



# Just for the ASKing!



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## Stop... in the Name of Learning 2.0 (18 Practices to Rethink)



Bruce Oliver, the author of *Just for the ASKing!*, lives in Burke, Virginia. He uses the knowledge, skills, and experience he acquired as a teacher, professional developer, mentor, and middle school principal as he works with school districts in across the nation. He has written more than 150 issues of *Just for the ASKing!* He is the author of *Points to Ponder* and also a co-author of *Creating a Culture for Learning: Your Guide to PLCs and More..*

Several years ago I wrote an issue of *Just for the ASKing!* titled “Stop... in the Name of Learning.” The content was based on classroom observations I had made over time as a principal and professional developer and on conversations about practices that teachers shared during workshops. Sometimes ways of thinking, routines, and practices surfaced that were not always in the best interest of learning.

In 2020 we are dealing with new realities so I decided to resurrect the original concept with a focus on teaching and learning in the age of Covid-19. Given our hectic lives, it is no surprise that we do not ask ourselves often enough if our actions are high leverage choices for promoting student learning. The pandemic-induced turmoil we are now experiencing provides both a mandate and an opportunity to think about how to best move forward and, as we do so, consider which of our practices need to be revisited as we make instructional plans for the future. In this 2.0 issue I offer alternatives to consider. I hope that these observations and recommendations will result in discussions, debates, and most importantly, deliberate decisions that better support student learning.



**Stop designing lessons for face-to-face or virtual learning that are teacher-centered and content-heavy.**

***Instead, build in pauses for processing during instruction.***

Give students time to think, to practice, to predict, or to pose questions, etc. Additionally you are able to learn how well the students are processing the information that is being presented. Some students get lost early in a lesson and for them the investment of time can become a waste of time. Learners should also have the opportunity to interact with one another and/or use white boards or slates to display their thinking. As a result of a learner-centered environment, you are able to determine what is working well and what needs adjustment.



**Don't begin each lesson with a deep dive into dense content.**

***Instead, explore ways to capture student attention quickly at the beginning of each class.***

Some options are:

- Post an image on the screen along with a question such as “What do you notice?” or “What do you wonder?” This step can lead to an informal discussion or a reflection at the beginning of class that can lead to possible predictions or retrieval of information.
- Begin class with a story that enables you to share personal enthusiasm or reveal a personal passion or interest. Such an activity can inject energy into the setting.
- Share information that demonstrates your compassion or personal feelings that will help students see you as a “real person.”
- Whatever way you begin class, it is important to remember that student brains do more than think; they also feel and their feelings can play a valuable role in the success of your efforts to motivate and inspire student learning.



**Don't rely on the same instructional tools day in and day out.**

***Instead, use and have students use a variety of tools.***

Over time, add new apps to your repertoire, while being mindful of not overwhelming students and their parents with too many log-ins, passwords, or too many new apps at once. Some popular options to use are:

- **Polling, Poll Everywhere, or Top Hat** (all free): Possible questions include one-best-answer questions, student perspective questions, or misconception questions.
- **Facetime, Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts or Loom** (all free): Video conferencing tools with multiple uses for teaching and learning
- **Google Sheets:** Use during lessons by posting three questions at the top of three columns and periodically stopping to let students fill in information or responses to each question. (This application helps the lesson flow better and keeps students tuned in).
- **Quizziz:** a free app to use as an assessment tool.
- **Phone Buddies:** Since most students have phones, use them for checking for accuracy of information, having students take pictures of projects they have completed, or asking students to collaborate with a “phone buddy” during a class discussion.
- In place of assigning homework, have each student read for one-half to one hour instead. Depending on the age of the reader and the complexity of the materials to be read, reading can occur independently or with an adult.



- Use **Let's Go RAFTing** where students assume a role and create products for target audiences other than the teacher's inbox. See 20-pages of ideas at <https://justaskpublications.com/just-ask-resource-center/teaching-and-learning-resources>.
- Consider **Project-Based Learning (PBL)**. As the year progresses **PBL** may be just the right ticket that will take students away from the screen and to learn in a new and different way. Learn more at [www.pblworks.org/what-is-pbl/gold-standard-project-design](http://www.pblworks.org/what-is-pbl/gold-standard-project-design).



