



# Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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*Just for the ASKing!* is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. The focus of this issue is on setting students up for success and eliminating blank stares on their faces.

## Setting Students Up for Success: Filling in the Blanks



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

In many classrooms I have seen excited and involved students busily engaged in worthwhile learning experiences. I watched the children and listened to their teacher, I tried to determine what made these classrooms come alive with vibrancy and enthusiasm. I concluded that, in almost all cases, the teacher had carefully prepared the students for the learning that was taking place.

In contrasting classrooms, however, students seemed to be passive and uninvolved. There was a lesson plan in evidence, yet there seemed to be a paucity of true “buy-in” on the part of the students. When I talked to the students about the learning that was supposed to be occurring, they gave me a variety of responses about their lack of engagement. Some were not sure what they were supposed to do; others were bored and did not see the purpose of the activity. Still others felt the work was too hard, or that they did not have the skills or knowledge to work on the task that they were asked to complete.

I have met very few teachers who are simply “going through the motions” of teaching. The vast majority of teachers are well intentioned and want their students to be successful learners. When they witness the passivity of their students, they become discouraged. They are not sure what they should do. What they are sure of is that they want to eradicate the boredom and apathy they see in their students.

School leaders can assist teachers in closely examining their teaching to determine if there are steps that they can take to improve the learning climate in their classrooms. Sometimes a teacher can be “too close” to a problem to determine what steps to take.

For assistance in helping teachers eliminate those blank stares, please refer to a ten question self-assessment titled **Filling in the Blanks** at the end of this newsletter, appropriate for use in faculty meetings or in supervisory conferences.

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# Filling in the Blanks

If we truly want students to learn, it is important to do as much as possible to prepare students for learning and to support them as completely as possible throughout the learning process. When students gaze at teachers with **blank stares**, could it be that they are unsure of what they are supposed to learn or what it will look like when they have successfully mastered their new learning? We need to plan carefully and take the necessary steps to avoid the confused stares of students by **filling in the blanks**.

**Directions:** Below are a series of statements that relate to student learning. Each statement is accompanied by a question. After reading each descriptive statement and question, complete the self-assessment by responding to the question in one of three ways: (A) Almost always (S) Sometimes or (N) Never.

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. A teacher who completes a **task analysis** (carefully analyzing the tasks that a student will complete in an upcoming unit to make sure the tasks are “doable” by all students) can better plan learning activities to meet the needs of individual learners. When the teacher fills in the gaps or holes in a student's knowledge base or skill sets, there is a greater likelihood that new learning will successfully occur.

**Question:** Do I routinely complete a task analysis to better meet the different learning needs of my students?

- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. If we want students to complete assignments successfully, it is important to show them **models of excellent work**. Having prominently displayed exemplars of successful work from past students will give students something to shoot for, result in better overall work from students, and eliminate student confusion.

**Question:** Do I share models of successfully completed work with my students so they have a “target” to shoot for?

- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Make sure the students are adequately equipped to face the upcoming learning that will occur. A good teacher will provide students with important **vocabulary** that will be included in future content at the beginning of a unit. The teacher will also plan learning experiences very early in the unit to dispel misconceptions so that new and accurate learning can occur.

**Question:** Do I make sure that students have the basic vocabulary they will need to be successful in the upcoming unit?

# Filling in the Blanks continued...

- \_\_\_\_ 4. When teachers present new content in a vacuum or without establishing context, the information will fall on deaf ears. Explaining **why** the learning is important and **how** the learning will be used will give students more of a reason to buy into the upcoming learning.

**Question:** Do I provide my students with an overview of the upcoming unit letting them know why the learning is important and how the learning will unfold?

- \_\_\_\_ 5. When teachers are explicit about **how learning will be assessed**, students will be able to better prepare themselves for tests or future assessments. A teacher's guideline should be: Take the mystery out of mastery.

**Question:** Am I upfront with my students by letting them know precisely how their learning will be assessed?

- \_\_\_\_ 6. Successful teachers appeal to all learning modalities. Kinesthetic learners who are expected to sit for long periods of time will become bored or restless. Visual learners who only experience the spoken word will frequently tune out and lose interest. A student who learns best through listening to the ideas of others and engaging in conversations will not learn as much if he is deprived of those opportunities. A teacher who plans proactively to meet all learning styles will see fewer blank stares.

**Question:** Do I routinely plan units that address the learning styles of my students?

- \_\_\_\_ 7. All students need the opportunity to **practice** for upcoming assessments whether the assessments are teacher-prepared or formal standardized tests. Giving students realistic practice on assessments will give them a greater chance to experience success when they face the real thing.

**Question:** Do I devise short and frequent formative assessments that will enable my students to determine what they have mastered and what they still have to learn? Do I ensure that my students become familiar with the standardized test formats they will face in the future?

# Filling in the Blanks continued...

- \_\_\_ 8. When teachers provide students with timely and appropriate **feedback** on their learning, the "a ha" moments increase significantly. If our goal is to eliminate quizzical or confused looks on the faces of our students, provide them with the feedback on their work that will help them take the next step toward learning a benchmark or achieving a standard.

**Question:** Do I provide meaningful feedback that enables students to continue making progress?

- \_\_\_ 9. When students are periodically given the opportunity to assess where they are in their learning, they can set realistic goals for future learning. When students are expected to add more and more new material to their knowledge base without stopping to **self assess**, they will become overwhelmed and discouraged.

**Question:** Do I periodically ask my students to reflect on their learning in order to set goals for future learning?

- \_\_\_ 10. Teachers sometimes complain that their students do not study for quizzes or tests. We often erroneously assume that students know **how to study**. A wise teacher will take the time to demonstrate study skills and to show students the proper way to prepare for an upcoming assessment.

**Question:** Am I explicit about how students should prepare for upcoming assessments or tests?

After completing this self-assessment, determine which components of lesson design and implementation need more attention. The next step is to make conscious plans to address the questions which have been answered with (S) sometimes or (N) never in order to help students become more involved and successful in their learning.