



Just for the ASKing!

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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 support administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. The focus this month is on the power of reflection and the role it plays in maximizing our efforts to promote student learning.

The Forgotten R



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

Throughout the past century, educators have emphasized the importance of the three Rs: “**Readin’ and ‘Ritin’ and ‘Rithmetic.**” The phrase has been popularized in early films and plays and there are still references to these three Rs on countless websites today. The importance of the three Rs remains intact today since the No Child Left Behind legislation requires schools to show annual progress in the areas of reading and mathematics. In more recent times, three additional Rs have emerged to bring us more in tune with the requirements of the 21st century classroom. The 21st century three Rs are: **Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships.** No one can argue their importance since they encompass the necessary skills that tomorrow’s citizens must possess in order to compete in our global economy.

There is another R that should receive equal attention in today’s schools. Call it the “Forgotten R” since its importance is often overlooked or neglected. The forgotten R is **Reflection.**

Educators, by virtue of their jobs, are busy people. To carry out their responsibilities, they must be on the go with a high energy level and strong sense of accomplishment. The ability to pour oneself into one’s job is perhaps an educator’s most important asset. Conversely, it can also be his greatest liability. Because of the pressure on educators to show results, we often charge ahead, sometimes without a clear focus, hoping that our struggle will pay off. We rarely pause to reflect on our efforts to determine whether our actions are in the best interest of students and their learning. Although the No Child Left Behind legislation was aimed at making us better at our jobs, it has, in many ways, become a detractor. Some of us have become myopic in our thinking, focusing on the specific learning approaches or programs with the hopes that we will see the payoff, as defined as the improvement on the required annual standardized test results.

For many individuals, the education system can be compared to a merry-go-round. We get on the ride and go through the same cycle year after year. We follow the same predictable procedures, hopeful that we will be able to grab education’s brass ring. What’s missing in this scenario is the practice of making careful, deliberate, well thought-out decisions based on student data. In short, we should spend more time reflecting on our practice.

Reflections can take many forms, and they should be incorporated into our day-to-day practices whether we are administrators or teachers. Below are some considerations about the importance of stopping to reflect on our practices to make thoughtful decisions.

Teaching the right lesson. As some teachers plan, they devise lessons that they feel will be high interest and keep their students focused. They think about filling a segment of time, perhaps a learning block or a period. In addition, the lesson incorporates the necessary standards that the teacher is required to address. It looks like it has the potential to be a good lesson. The flaw in this thinking is that while it may be a good lesson it may not be the right lesson to match the needs of the students. Some teachers talk about following a lesson outlined by a textbook publisher or retrieving a lesson plan from a previous year that seemed to work. A good teacher will do a great deal of upfront reflecting to make sure that the lessons they plan are clearly matched to the standards, have specific defined outcomes, are connected to prior learning, and are presented to students in such a way that all the students are able to be successful. Of equal importance is the administrator's responsibility to carefully plan staff development opportunities for faculties to ensure that they support school goals, improve teacher practice and enhance student learning. When administrators provide the right lesson for teachers, it can often be the catalyst for the changes we seek.

Refining the learning experiences. The Standards-Based Education (SBE) planning process sets forth four important questions a teacher should pose as he or she plans units or lessons. The questions are:

- What should students know and be able to do?
- How will the students and I know when they are successful?
- What learning experiences will facilitate their success?
- Based on data, how do I refine the learning experiences?

Often in our haste to keep up with pacing guides, or to make sure that we cover the necessary content, we often press on without thinking about the unit just completed. Hence, we skip the important fourth question without reflecting on the success (or lack of success) in the most recent unit. Wise teachers routinely ask students to provide feedback on the learning experiences so that future units have the student perspective on what worked and what did not work in the unit just completed. Making future instructional decisions based on current data is a step we cannot afford to neglect. Likewise, administrators should reflect on their interactions with staff members and provide feedback that will lead to teacher growth.

Beginning with the end in mind. Our personal lives provide promising practices that we can apply to our professional lives. One such common exercise is to envision how an event will unfold when all the details are thought-out and in place, and everything goes as planned. When we host dinners or holiday gatherings, chart out vacations, or plan a wedding, we do so by envisioning how the event will play out. The same method of thinking should be followed on the job. As teachers plan lessons, they should begin by reflecting on the outcomes they wish to reach and then plan the learning experiences that will help students reach these end results. As well, when administrators or teachers plan meetings, they should begin by asking how participants will be different as a result of the meeting. In short, the guiding question should be: What new learning will occur and what steps will we take to ensure that learning takes place? To follow such practices requires upfront reflection as well as the opportunity for participants, be they children or adults, to reflect on their new learning.

Making deliberate decisions. When we adopt the habit of reflecting on our practices, we can discover meaningful information that will help us manage our time better and support student learning in a more relevant and consistent manner. One such approach is for the practitioner to make three separate lists with

the following headings:

- What we need to stop doing
- What we need to keep doing, but do more purposefully
- What we need to start doing

Such an exercise can bring fresh perspectives on how we carry out our responsibilities and duties. A second reflective approach at the beginning of the school year is for faculty members to give serious thought to two questions:

- What are the five most effective actions we take in our school that contribute to student learning?
- What are the five least effective things we do that we need to stop doing?

When the data from each faculty member's reflection is tabulated, it can be shared with the overall faculty and used to formulate school-wide goals or initiatives for the upcoming school year.

Collaborative Conversations. A powerful practice that should not be overlooked is the collaboration among teachers and/or administrators to jointly analyze assessment data and determine which teaching approaches have made the greatest difference in student achievement. These sharing sessions can result in teachers discovering new strategies they can immediately employ in their classrooms with their students. If we work primarily in isolation, we can go for long periods of time without ever knowing that the teacher next door has that great idea that could truly make a difference.

Reflective Conferences. The purpose of any one-on-one conference between educators is teacher growth and increased student learning. No matter how well things may be going in a teacher's classroom, new ideas may emerge from a conference session. When administrators, mentors, or fellow teachers practice the art of asking reflective questions in conference settings, the result is more introspection and deliberation on the part of the teachers. Not only will teachers reflect on their practice, they will emerge from conferences with ownership of new teaching strategies. As a result, teachers will be more likely to act on the ideas, see the results firsthand, and look forward to future conversations with their fellow educators.

Why is reflecting an important practice for educators to follow? When we fail to reflect on our behavior, we can end up doing things haphazardly and carelessly, and find ourselves with results that are of little use. When reflection becomes as second nature as brushing one's teeth or having that morning cup of coffee, it leads to improved decision making, better data analysis, and ultimately contributes to greater student learning. Put simply, it just makes good sense.

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