



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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My Favorite Things



Bruce facilitating the **Leading the Learning®** workshop

Tis the season...the time when magazines, websites, TV talk shows, and advertisers promote their favorite new products. I regularly collect new information that I may choose to share with fellow educators. Therefore, to close out 2014, this issue features some recent discoveries I am calling “My Favorite Things”.

My favorite new questioning strategy

British researcher Dylan Wiliam recently wrote an article for *Education Leadership* entitled “The Right Questions, the Right Way.” In the commentary, he points out that in many classrooms, the typical convention is for the teacher to ask a question, wait for students to raise their hands, and then select a student to respond. Participation in this process is voluntary and, too often, a segment of the class may not be engaged.

Wiliam advocates for a different approach to questioning. He suggests that instead of asking a question, the teacher posts two questions on the board and asks the class as a whole, “Which of the two questions is harder to answer and why?” The students are given think time and time to share their thinking with a fellow student before anyone responds. As Wiliam points out, “The ensuing discussion will raise all the important issues that the teacher needs to cover, but the question has been posed in an inconclusive way that enables more students to contribute.” Wiliam further proffers a second alternative to questioning in which the teacher writes a statement on the board and asks students to agree or disagree and explain the thinking behind their answer. The example he shared is “Russia was most to blame for the outbreak of WWI.” In both of these questioning approaches, the possibility of a longer and deeper classroom discussion is much more likely. As Wiliam concludes, “If the questions are not causing students to struggle and think, they are probably not worth asking.”

My favorite “new” quote

“One must learn by doing the thing, for though you think you know it, you have no certainty until you try.”

This straightforward statement supports the belief that having students actively involved in the learning process will engage them more thoroughly and ultimately result in deeper learning. The quote is a perfect companion piece for the Chinese proverb: “Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand.” By the way, the author of the quote is Sophocles (496 BC – 406 BC), the acclaimed Greek dramatist. The importance of student engagement is timeless.

My favorite perspective on today’s teenagers

John Green, the author of the popular book *The Fault in Our Stars*, recently shared his feelings about young adolescents on the CBS program *Sunday Morning*. He said, “We are led to believe that teenagers have their faces behind screens, they’re anti-social, they don’t talk, they’re disengaged, they don’t read, they don’t care. It’s not true.

That's what our parents said about us. That's what their parents said about them. It's always been untrue, it's still untrue. Yes, they are living in different ways but they are still reading, they are still thoughtful, and I am inspired every day by their intellectual curiosity." Too many people might believe the stereotypical descriptors that Mr. Green has found to be incorrect. Like Mr. Green, it is important for teachers to seek out the best in young people and to encourage their compassion, their imaginations, and their spirit of inquiry.

My favorite new Edutopia article

I derive a great deal of inspiration from the Edutopia website, and I want to share a recent article I read. An absolute requirement of the teaching-learning process is the on-going custom of checking for student understanding which provides essential formative assessment data. An unfortunate occurrence in some classrooms is the asking of questions such as, "Any questions?" "Everybody with me?" or "Ready to move on?" none of which is a valid check for understanding. The teacher has no idea if the students are understanding or not.

Todd Finley, Edutopia blogger and assistant editor, begins his article titled, "Dipsticks: Efficient Ways to Check for Understanding," with a definition of formative assessment attributed to California State University Long Beach instructor Bill Younglove as "the frequent interactive checking of student progress and understanding in order to identify learning needs and adjust teaching appropriately." To bring life to Younglove's definition, Finley provides 53 ways to check for understanding; they range from more common practices such as journal writing, mind mapping, and question stems to some novel approaches such as Muddy Moment (What frustrates and confuses you about the text? Why?), Twitter post (Define _____ in under 140 characters), and misconception check (Given a common misconception about a topic, students explain why they agree or disagree with it). Each of the alternative formative assessments will provide fresh approaches that can add to an educator's repertoire of options to "get inside their students' heads."

My favorite recent student interaction

I thoroughly enjoy my opportunities to interact with young people, especially the very young ones. In a kindergarten class recently, I knelt down next to two students who were working on a joint project. As the wide-eyed five-year-olds made eye contact with me, I asked the young boy what they were working on. He enthusiastically replied, "We're making a merona!" I looked at their work in progress with a bit of puzzlement. His partner noted the confused look on my face and quietly said, "They're called menorahs." Smile...

My favorite first impression

I recently had the opportunity to visit Ruckersville Elementary School in Greene County, Virginia, and my visit reminded me of how important first impressions can be. From the moment I drove into the parking lot until I departed, I was impressed again and again with the culture that had been established in the school by the principal, the staff, and students. Outside I saw several teachers greeting arrivals by opening car doors and welcoming parents and students. At the front door of the school, upbeat music was playing where a teacher greeted the young people as they passed through a balloon arch. After I entered and checked in, a student asked if I would like some coffee or water. The student was a fifth grader and a member of the school's Bravo team, a group assembled by the principal, Dr. Charles Heaton, whose job it was to help their school. As I looked around, I saw pictures of children throughout the front office as well as upbeat messages about Greene County Public Schools. One sign stated the district vision: "Joining together is the beginning, Working together is progress, Growing together is success", while another stated, "A team above all, above all a team." On a wall in the main office was a Spotlight Board that included dozens of student signatures. Dr. Heaton began the morning announcements with the words, "Welcome to your school." Bravo team members took turns reading the morning announcements which concluded by Dr. Heaton reading the names and inviting students to come to the main office and receive certificates for a variety of positive accomplishments. As the students arrived

and received their certificates, members of the Bravo team helped the younger students add their names to the Spotlight Board. As the morning routine concluded, the Bravo team collectively chanted, “We take care of our school!”

