



Just for the ASKing!

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of all those who strive to be instructional leaders. This month's issue examines how teaching and learning have changed over time.

It's Not Your Father's Classroom



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop

When the CEO of our school/business partner came to visit our campus, we visited several classrooms; we saw students using manipulatives in a math classroom, groups of students working on an English/social studies interdisciplinary assignment, an enthusiastic **Numbered-Heads Together** activity in a science class, clear student-friendly lesson outcomes posted in every classroom, an abundance of scaffolding examples across classrooms, teachers working one-on-one to support individual learners, ESOL students from around the world practicing their new vocabulary with **Clock Buddies**, and 100% of students participating in a physical education class. The more we saw, the prouder I became. When we returned to my office, I asked our guest for his reaction to what we had observed. He noted that he was quite surprised by what was going on in the classrooms we visited. He further explained that what he had seen in no way matched his experience as a student. Examples he gave included that the classrooms were much noisier, desks were scattered instead of in rows, the teachers did not seem to be delivering instruction, and students were, in fact, engaged in different activities simultaneously rather than attending to words of wisdom from their teachers.

The CEO's reaction was my inspiration for this month's newsletter. As we reflect on our schooling experience, we rely on our own frame of reference about what school should be just as the CEO did. However, maintaining the status quo from the past is inconsistent with what we know about teaching and learning in the 21st century. Regardless of one's age or when we were students in school, what and how students learn should be ever evolving and include fresh approaches based on new research and pedagogical advances.

To explore the topic in more detail, let's take a walk down a school hallway from yesteryear (when the CEO was a student) and take a look into some classrooms to see what was going on in a high school environment:

- A stop at Mrs. C's history class shows her poised at her podium in front of a very voluminous notebook. She is lecturing to her students using her notes as a guide. Her students are dutifully taking notes and doing their best to try to keep up with her pace. Her lecture is exclusively delivered in an academic context with little effort to have her students relate the content to world outside the classroom.
- In another room, Mrs. H. is seated behind her desk (clearly a barrier between her and her students) analyzing a poem from her student's literature anthology. She provides insights into the writer's thinking as well as the literary devices he includes. Once again, the lesson is teacher-centered since the students were never asked what they thought or what the poem meant to them.

- In the French classroom, Mme. M. is passing back a test. As she returns the papers, she bemoans the fact that the students had not done well and reminds them that they need to do better on the next test. There is no discussion, no opportunities to correct errors, and no individual feedback.
- Downstairs in the biology lab, the students are labeling a diagram of a crustacean by copying words from a picture in their textbooks. The picture in the text is identical to the picture on the handout making the assignment redundant. The students work quietly and independently.
- Mr. H's algebra class is a little more animated. He poses several questions during his presentation but quickly turns to the blackboard and answers each one as he works through a problem himself. After his presentation, he passes out a worksheet for students to practice the new concept.

To further see what was happening in the classrooms from years past, we move down the road a bit and visit an elementary school:

- In a fourth grade classroom, Mr. D. asks his students to take out their geography books and turn to chapter three. He emphasizes that they were going to have to “speed things up” since they still had “a lot of chapters to cover” before the end of the quarter. He tells the students that they are to read the chapter and complete the corresponding page in their workbooks that accompanied the texts. The students work quietly and obediently.
- The topic is heat and energy in Mrs. A's sixth grade science class. Prior to delving into new content, the students are familiarizing themselves with new vocabulary by copying definitions into their notebooks from the back of their texts.
- In the first grade classroom, Mrs. B. is reinforcing the class rules with her six-year old students. She refers to a heart on her bulletin board that included the names of all the students inside. She explains that she wanted to keep all the children inside her heart but could only do so as long as they behaved properly.
- In the third grade class, the principal drops in for a visit and commends Miss G. for the orderliness of the students in her room. All is quiet as the students complete a language arts lesson during which they cut out sentence strips from their handout, color all nouns blue and all verbs red, and paste them on an accompanying blank sheet of paper.
- The fifth graders in Mr. N.'s math class are seated in straight rows. The lesson is on reducing fractions and the students are given 20 minutes to complete the practice exercise. He reminds his students to “use their time wisely” and to “keep your eyes on your own paper.” Some of the students progress with their work but at least five of the class members appear to be struggling; they were still expected to complete their work independently in the time allotted.

