steps in order to move student learning to the next level. Hand in hand with Wiliam's work, we must remember the wisdom passed on to us by the late Grant Wiggins who for years shared his belief that feedback must move beyond "Try harder" to ensure that students "know exactly what's on target and what needs to be fixed." Wiggins has written that feedback must be timely, be provided in student-friendly language, and include opportunities for self-adjustment. Both Wiliam and Wiggins would agree that the ultimate goal of good feedback is to get students to reach the point "where they can self-correct without the teacher looking over their shoulder."

STEM

STEM education continues to be an expanding focus in schools across the nation. Because the approach incorporates Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, it is the ideal approach to learning since the four subjects have a huge impact on our daily lives. As the initiative grows in popularity, so do the resources which support educators to make STEM an ever more commonplace phenomenon. As the **TEACH** website purports, it is important to keep the STEM approach moving in the right direction in order to "produce literate, savvy, and driven young talent that will leave their indelible mark on STEM industries."

For teachers who want to promote a STEM program in their school, Julia Fischer provides a collection of resources to get STEM education started. Included in itemized lists are webinars, lesson ideas, teacher resources, project-based STEM approaches, suggestions from fellow educators, and ways to involve the community. One of Ms. Fischer's suggestions is a website entitled "10 Best STEM Resources" developed by retired middle school teacher Phil Nast. His list includes curriculum resources, professional development suggestions, and a compendium of successful K-12 STEM programs.

An offshoot of the STEM movement is called STEAM which incorporates art and the humanities into the mix. As the **STEAM** website states, "STEAM represents a paradigm shift from traditional education philosophy, based on standardized test scores, to a modern ideal which focuses on valuing the learning process as much as the results. In essence, we dare our students to be wrong, to try multiple ideas, listen to alternate opinions and create a knowledge base that is applicable to real life as opposed to simply an exam." The **STEAM** website provides information for administrators, teachers, students, businesses, the media and the community.

Portfolios

The title of a recent **District Administration** article was "Portfolios Hold New Promise for Schools." The premise of the feature was the use of electronic portfolios to compile samples of a student's work for one or more years. Author Deborah Yaffe writes about current portfolio practices noting, "In the elementary years, teachers snap and upload digital photos of handwritten work. In the upper grades, students accustomed to electronically documenting their school lives habitually upload essays and lab reports and record videos of their oral presentations." As a result of this use of technology, there are no more bulging binders or misplaced completed assignments. Ms. Yaffe further notes, "With the aid of user-friendly and often low- cost technology, schools are using digital portfolios to track assignments, communicate with parents, and help students reflect on their educational progress."

Coding

Another topic that is gaining attention in the field of education is coding. In simplest terms, coding is telling a computer what you want it to do in step-by-step commands that makes all the technology we use every day work so efficiently. There are different coding languages but all are aimed at making a device operate smoothly. Today's students are being exposed to technology in the classroom at an ever-expanding rate. It is estimated that in the near future, "there will be 1.4 million jobs in computer sciences and only around 400,000 graduates to do them." **International Business Time** writer Anthony Cuthbertson sees it this way: "Our kids should learn to bend, join, break and combine code in a way that it wasn't designed to. It's a whole generation of kids that will use code like our generation used words." Across the world, different countries are introducing coding to their national curricula. In order to bring coding to the classroom, multiple resources are emerging to provide "interest-arousing activities" to stimulate children's curiosity. The **Edudemic** website provides 16 resources that can help teachers and students venture into the field of coding in K-12 classrooms.

Tablets

Tablets of different kinds are appearing in classrooms at an explosive rate. Using a tablet in the most constructive and time-sensitive way can be a dilemma for educators who already have a full plate. The website **We are Teachers** provides support (and ideas) as they take the precipitous journey through tablet-land. Entitled "Tablets 101," the site addresses a variety of topics including the following:
- 30 Kids, One iPad?
- 60 Apps for Teaching STEAM
- Tablets in Special Education
- Learning to Read, iPad-Style
- 5 Apps for Connecting with Parents

For some educators, integrating tablets into the classroom is a smooth process. For others, it is an "I can use all the help I can get" situation. **We are Teachers** may just be the ticket.

