



Just for the ASKing!



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October 2020
Volume XVII Issue X



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Nothing Changes if Nothing Changes

As I began my seventeenth year of writing *Just for the ASKing!* I looked back on what I have written over the years. There certainly is a great deal of information, resources, suggestions, insights, and stories. I am proud of my work and hope that my thoughts have helped educators establish and maintain the best learning environments for our young people.

Some of my inspirations for newsletter content have come from my ever-vigilant practice of looking and listening for ideas. Most recently I saw a sign in a video that read, “Nothing Changes if Nothing Changes.” With the title in mind, I found myself rereading past newsletters to look for suggestions I had shared over the years. One thing I’ve learned for certain is that consistent reminders of the best practices in education have a greater likelihood of leading to progressive change. My focus in this issue, therefore, will be on revisiting instructional ideas, practices, beliefs, and research that could have the greatest impact on teachers and their learners.



Roadblocks to Change

There is no doubt that change is hard, especially during the COVID-19 crisis. Educators are facing the biggest change of their lives by having to adjust to distance learning. At this point, we do not even know how long we will be in the current situation! As time goes by, teachers have innumerable decisions that they have to make as well as learning new approaches that will meet the needs of their learners.

As I reflect back on my career as a teacher and administrator, I have watched how co-workers have reacted in a variety of ways to changes that have been presented or, in the eyes of some individuals,

ones that have been “thrust upon us.” People who have resisted change have had a variety of responses to innovations:

- “What I’m already doing works just fine for me” (even though it may not be working for students).
- “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it?”
- “It’s just too much trouble.”
- “I barely have time to handle what’s on my plate already, much less add change to my workload.”
- “What if the change makes it worse instead of better?”
- “There are also the “Yes, but...” folks who barely hear the new idea before they reject the change; and finally there are individuals who blithely respond, “Been there, done that.”



“Change is an opportunity to do something amazing.”

- George Couros

As I think about change, I am in no way negating its inconveniences or headaches. However, there is a possibility that we may find ourselves in a difficult position when we continue to do things in the same way and do not see the results of all our efforts. My purpose in this newsletter is to provide different ways of thinking that may require a change in teaching approaches that will also provide educators with alternatives as the year goes on.

Set aside more time for students to write.

As teachers plan their units and daily lessons, their thinking often goes to the content they must “cover.” That puts the pressure on educators to “be on” most of the time. A writing report from the **National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)** suggested that middle and high school students need opportunities to improve their writing skills especially in the area of persuasive writing which author Dian Schaffhauser concludes is “being neglected to an alarming degree.” When students are given different opportunities to write, the change will build familiarity with the writing process, make students more comfortable, and is likely to make them stronger writers. When students have the chance to write, they can do so in a quiet home environment on the other side of the screen. The teacher can be available to confer with individual students who may need help.

Make students better thinkers by building long-term memories.

British educator Dylan Wiliam has provided educators worldwide with professional



development that has resulted in **changes** in the way teachers think. In an article in *Curriculum Matters*, Wiliam suggests that teachers change their beliefs about making students better thinkers. He writes, “The big mistake we have made in the United States, and indeed in many other countries, is to assume that if we want students to be able to think, then our curriculum should give our students lots of practice in thinking. This is a mistake because what our students need is more to think **with**.” He explains that the main purpose of curriculum is to build up the content in long-term memory so that when students are asked to think, “they are able to think in more powerful ways because what is in their long-term memories makes their short-term memories more powerful.” In short, strong curricula results in better thinking. When students are challenged to dive into deeper thinking, the teacher can remind them of past learning to stimulate their memories. Wiliam’s advice can change the way educators work with their pupils to make them better thinkers.

Find ways to emphasize positivity in this difficult climate.

In a recent *Knowledge Works* article, the focus is on how schools are changing their teaching and learning practices by bringing positivity to their learners and their families. Many districts across the country are coming up with ways to relieve anxiety and provide emotional management techniques for their constituents. Ideas such as sending regular messages of positivity from the school, offering fun challenges for families to do at home or giving students the opportunity to participate in a virtual spirit week are just a few of the ways schools are reaching out to help relieve stress. When schools and communities are disconnected from each other both physically and socially, a change in the way the school or district interacts with children and their parents can make a big difference in how students learn and grow.

Help students to navigate in a difficult digital world.

