



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

2017 Volume XIV Issue VI

The Knowing-Doing Gap



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 also a co-author of *Creating a Culture for Learning* published by Just ASK.

When educators attend conferences or workshops they are often inspired by the many new and exciting ideas they learn about and are prepared to put some of the newfound strategies into practice in the near future. Upon returning to the workplace, however, the computer or print file filled with handouts/notes is placed nearby on a shelf or in the corner of a desk. Then... reality sets in. The teacher reads the summary of the day(s) left by the substitute and determines what follow-up(s) must take place; she checks emails to see what immediate action must take place or which phone calls must be returned. The folder with all those exciting ideas sits lonely and neglected.

We cannot be criticized for not implementing new ideas in a timely manner since our professional lives are filled with unexpected events and frequent interruptions. And let's not forget... change is not easy.

On the other hand, it is important to remember that teaching is a profession, and in all professions, it is unrealistic to remain static and cling to ideas that may not be as effective in promoting student learning. We must be introducing new concepts/ideas into our repertoires. The file folder from the conference that holds new ways of thinking, deserves attention; thus, it is critical that we open that folder while the ideas are fresh in our minds. Remember, the ideas that were introduced in the workshop, regardless of how good they are, will have no impact on learning until we act on them. As a wise man once said, "It is not good enough to think outside the box, you must act outside the box as well."

The Gap

The inability to put new ideas into practice is called the knowing-doing gap. It is a widely used moniker that is not unique to education; it is taught in college courses, a vital part of leadership training, and is a mainstay in the world of business. In the words of Dale Carnegie, "Knowledge isn't power until it is applied."

The Wisdom

In a recent webinar, British researcher Dylan Wiliam provides a great deal of insight about how teachers can reduce or even eliminate the gap. The title of a recent blog by Dr. Wiliam says it all: "Changing What Teachers Do is More Important Than Changing What They Know." The article focuses on the importance of teachers reducing the achievement gap by embedding formative assessment practices into their range of options. He states, "It's not about

a magical intervention to help the kids this year; it's about helping teachers make decisions based on the level of understanding of all students. That's how you close the achievement gap."

The Strategies

Basing his conclusions on 35 years of experience in the field of education, Wiliam recently shared five strategies he believes are essential for the successful application of formative assessments into a teacher's instructional delivery. He proposes the following practices:

- Each and every student must understand what their learning experiences will entail and how success will be determined. Teachers must be specific and present practical examples that students will understand as they are explaining the lesson outcomes. When teachers clarify what success will look and sound like, students are much more likely to achieve it.
- It is not good enough that students hear about the success criteria shared by their teacher; they must have the opportunity to participate in discussions with peers and share possible examples of success with one another. Thus, as a bi-product of the discussions, students will have a clear picture of success indicators.
- Learning is being **formed** as students are engaged in specific activities to master the content. Simultaneously, the teacher can be observing and interacting with students to provide on-the-spot feedback in order to keep progress moving in the right direction. Remember... student engagement + feedback = success.
- Students are often an excellent resource for one another as each individual works toward his "aha moment." Discussions, critical thinking, and problem solving are all excellent sources of formative assessment data and they keep students actively involved in their learning process.
- Teachers must repeatedly promote the understanding that all students are accountable for their individual learning. When students know, from the get-go, that they must take responsibility for their own learning, Wiliam has concluded that learning will dramatically increase.

The more options teachers have at their disposal, the deeper their discussions will be with their fellow teachers, and the stronger their use of formative assessment will become. Following Wiliam's five steps will help to transfer educators more quickly and permanently from knowers to doers.

The Actions

In his writing, Dr. Wiliam offers further suggestions that will help teachers move into the action phase and move closer to reduce or even eliminate the gap. He believes that teachers must get into the "habit changing business." He suggests the following practices:

- **Choice** – Instead of having top-down requirements for all teachers, giving individuals a choice about a practice they wish to implement will increase the likelihood that the implementation will become a permanent fixture. Wiliam writes, "When teachers themselves make the decision about what it is they wish to prioritize for their own professional development, they are more likely to make it work." When teachers have the power to choose, they increase their level of expertise and take more responsibility to apply a strategy again and again.
- **Flexibility** – Teaching styles differ and the students who make up individual classes can vary greatly. For this reason, when teachers learn a new strategy, they do not have to implement it in a lock-step manner. Wiliam believes that what is important is that the instructor is moving to action. He cautions, however, that a teacher should not change the essence of the idea to the point where it becomes ineffective.
- **Small Steps** – Research evidence shows that teachers in general are slow to change their practice primarily because change is "genuinely difficult" and "immensely challenging." Most educators become accustomed to doing things a certain way and it supports their comfort level. In order for the change to occur, Wiliam recommends moving slowly. He writes, "Small steps grow new expertise which makes



the new behaviors “hard wired,” and thus more lasting. He further advocates for having a checklist of specific actions with “Plan B options” so the idea is not seen as a failure. It can be an emotional letdown for a practitioner to have a new idea go poorly; thus, small, manageable steps may be the ticket.