Relationships

A recent issue of **Educational Leadership** focuses entirely on the ever-present topic of relationships between students and adults in schools. Among the many articles in the magazine are the following conclusions:

- In order for relationships to grow, teachers must know who their students are both inside and outside the classroom.
- The first rule of respect and relationship building is that no one in the school is invisible.

- When educators are tuned in to students' emotional issues, achievement improves.
- Students with a strong positive relationship with their first grade teacher have better academic performances during their elementary and middle school years.
- Teachers who seek insights on how trauma influences the brain are much better able to reach these children suffering from the aftermath of upheavals in their lives.
- Positive relationships among children and adults tend to blossom when adults demonstrate empathy.
- Relationships are built not simply from adult's words but also from adult actions.
- Anger demonstrated from a student should not be viewed as a threat but an emotion based on some underlying factor.
- Research shows that boys are looking for ways to connect with adults in meaningful ways that can eventually unlock boys' potential.
- A "no excuse" approach to misbehavior can limit the development of important social-emotional skills and then impede the quality of the relationship.
- Finally as contributor Lisa Medoff says, "The one student who challenges us the most may be a gift in disguise."

Collaboration

Board-certified teachers Erin Gilrein and Jennifer Wolfe describe the "silo culture" that exists in some schools. They write, "We see silos of disconnected departments, curricula, and personnel, each filled with committed, thoughtful, hardworking educators dedicated to student learning, but not often working together in the same space with the same vision." This kind of isolation hampers a school's ability to "cultivate healthy and sustainable environments for learning." They further assert that silos do not exist in settings where exemplary practices, demonstration lessons, open doors and collaborative inquiry are a part of the school's culture. When a cultural shift is made, collaboration becomes the norm. Some schools have improved their collaborative efforts by using social media to reach beyond their school walls to establish professional learning networks. Other districts that have limited funds or resources are exploring the concept of web-based coaching by linking novices and other classroom teachers with highly capable practitioners in order to enhance collaborative efforts.

Summary

My "ends in mind" for writing this newsletter were to share what I have learned and to encourage practitioners to take their own journey through "Web-land" to see what they might find that will enable them to add new ways of thinking to their important work. A large banner hangs in the center of the main office of a school I recently visited that summarizes my "ends" perfectly. The banner reads: "The worst regret we have in life is not for the wrong things we did, but for the right things we could have done but never did."

Resources and References

Cuthbertson, Anthony. "Coding in the Classroom: What is Coding and Why is it so Important." Access at https://uk.news.yahoo.com/coding-classroom-coding-why-important-125850276.html

Fischer, Julia, "Getting Started with Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)." Access at www.clarity-innovations.com/blog/jfischer/getting-started-science-technology-engineering-and-math-stem

Gilrein, Erin and Wolfe, Jennifer. "Bridging Silos." *JSD*. Access at https://learningforward.org/docs/default-source/jsd-august-2016/bridging-silos-august16.pdf

Kalil, Thomas "Building a Nation of Makers." Access at www.huffingtonpost.com/thomas-kalil/building-a-nation-of-make_b_11978108.html

McTighe, Jay. "Three Lessons for Teachers from Grant Wiggins." Access at http://inservice.ascd.org/three-lessons-for-teachers-from-grant-wiggins/

Miller, Andrew. "What is a Makerspace?" Access at https://makerspace.com

Nast, Phil. "The 10 Best STEM Resources." Access at www.nea.org/tools/lessons/stem-resources.html

Nelson, Joy. "Coding in the Classroom: 16 Top Resources." Access at www.edudemic.com/coding-classroom-16-top-resources/

Noguera, Pedro. "Equity and Deeper Learning: Making High Standards and Powerful Learning Available to All Students." Access at www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuJtIdQwWc0

"Relationships First." Several feature articles from the May 2016 issue of *Educational Leadership*. Access at www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept16/vol74/num01/toc.aspx

"Tablets 101." Access at www.weareteachers.com/hot-topics/topics-in-education/tablets-101

Wiliam, Dylan. "The Secret of Effective Feedback." *Educational Leadership*. Access at www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/apr16/vol73/num07/The-Secret-of-Effective-Feedback.aspx

Yaffe, Deborah. "Portfolios Hold New Promise for Schools." District Administration. Access at www.districtadministration.com/article/portfolio-promise