



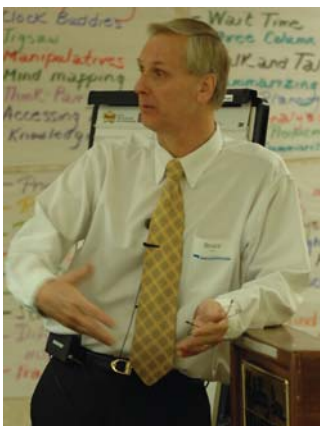
Just for the ASKing!

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators. This month Bruce uses a sailing metaphor to celebrate and describe the practices of teachers he calls successful, discerning, productive, accomplished, astute, insightful, and wise.

Smooth Sailing



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

All educators would like their lessons to be successful, their classes to run without complications, their students to respond enthusiastically, and to end each day with a feeling of satisfaction that they have accomplished their goals with the assuredness that student learning has taken place. For those teachers who plan carefully and deliberately, who know their students well, and who anticipate where pitfalls and roadblocks to learning might occur, they find that teaching becomes a more predictable endeavor, and the daily life of both students and teachers in the classroom is an enjoyable and satisfying learning experience.

Being a successful teacher requires hard work. It does not occur without a great deal of up-front thinking and analysis as teachers make their plans. They know their content, they understand pedagogy and they possess the wherewithal to blend the two together successfully to make their lessons work.

They fully understand that teaching is not formulaic or magical, and that it requires trial and error, an open mind, and a certain amount of risk. When these great teachers make mistakes, they don't dwell on what went wrong but instead use the less-than-satisfying results to plan for the future. Metaphorically, they continually test the wind currents in their classrooms and "adjust the sails" to make sure that their lessons turn out swimmingly!

After spending many years observing great teachers in action, and even more time listening to their philosophy of learning and their thought processes for lesson design, I have concluded that there are patterns that emerge that successful teachers follow. The descriptors below represent the steps that many successful educators take as they bring their gifts and skills to their students each day.

Somewhere Else

The lyrics in popular singer Toby Keith's recent hit song "Somewhere Else" nicely capture the way of thinking that accomplished educators embrace. A line from the song states, "If you don't know where

you're going, you might wind up somewhere else.” The lyrics encapsulate the spirit of the standards-based planning process for planning units and lessons. After unpacking and repacking the standards they are required to teach, polished professionals construct a vision of what success will look like when students have satisfactorily learned the unit's content and skills. As a result, they plot out their units carefully and deliberately rather than meandering through book chapters or a series of activities without a clear intent and focus. These teachers also clearly know that there is a difference between having definite and specific goals for each lesson rather than simply having good intentions. Much like an accomplished seaman will not set sail and wander the oceans aimlessly, the professional educator will do everything necessary to chart a learning journey with perspective and purpose.

Empowering vs. Controlling

All teachers understand the importance of capturing and maintaining the attention and active involvement of their students in their planned lessons. Some teachers focus their energy on classroom management as they endeavor to control student behavior. Discerning, experienced teachers learn that empowering students through dynamic lesson design and implementation has a much greater impact in the long run. They involve their students regularly in classroom learning experiences that are meaningful and stimulate students to be creative and interact with their peers. Experienced teachers often involve their students in charting the course that their learning journey will take. These teachers adhere to the philosophy that the best management program is a strong instructional program.

Before Casting Off

Before each lesson, successful teachers carefully double check their plans for the day. They check all technology to make sure it works properly, they have the necessary materials ready for distribution, they arrange their classroom furniture to match the lesson design, and they have carefully analyzed the tasks the students will be asked to complete to ensure that students have the necessary skills and/or knowledge to carry out the assignment. Finally, the teacher formulates a mental picture of how the lesson will flow, how transitions will occur, how time will be used, and how the lesson will conclude. By the time students arrive, they are prepared to cast off. Just like an experienced sailor, a great teacher leaves nothing to chance.

Full Disclosure

As they present their unit overview to their students, consistently productive teachers routinely and consistently make sure to provide a complete picture of the learning that will take place during the unit. Their presentation includes the essential understandings the students will be expected to master, the concepts that will be imbedded in the lessons, the variety of learning experiences that will successfully guide the students to mastery level learning, and specific information about the different ways student learning will be assessed and measured. As the teacher presents the unit plans to their classes, they do so with extreme clarity and specificity; there is no mystery and no confusion. By following this line of thinking with each unit, these polished educators make sure that “all hands are on deck” thus avoiding a “shipwreck” that can occur when teachers do not prepare students for the learning journey and students then face frustrations and failure as the unit progresses.

It Is What It Is. Or Is It?