**Stop thinking of reading as either silent reading in class or as a homework assignment.**

***Instead, consider reading aloud to students.***

Research has shown that the following benefits can be realized from such a practice with students of all ages:

- Builds vocabulary
- Improves reading comprehension
- Reduces stress
- Boosts brain development
- Exposes children to different experiences
- Increases chances of kids' future success
- Helps develop communication skills
- Builds self esteem

If you have not tried reading aloud to students, give it a shot.



**Don't be reluctant to use interactive multimedia content (text, image, audio, video, and animation) for fear of not being able to do it well.**

***Instead, make it a goal to hone your technology skills.***

Connect with tech savvy colleagues or technology specialists to build your confidence. Begin the learning process with tech tools that do not have a steep learning curve. Not only do you want to master their use, you want both students and their parents to learn to use the tools quickly as well. There are dozens of short tutorials on the Web. Try them or have your students teach you how to use new digital tools.



**Avoid introducing new content without ensuring that students are making connections to prior knowledge/learning.**



***Instead, employ a retrieval system.***

Possibilities include a five-minute quick write where students reply to questions such as “What do you already know?” or “What do you want to know?” about the new topic or completion of concept/mind maps about what they think they already know. When students are asked to retrieve prior knowledge, their brains start to search for connections. Asking an attention-getting/thought provoking question at the start of a lesson usually captures student imaginations and starts the “wheels turning.”



**Stop having students remain seated or staying in one place for an entire lesson.**

***Instead, build in opportunities for physical movement.***

This might be periodic stretch breaks, times to stand up, five-minute walks, snack or water breaks, or any movements that will get the blood flowing to the brain. Research suggests that movement can add to improved cognitive functioning. Teachers might also ask students to visit a museum, go to a park or recreation center, or visit a local business. When students are outside their homes, the lesson can include making observations, devising a math problem, or finding an interesting topic on which to write. Some lessons may place an emphasis on discovery and/or experimentation both of which will not occur if students remain sedentary all the time.



**Don't neglect the social emotional development of learners.**

***Instead, take time to have honest conversations with students about how they are feeling about this new way of learning.***

This approach will let your students know that you care about how they are feeling and it can provide comfort, and even lead to social connections between individual students. Keep in mind “the other side of the screen.” Remember the adage: Connection over content. Some children may live in unstable environments and they are deprived of the safe haven a classroom can bring. Keep reminding yourself that community, empathy, and purpose can result in supplying encouragement and joy when your students are with you. Pay attention to quiet students or ones who are hesitant to participate. Incorporate these individuals into lessons that acknowledge that they matter to you.



**Do not operate with a “one size fits all” mindset.**

***Instead, make yourself available for one-on-one interactions.***

When time is set aside for students to make appointments to interact with their teachers, these sessions can be used for emotional support, tutoring, clarifications, or just plain



listening. You might consider requiring a minimum number of one-on-one interactions while freely offering more availability, or even scheduling more as appropriate.



**Stop limiting learning almost exclusively to academic applications.**

***Instead, ask students to use their new knowledge in practical ways, or ways that represent real-world applications.***

During my classroom visits as a principal or staff developer, I occasionally asked students how they could use their “learning” beyond using it on the next test. Most students could not answer the question since it was not made clear to them. In addition to making sure that students are mastering the content in their textbooks, make sure they understand the practical applications of their new knowledge as well.



**Be aware that you can get so immersed in the standards that you forget what is equally important.**

***Instead, think of the bigger picture and the life lessons you want to instill in your students.***

One of the most important assets you can convey is that of kindness. A few lessons a teacher can convey are:

- Always be kind
- If you see someone falling behind, walk beside them.
- If someone is being ignored, find a way to include them.
- If someone has been knocked down, lift them up.
- Always remind people of their worth.
- Be who you needed when you were going through hard times.
- Just one small act of kindness could mean the world to someone.