The descriptors above do not represent all teachers from former times. There is no doubt that there was and always will be excellent instruction going on regardless of the time period. Nevertheless, the scenarios were commonplace in past decades and were reminiscent of the state of education at the time. There are many questionable practices which we have since learned are not in the best interest of children and their learning. Teachers often duplicate what they had experienced when they were students without giving much forethought about the effectiveness of those practices. In the past, it was the norm for teachers to close their classroom doors, do what they thought best, and, as long as student deportment was acceptable, teachers were left alone. Typical “schools of thought” in yesterday's classrooms included the following ideas:

- The emphasis was often on what was taught rather than what students learned.
- Ability grouping was prevalent with minimal opportunities for students to move out of a fixed group.
- The primary vehicle for instruction was the textbook with few, if any, additional resources.
- Programs of study or curriculum guides were minimal so many teachers taught what they pleased as long as they were “in the ballpark” with their grade level or subject.
- Teachers rarely retaught their content and enrichment was sporadic or non-existent.
- Most lessons were teacher-centered and teachers delivered their lessons to a passive group of students whose job was to listen, absorb, and eventually feed back what they had “taken in” on test day.
- The bell curve was the approved measure of the day, and, as a result, it was accepted that a select group of students would fall at the lower end of the bell and thus, fail.

- Assessments were paper and pencil and they required a great deal of memorization in order for students to be successful. It was unheard of for students to be able to receive feedback and have an additional chance to improve their performance.

So what should we see and hear in classrooms today that was either missing or sporadic in your father's classroom?

If we examine the plethora of literature and research available, the question might seem to have an infinite number of answers and applications. Logic tells us that the best approach is to pare the options down into achievable possibilities. The ten bulleted items below are descriptors of the choices teachers can make to ensure that they are providing a 21st century learning environment for their students:

- In every class, every day, teachers should be able to answer two questions: “What are students supposed to learn?” and “How will they and I know if they learned it?” With these questions in mind, teachers can plan their lessons.
- Classrooms should be learner-centered and not teacher-centered. Learners should be active participants in the learning process. Stated another way, our students should be doing more work than their teachers.
- The **Common Core State Standards** or other state standards like the **Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)** or the **Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs)** should drive curriculum decisions.
- Textbooks should serve as just one of many resources teachers can access. Today's educators must provide multiple resources, including technology.
- All children deserve the right to strengthen their thinking skills. Accordingly, teachers must move beyond fact-based questions as they check for understanding and pose more demanding and sophisticated questions for their students to tackle.
- Today's teachers should respect and respond to the needs of individual students, and continually increase their ability to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of a diverse population.
- If learning and not grading is the goal, students should be able to work toward mastery level learning. The shift in thinking by teachers is that students should have multiple opportunities to reach mastery and not be limited to only one chance.
- Through dialogue and collaboration, teachers should have an ever-increasing repertoire of teaching strategies at their disposal.
- To engage and stimulate student learning, teachers should connect their content to the students' realities outside school and to the larger world as a whole.
- Classrooms should be filled with appropriate noise, celebrations, affirmations, laughter, stimulations, and variety - all promoted by a deeply caring adult who understands the power of relationships.

As I review the suggestions I have posed, I realize that whole books have been written and courses have been designed to address each of the topics above. I am aware that I have reduced complex issues to a sentence or two. My intent is to stimulate thinking and encourage educators to purposefully and continuously add new practices to their repository of ideas. After all, it is truly not your father's classroom, nor should it be.

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