Author Ana Homayoun has provided some important insights in her article “Social Media Wellness: Helping Tweens and Teens Thrive in an Unbalanced Digital World” when she writes “It’s no secret that students today face the ultimate paradox – the same tools they need to use to complete their work can also provide their biggest distractions from completing work.” A change that some educators might undertake is to establish up front their expectations for technology use in order to help students navigate online distractions. Taking time to have these honest conversations with students, and to let them know that sometimes their teacher can also get distracted, can set the stage for how work can be better completed. Explain to your students (in a very friendly way) that checking emails, sending tweets, or writing texts will have a place as soon as class is finished.



Remember words of wisdom from the past.

Occasionally, I go back in time and reflect on my years as a teacher. More recently, I think about what I would do in the era of COVID-19. I would do a lot of staring at a blank screen (and in somewhat a state of panic) wondering where to start. I began paging through some of my books/notes seeking an answer and I came upon an oldie but goodie that provided me some direction: **Edgar Dale's Learning Theory** that is cited below:

We Remember
10% of what we read
20% of what we hear
30% of what we see
50% of what we hear and see
70% of what we discuss with others
80% of what we experience personally
90% of what we teach others

Here is my take-away from reading Dr. Dale's words as it relates to distance learning along with five possible changes I might need to make in lesson planning and delivery:

- Make sure not to do too much talking.
- Provide visuals/examples when I teach a concept.
- Allow students time to react (or jot down their thinking) as I teach.
- Set up opportunities for my students to make connections to content in their real world, and give them learning credit when they share their findings with their classmates or me.
- Challenge learners to teach what they have learned
- (perhaps to a sibling or a parent) and keep reactions in a log or journal for future sharing.

Changes do not have to be extravagant or complex.

There are lots of strategies and practices in the field of teaching that simply require a reminder about how they can support student learning, and they don't require a great deal of change. Below are research supported ideas or hot topics that only require a bit of tweaking in your lesson plans:

- Include **10:2 Theory** – For every ten minutes of teacher talk, give students two minutes to process or react.
- Provide **Wait Time** – After asking a thought provoking question, give students 3-5 seconds to process before asking students to respond.
- Make sure each lesson has a clear outcome; remind students of what they should know or be able to do at the end of the session.
- Give students feedback on their work or assessments. Next, allow them to make



corrections or additions and then resubmit their work for evaluation.

- Wrap up your sessions by including a summary; remember the teacher doesn't summarize, the students do.
- Have students access their current knowledge on a future topic at the beginning of new learning, that way, they will have some Velcro on which to attach new information.
- Design checks for understanding as you plan your lessons – Don't just ask questions that pop into your head in the moment.

Pay close attention to the needs of struggling learners.

I am sure that it is difficult enough to keep your lesson flowing and to pay attention to learners in general during distance learning sessions. As in any heterogeneous setting there are those individuals who catch on quickly and follow through by fulfilling teacher expectations. In some cases, students may already know the content being addressed. But there are also learners who may struggle for a variety of reasons and who may require more personalized attention:

- They have vastly different backgrounds and may not be prepared for the new content.
- They may have disparities such as inadequate technology or access to needed health care.
- They may have become accustomed to giving up quickly when they encounter difficulty grasping new information.
- They experienced learning losses once the pandemic closed schools and now they are “in the dark.”

Perceptive educators will watch for signals to determine which students may need more attention. Indicators may include changes in attendance, withdrawal or lack of participation during instruction, or not turning in assigned work. *Education Week* reporter Stephen Sawchuk provides some changes in thinking teachers may undertake as they work with struggling students. In the article, “Overcoming COVID-19 Learning Loss,” he shares the following suggestions:

- Establish a trusting relationship that will promote consistent attendance and better engagement. Make all students feel noticed by calling them by name as they enter the session.
- If signs of withdrawal become apparent, send text messages to students who are repeatedly absent, earning low grades, or posting incomplete or sketchy work.
- Engage parents in a timely manner to gain support from home.
- When struggles begin, enlist the assistance of the school counselor.
- Provide extended learning time in small groups for individuals who may be falling behind or need more personal attention. Students who have already mastered the



content can work independently on areas of interest in order to provide time for the needier kids.

Keep abreast of how other schools and districts are adjusting to change.

There are so many changes happening so quickly that it may be difficult to keep up with what is happening across the country, and how other divisions are recreating the structure of the school day. Gregg Vanourek of the Fordham Institute has presented what he calls “key design principles” that educators can follow:

- Simple, consistent routines and schedules
- A blend of structure and flexibility
- Attendance monitoring
- Clear expectations geared to next-grade success
- High-quality materials and instructional videos
- A grade-appropriate blend of synchronous and asynchronous instruction
- Monitoring student engagement and learning
- Educators availability to students
- Communication with parents

The above list may seem like common sense. I present Vanourek’s thinking so that teachers and leaders can determine if they are missing vital components that need to be included in their planning.