Many practitioners learn as much as they can about the students they will teach at the outset of the new school year. They peruse student folders, talk to the students' previous teachers, and examine achievement data (e.g., test scores) from past testing scenarios. In some instances, teachers develop a pre-conceived notion about their students based on these data sources. However, there are other very astute and insightful professionals who view a student's past performance data as simply part of the picture, and they are unwilling to rush to judgment. Their philosophical belief is that they can and will make a difference in a student's academic performance. They bring a sense of enthusiasm, vigor and optimism to their learning

environment. They carefully monitor each student's progress and intercede quickly and deliberately when they see that a student might falter, thus ensuring a "safe harbor" for each individual.

Extra Cargo

Some students get into the habit of making excuses for their learning deficits and their inability to master course content. They bring to class considerable "cargo" (and maybe even an albatross around their neck) that gets in the way of their performance and inhibits their capacity to make progress. Wise teachers view such students and their lack of productivity through a different lens. Instead of allowing students to continue to "carry their accumulated baggage," they help their students refocus their efforts; they are quick to point out a student's assets instead of magnifying the perceived problem, and they carefully guide students to take the necessary steps to learn. Such a practice on the part of a teacher has been called attribution retraining and follows the research completed by Bernard Weiner. Experience has taught these educators that by changing a student's personal perception, they help the student ward off a "sink or swim" scenario. As a result, the student is less likely to become mired in failure and continue to add even more baggage to an already heavy load.

Running Aground

Designing and implementing lessons that result in definite, documented student learning necessitates that the teacher take certain steps throughout the delivery of instruction. When teachers begin their lessons by presenting new information, some students are unable to make connections of the new content or follow a teacher's unit introduction. They find themselves lost early in the unit, and unless the teacher includes frequent checks for understanding or opportunities for students to process their new learning with their fellow classmates, the student may end up confused or simply "putting on a good face" as they pretend to follow the teacher's presentation. The propitious teacher watches closely for students who exhibit early confusion when they are about to "run aground" during a unit's introduction, and they intercede quickly to ensure that the student is not confused or frustrated. Such a decision by a teacher will reap great dividends as the unit continues to unfold.

Lost in Mediocrity

An unfortunate reality that can occur in some classrooms is that certain students get into the misguided habit of doing just enough to get by rather than pushing themselves to exceed at greater heights. These students may simply work toward getting the minimum passing grade; in short, they accept mediocrity as a way of life. Perceptive teachers recognize that if this practice goes unchecked or unaddressed, it can ultimately lead to "capsizing" or "sinking" entirely, and they refuse to accept a vapid or uninspired performance from these students. They present clear and uncompromising expectations for student work habits, and they are unrelenting as they move about their classrooms monitoring student work promoting and insisting on a satisfactory work ethic. They believe that if they are going to make a difference in the life of these students, they must insist that students "do not get away with" such colorless and lackluster performances.

Hold That Thought

The goal in every classroom should be to promote a deep understanding of the content. This depth cannot occur if the emphasis in a teacher's lesson is on memorization or fact-based learning. In order to move beyond low-level learning, the best teachers understand the importance of challenging their students to cogitate, to tackle important questions, and to use their problem-solving abilities. These adults accomplish this feat in several ways. First, they devise challenging, thought-provoking questions to accompany the content they are required to teach. They often use Bloom's taxonomy question starters as they develop their questions. Next, they habitually provide their students with "think time" as well as time to compare their thinking with their fellow students. Finally, they include questions which might have multiple solutions or no one clear answer. In these classrooms, "rough waters" are viewed as challenges to student thinking rather than reasons to float adrift.

Reviewing the Outtakes

A popular component of some television shows or movies is the inclusion of outtakes, specific scenes that were not included in the final version because they just did not fit or they were not implemented properly. In the classroom, we do not have the luxury of editing out the pieces of our lessons that did not go well; we have to do our best to deal with these unfortunate occasions and try to move on. Learning from one's mistakes is the hallmark of our best teachers. I do not know any professional who has a perfect day in the classroom day after day. We're all human and humans make mistakes. When teachers take the time to "replay" the class events in their heads and reflect on their less-than-outstanding performance, they avoid making the same error again and again.

The adage reads, "Nothing succeeds like success." Success does not occur without effort, analysis, and hard work. It requires adherence to the three d's – dedication, diligence, and determination. Teaching stands out as one of the most difficult professions since human behavior is unpredictable, and despite our best efforts, things do not always go the way we hope they will. We can, however, achieve consistent and positive results most of the time when we think through our practices carefully, reflect on what works and what doesn't work, and use the classroom data to plan our next steps. Our best and most successful teachers often follow the practice of stepping back and mentally examining their teaching behaviors by picturing themselves in their learning environments working with their students. This analysis can be dubbed, "a view from the bridge." Christopher Cross captured the vision that most teachers seek in his song "Sailing" when he wrote, "Sailing takes me away to where I've always heard it could be. And if the wind is right you can sail away and find tranquility." Smooth sailing, great teachers!

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