My favorite classroom sign

On two different occasions, I have seen a sign posted inside a classroom that reads, “Mistakes are welcome here.” It is a healthy approach to learning that all teachers could adopt and promote. *The New York Times* journalist, Alina Tugend has taken on the topic as a mother and professional writer. She has observed that “...we’re raising a generation of children... who are terrified of blundering. Of failing. Of even sitting with the discomfort of not knowing something for a few minutes.” School, for most students, is defined by the grades they receive on tests or assignments. Many young people see mistakes as indicators of failure which make them feel “stupid.” They do not view their errors rationally but emotionally. As a result, children are often afraid to attempt anything new, or of even thinking in different or more creative ways. It is vital that teachers emphasize that mistakes are and always have been a part of the learning process. As authors Hunter Maats and Katie O’Brien have written, “Academic success does not come from how smart or motivated students are. It comes from how they feel about their mistakes.” They continue noting, “...mistakes are helpful. The red pen is not the enemy.” Finally, the more open teachers are about their own mistakes, the less significance students will place on their future errors.

My favorite reality check

In a recent posting on Grant Wiggins’s blog, “Granted, and...”, a 17-year veteran high school teacher (later revealed to be Grant’s daughter Alexis), shared her “eye-opening” reactions after shadowing two students for two days. Below are her findings:

- **Students sit all day and sitting is exhausting.**
The teacher found that it was difficult to keep mind and body on the subject and thus “slipping into oblivion” became a reality. She noted, “I was drained, and not in a good, long, productive-day kind of way.”
- **Students are passively listening 90 percent of the time.**
Much of their day was spent absorbing information and left with the feeling that they were not making important contributions in their classes.
- **You feel a little bit like a nuisance all day long.**
Students are repeatedly told to keep quiet and pay attention. The shadower observed teachers displaying “sarcasm, impatience, and annoyance” toward students that she felt placed barriers between students and their teachers.

As a result of her shadowing experience, the teacher came away with clear impressions and suggestions for her fellow educators:

- Incorporate hands-on and movement activities on a regular basis
- Include stretch breaks
- Insert energizing checks for understanding into lessons
- Begin each class with questions from the previous day’s lesson
- Limit the amount of teacher talk in each class period and plan more student-centered experiences
- Make a pledge to treat students with more patience, understanding, and affection

My favorite “Yes!” article

CEO of Crescendo Education Group, Joe Feldman, recently wrote an opinion piece in *Education Week* that caused me to mentally say “Yes!” again and again. His thesis is: As educators making the **Common Core** transition, we are addressing K-12 standards, curriculum, and instruction, but we are leaving out one important aspect: grading. After extensive investigation of the topic, he has concluded, “Neglecting this element of instruction constrains our reform within an evaluation and reporting system that many educators readily admit is flawed.”

The main points in his absorbing article are:

- A single grade represents a composite of “disparate elements of performance” and it is often confusing to determine what the grade really means.
- Grading problems are exacerbated since each teacher determines her own grading system. Thus, “we damage our own credibility when we use one that is vague, arbitrary, and different for every teacher.”
- Teachers receive little or no support for grading practices in their pre-service experience or in professional development settings.
- Asking teachers to examine or change their grading practices is often viewed as a “challenge to their autonomy and professionalism.”

Feldman concludes his piece in the following way: “Discussions that ask teachers to talk about grading are hard, emotional, and confusing. But we need to free ourselves from an antiquated, unclear, and essentially discredited system that weakens teachers’ effectiveness and their creditability. Improving grading practices isn’t an optional add-on to our common core work. It is the linchpin to the effective use of the common standards and all they represent. It is one of the best ways to truly change what happens in our classrooms.”

My favorite new metaphor

“Lightning in a bottle” is defined as capturing something powerful and elusive and then being able to hold it and show it to the world. Further, it is a phrase that is used to express surprise or happiness when something different or seemingly impossible to accomplish, such as a moment of creative brilliance, has occurred. The derivation of the phrase, which has become more popularized in the 2000’s, is often attributed to Benjamin Franklin’s kite experiment in which he captured electricity from lightning and stored it in a Leyden jar.

In the field of education, capturing lightning can be a rare but albeit euphoric accomplishment that can result in a flood of emotions and boundless excitement. It might be that breakthrough in a student’s ability to learn something that seemed almost impossible. It can be that unforeseen support from a colleague that leads to surprising success in classroom learning. It might be those unexpected words of thanks from a taciturn student who the teacher felt he had not reached. Or it might be the surprising acts of kindness shown by a supposedly jaded student who had a reputation as a bully. And finally, it might be that moment in time when a student frees his mind and spirit to reach new heights that were deemed unachievable. The words of singer George Strait sum up the metaphor this way: “Life’s not the breaths you take, but the moments that take your breath away.” Be vigilant and watch for these special occurrences. My wish for each of you is that you capture lightning in a bottle again and again as you approach the new year.

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