**Stop creating and then reading lengthy PowerPoint slides to your students.**

***Instead, only include slides that supplement or enhance student learning.***

The slides should stimulate visual interest and add new dimensions to the teacher’s message. Never have students copy projected slides. As appropriate, make copies of the slides available to students so they can add new insights/reactions to the information provided. One last thought: Avoid “PowerPoint fixation” by varying your content delivery.







**Do not ask “Are there any questions?” to check for student understanding. *Instead, try saying to the students, “Ask me a question’ or better still “Ask me two questions.”***

Research has demonstrated that this approach seems to elicit a greater frequency and quality of questions than the when the teacher does the asking.



**Avoid at all times ending lessons abruptly or without proper closure. *Instead, have students summarize each lesson.***

There are an abundance of strategies teachers can use including 3-2-1. Ticket to Leave, journal writing, and Two Insights, One conundrum or Next Step. The research is clear that having students process their learning immediately greatly enhances “remembering.”



**Don’t fixate on the “new normal.”**

***Instead, remember that good teaching is good teaching no matter the delivery format.***

Jennifer Gonzalez of Cult of Pedagogy reminds us of the importance of these principles of learning:

- Clear and consistent communication
- Explicit and consistent rituals and routines
- Research-based instructional strategies
- Use of digital and non-digital tools
- A focus on authentic learning – products, voice, and choice.



**Do not minimize the importance of feedback in the learning process.**

***Instead, think of assessment and feedback as your instructional “GPS” system.***

Heed the words of wisdom:

- Assessment determines where students are in their relationship to the learning destination.
- Assessment determines what action is needed to ensure progress toward that the leaning goal.
- Assessment provides regular updates to both teacher and student throughout the course of the journey.
- Feedback lets students know when they are making progress in successfully completing their journey, or when they have gotten off track.



- Feedback lets students know how they can recalculate and reach their final destination.
- Students and their families should understand that grades don't reflect who students are, but rather their temporary location on the learning journey.

Effective feedback is clear, timely, task-specific, thought-provoking, focused both on strengths and growth, and delivered in manageable chunks. Ineffective feedback includes grades, giving answers, vague comments, responses focused on the student rather than the task. Grades by themselves are not helpful.



**Do not misuse formative assessment data.**

***Instead, do not include formative assessment data in determining a student's quarter or final grade.***

Scores on quizzes, homework, **Tickets to Leave** and other summarizers, etc. should be used to provide information to both the teacher and students about whether students are moving closer to mastering content rather than a measure of what a student ultimately masters/achieves.

Follow these five simple steps to foster a cycle of growth:

- Identify clear learning criteria
- Regularly gather formative data
- Provide feedback based on the formative data
- Allow students time to use feedback for reflection, correction, and to set new learning goals
- Adjust the learning plan as needed based on formative data.



**Do not limit assessment practices to traditional tests.**

***Instead, provide creative ways for students to demonstrate their learning.***

In virtual learning environments, it can be difficult to know whether students are looking up information to find correct answers, or receiving assistance when they take a test. In place of typical tests, teachers can provide a multiplicity of ways to allow students to demonstrate their creativity as well as mastery of content through such venues as videos, podcasts, digital or physical art, written pieces, etc. Teachers can use their own creative skills to ask students to show what they have learned by integrating content and skills. The teacher can also supply a rubric that can highlight learning goals that their products will demonstrate.



## Stop and Take Care of Yourself!

Make sure to set aside special time to do things that make you happy. In these unprecedented times, teaching your students under unorthodox circumstances can be stressful. If you are working hard to provide learning experiences that are good for your students, you are so very important.

“If you fail, never give up because **F.A.I.L.** means ‘First Attempt in Learning.’ End is not the end. In fact, **E.N.D.** means ‘Effort Never Dies.’ If you get No as an answer, remember **N.O.** means ‘Next Opportunity.’”

- Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, 11<sup>th</sup> President of India





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