



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Lessons from Thoreau: Simplify, Simplify, Simplify!



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop

The namesake for the school where I was a principal for sixteen years was the poet and essayist Henry David Thoreau. One of Thoreau's oft-cited quotes is "Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify, simplify, simplify!" To bring life to his philosophical beliefs, he retreated for over two years in 1854 to Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts, to engage in personal introspection and to work toward inner peace and contentment. In our often fast-paced and stress-filled life, many of us would welcome the solitude and respite that Thoreau experienced even though it is a bit unrealistic. However, there may be ways in our daily lives when we could find some breathing room from our daily tasks.

Consider the following suggestions as possible ways to provide relief and even greater satisfaction by simplifying the way we approach our daily undertakings:

In a January 2014 *Education Week* article titled "Education's Crisis of Complexity," Mike Schmoker discusses the "crisis of complexity" educators find themselves in with the implementation of the **Common Core State Standards**. He writes about the state of school improvement that includes "long documents written in confusing language" which hinders effective implementation, especially when they are used in teacher evaluation. He asserts that truly effective lessons should include "a very simple structure" comprised of a clear objective with a matching assessment, teaching in small manageable steps, frequent informal assessments, circulating to observe student work, reteaching when necessary, and working toward having students achieve success on assignments or assessments.

Simplification: Instead of relying on curriculum documents filled with "ambiguous terms and buzzwords," focus on the tenets of good instruction and avoid ambiguities and complications.



Teachers, by definition, are hard-working people. In many situations, class time is dominated by teacher talk, including lectures, demonstrations, directions, and clarifications. Teachers are required to keep many plates spinning at a breakneck pace. In a learner-centered environment, students do more work and less is done by the teacher. Furthermore, when students are actively engaged in learning experiences, they learn content faster and remember it longer.

Simplification: Move toward a learner-centered environment in which more work is done by students as teachers circulate, monitor, and interact with learners.



Good teachers create a classroom culture with high expectations for their students. Because they have clear learning targets, both teacher and students know with impunity how they are making progress toward reaching publicized goals. These teachers frequently assess students primarily through on-going, informal processes such as questioning, clarifying misconceptions or misunderstandings, journal entries, summarizing strategies, and student self-assessments. Each of these examples falls under the category of formative assessments, occur as learning is being formed, and do not necessitate a grade. Thus, the teacher reserves grading for summative assessments and does not burden herself with folders full of excessive papers to grade.

Simplification: Make a shift to grade less and assess more.



Data analysis, in order to be effective, must be useful to help educators make instructional decisions. In our data driven environments, we are bombarded with charts, percentages, data-filled notebooks, and repetitious reports. The expectation is that individuals and groups of teachers will be able to analyze the data and extrapolate from the information what must be done to improve learning. It is a task that can be daunting, confusing, and overwhelming, often with little return for the time invested. Perhaps a better use of our time would be to view data in a less structured manner. In truth, “in time” data is going on every day in our classrooms. How we respond by providing students with feedback, allowing students to correct errors, dispelling misconceptions, and frequent checking for understanding can result in the learning improvements we seek.

Simplification: Spend less time analyzing standardized test data and more time responding to daily data occurrences.



Educators often find themselves on meeting overload. Meetings themselves are not necessarily the problem; instead it may be the content, the time spent “spinning our wheels” by rehashing information or debating ambiguous or confusing content. A further issue in meetings may be the personalities of the participants themselves. Productive meetings have clear purposes and outcomes, a starting and ending time, and publicized agendas prior to coming together so participants can be prepared for the session. As well, meeting leaders monitor the problem of excessive rambling, domination by only a few individuals, and people who habitually pull participants away from the agenda items. The complete elimination of meetings is not an option, but we can do a better job in how we carry out our collective gatherings.

Simplification: Plan purposeful meetings that result in greater satisfaction and less frustration.



Emails and texts are both a blessing and a curse; they expedite communication but can overwhelm our professional lives in sheer numbers and information overload. Emails can clog our inboxes in a stultifying manner, sometimes paralyzing us because of sheer numbers or rendering us helpless determining how to respond. Emails and texts require decisions, responses, calls to action, and a lot of just plain work; the reality is that this can eat into our available time. Adding even more complication, lack of response to an email for lack of time may be viewed as disinterest, rudeness, or even insubordination. Each of us needs to think before we send another email or text requesting information or a response, and ask ourselves if a quick phone call might be the more efficient mode of communication... over and done quickly!