“Our greatest natural resource is the minds of our children.”

The quote above comes from Walt Disney. It accompanies the chart below that is a reminder to all educators how important it is to change the way our young people view themselves.

Change in Dialogue

Fixed Mindset	vs	Growth Mindset
There’s no way I can do it.	vs	I can try something different.
It’s too hard.	vs	I should use more effort.
I’m a failure.	vs	How can I improve?
I made a mistake.	vs	Mistakes help me learn.
This is good enough.	vs	I can do better.
I’m such an idiot.	vs	What am I missing?

Children tend to look up to their teacher and, as a result, teachers have the power to change how learners view their capabilities. Yes, it is a powerful role we play!



Talking is not teaching and listening is not learning.

Most educators agree that it's important for teachers to get students talking about what they're learning. Doing so can result in students being more involved and interested in what they are learning, and helps them understand their learning with greater depth. When students are talking/interacting with one another, it can yield valuable insights into what students may need, and thus improve achievement.

Research shows that teachers talk 70-80% of class time. As renowned educator John Hattie has said, "If you're talking all the time, how can you hear the impact of your teaching?" Students' comprehension, engagement and test scores have been shown to improve when they get to discuss what they're learning. Two important changes teachers can consider in their practice are to ask more open-ended questions, and to move away from teacher ego to student voice.

Find out how the kids feel about their experiences.

Distance learning has resulted in a multitude of new teaching approaches and techniques. The creativity that has been displayed by teachers has been impressive, and in many ways, mind-boggling! Our faculties continue to experiment with new ways to involve students and to present their content in different modalities. One important change that can enhance lessons even more is when the teacher periodically pauses and invites students to give feedback on their learning experiences. Students' responses can be oral or written, and their ideas have the potential to make future lessons even more powerful. When teachers show that they are genuinely interested in what students have to say, and when they take student feedback seriously, it can result in strengthening relationships between learners and their instructors.

Educators can continue to learn about technological advances that can motivate and inspire students.

As Catherine Gewertz has discovered, "If social media posts are any indication, Bitmoji classrooms are becoming a teacher obsession." Using the Bitmoji app, teachers are building colorful virtual classrooms for their students that include avatar versions of themselves. Other tools such as **Google** or **Canvas** can help teachers build classroom backdrops "making welcoming spaces, complete with colorful rugs and posters, that can serve as a cozy home base for their classes." Students are also able to move through classroom spaces virtually to learn about assignments or link to reading documents. Who knew! This kind of change can create a warm, friendly, and inviting setting.

Throughout educational publications one sees multiple references to tools and apps such as **Google Meet**, **Google Classroom**, **Google Chat**, **Nearpod Collaborate**, **Zoom**



Whiteboards, and Zoom Breakout Rooms. As teachers add to their technological repertoires, they will be able to inspire and even amaze their learners.

What a teacher says at the beginning of class may change the dynamics of the day.

When the teacher opens a lesson in a friendly and upbeat manner, the student responses can influence how the entire lesson will flow, and even change how they are feeling. Some teachers may begin by asking, “How are you doing right now?” It sounds very caring but many children will respond with a one-word answer (“Fine,” or “Okay”) or they may not reply at all. Alternative ways to make deeper connections with students may be to ask more specific questions such as those suggested by Elizabeth Weingarten. Below are some of her suggestions that will allow students to explore their thoughts and feelings:

- “How are you taking care of yourself today?”
- “What is the best thing that has happened to you in the past 24 hours?”
- “What is the most generous thing you have done lately?”
- “What is giving you hope right now?”
- “What’s a story (book, movie, article, TV show) that you have really enjoyed lately?”
- “What specific place you looking forward to visiting when this is all over?”
- “What are some things that you have realized you don’t really need?”
- “What’s something you miss that surprises you? What is something you don’t miss that surprises you?”
- “What is the latest thing you have experienced that made you laugh, or cry?”
- “What do you hope we all learn or take away from this experience?”

These questions do not deal with content but instead touch on student feelings and emotions in their world. Students may respond orally, in writing, or share their thinking

In Conclusion

Distance and hybrid learning by themselves constitute ginormous changes! My great wish is that teachers will remain positive, explore different options, and continue to grow as professionals. To quote Benjamin Franklin, “Out of adversity comes opportunity.” As a teacher, I remember the feeling I experienced when a lesson (or even an entire day) went especially well. My purpose in this *Just for the ASKing!* is to provide teachers with options to make you proud and hopeful, and look forward to tomorrow.



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Oliver, Bruce. "Nothing Changes if Nothing Changes" *Just for the ASKing!* October 2020.

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