Simplification: Use your limited time to plan and teach and not to send and respond to emails.



Are you drowning in paper? Are you surrounded by stacks that you may never look at again? Is your briefcase bulging? Are you spending excessive time at the copier machine? We’ve seen the signs asking us to save trees by using less paper but we don’t act on it. Perhaps we should. When we have an overreliance on paper, it’s time to reevaluate how we are doing our jobs. Some schools have paperless days when teachers plan lessons without paper. Their students engage in conversations, participate more kinesthetically, and have lively, full class discussions. Schools that have tried this approach have found it scary at first but ultimately satisfying and worthwhile.

Simplification: Flex your creativity muscles by planning more paperless learning experiences for students.



Planning is one of the most important tasks teachers undertake. They must be prepared every day, every hour with meaningful, engaging lessons. Each lesson is broken down into finer components including the introduction, presentation of content, clarifications, checks to see if students are following, student application, and lesson closure. Each of these ingredients can differ from lesson to lesson. However, if we keep in mind two important questions as lessons unfold, it can provide a distinct focus for each of the moves we make. The two questions are: “What are students supposed to learn?” and “How will I know if they have learned it?” With these questions in mind, the teacher can monitor learning throughout the lesson as well as orchestrate a student-led summary to determine how well the students met the lesson outcomes.

Simplification: Make student learning the primary purpose of any lesson.



Dedicated educators want to provide the best instruction and learning experiences for their students. With a limited amount of time to plan and teach, it is difficult to keep up with new research on changing practices or how best to implement the **Common Core State Standards**. As a result, it is more important than ever that we work collaboratively with peers. No one person has a lock on all the best ideas, but each may have discovered an approach that is the key to improved engagement and learning. We all know the adage “share and share alike,” and in today’s educational environment focused on results, it is more essential than ever. We must minimize the duplication of tasks and feeling like we have to “go it alone.”

Simplification: Focus more on collaboration and less on working in isolation.



Most teachers want to do the best job possible and work hard to try to accomplish every goal. The result can be a feeling of excitement when all is going well and the sensation of disappointment when everything does not go as we had hoped. Working with children is an unpredictable endeavor and not everything we try works as we planned, but that does not mean that we should beat ourselves up. Find satisfaction in the good things that happen each day and the progress that each student is making. Just like we do on our computers, drag those negative feelings into the trash.

Simplification: Achieve greater mental health by celebrating successes.



The Bottom Line Simplification: Reduce your stress by enjoying life’s simple pleasures.

Enjoy the little things like

- the look on the youngster’s face when she realized that she “got it”
 - the nice compliment you received from a peer for an idea you shared
 - the affirming nod from the administrator who dropped by your class and saw a productive lesson unfold
 - the complimentary email you opened from a parent
 - the lunch that a fellow teacher brought for you to save you time
 - the joke that the front office secretary shared that started your day with a laugh
 - the surprise cancellation of a meeting that gave you some free time
 - the improved behavior of a difficult student
 - the new strategy you found on the Teaching Channel that you could use right away
 - the unexpected hug you received from a student
 - even the excitement of a snow day giving you some free time of your own
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The list could go on and on, but the message is clear; sometimes we forget to pause and take in the moment. It is important to embrace the idea that simplification is not synonymous with lack of productivity or even slacking off from our responsibilities. It is a significant consideration if we want to maintain good mental, physical, and psychological health. Perhaps if we work toward simplifying our daily lives, we can move toward reaching the inner peace and contentment that Henry David Thoreau achieved. **Simplify, simplify, simplify!**

Resources and References

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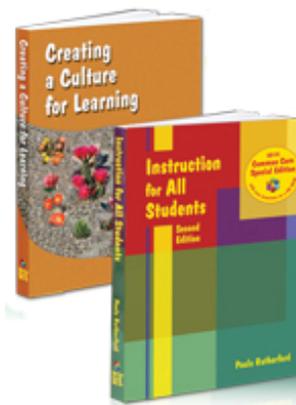
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