- **Accountability** – “All teachers need to improve their practice – not because they are not good enough, but because they can get better,” is a strong-held belief from Wiliam. He believes that it is appropriate for teachers to be accountable for their personal improvement. He endorses the idea of a teacher having an action plan with indicators showing how the new idea benefits students. The plans do not have to be long and complicated but should be in writing, contain a small number of changes that will take place, and include what the teacher will reduce or give up in order to make room for the new ideas.
- **Support** - In his work, Wiliam has concluded that a support system along with a model for providing the support is essential. In *Embedding Formative Assessment: A Two Year Professional Development Pack*, he prescribes monthly meetings with peers in order to make the move from knowing to doing more permanent. He calls the gatherings Teacher Learning Communities (TLC); He has determined that when teachers have a consistent protocol, when they make a commitment to peers, when they receive support and feedback from other practitioners, when there is time set aside to introduce new ideas, and when each individual specifically states what she will do before the next meeting, it becomes a powerful mechanism for change. As Wiliam states, the model is “currently being used successfully by thousands of teachers in hundreds of schools all over the world.”

The Insights

Other writers have weighed in on the knowing-doing gap and offer advice that supports Wiliam’s thinking as well as providing additional helpful observations. In their book, *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge Into Action*, authors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton explain that some people are “drowning in a sea of good intentions” because they spend an inordinate amount of time talking about an idea (“word spinning”) instead of making any progress. They state that “the gap between knowing and doing is more important than between ignorance and knowing.” According to the authors, some people delude themselves into thinking they are making progress simply because they keep talking about the idea. In order to move a plan into the action stage, they caution that a plan may get derailed early on if there are too many details in the beginning. They further endorse the practice of celebrating “moments of excitement” as a plan unfolds. It is likewise important to not spend time focusing on snags that may occur and to focus on what worked instead.

Binghamton University (SUNY) Professor Surinder Kahai has added additional insights in his book, *Closing the Knowing-Doing Gap in Leadership*.” He writes about if and when the initial enthusiasm about a new idea wanes, we resort to old behaviors. He writes, “This relapse is often caused by time pressure, peer pressure, anxiety over one’s capabilities, and sometimes by joyful circumstances (e.g., feelings that things are going well already when, in reality, they are not as good as one might think. Kahai supports the idea of goal setting with specific steps:

- Creating a list of desirable behaviors
- Setting targets for achieving the behaviors
- Monitoring progress as the behavior change
- Making sure the behaviors are specific enough and not overly general

He also shares a rather unique idea when he suggests setting up an email alert system as reminders of when important goals should be achieved. He recommends the use of Google calendar for weekly or twice weekly reminders.

The literature on the knowing-doing gap reveals further food for thought including the following options:

- When teachers’ work becomes more difficult, they often resort to “primal scripts” based on the way they



were taught as students. These were not necessarily the best teaching and learning practices.

- Making a commitment to action planning focuses the teacher on devising concrete steps and keeping a written record about how the steps worked.
- Studies found that feedback from peer to peer is most effective when the feedback did not stop at telling the fellow teacher what to do but more specifically how to go about it.
- As teachers roll out new learning approaches, an important point is that to maximize student learning the focus needs to be on individual growth rather than on a comparison with fellow students.
- When a teacher realizes that a successful new idea or approach is counter to existing school policy, the teacher should share formative achievement data with school leaders so that the existing structure can change.

We all know that change is difficult. But we cannot remain stagnant in our instructional practices. The above information contains numerous ways that teachers can make specific moves to ensure that the knowing-doing gap ceases to exist. The ball is in your court.



Resources and References

Beck, Martha. "The Knowing-Doing Gap: How to Stop Procrastinating." *O, The Oprah Magazine*. August 2008.

www.oprah.com/spirit/The-Knowing-Doing-Gap-How-to-Stop-Procrastinating

Goodrich, Kelly. "Dylan Wiliam & The 5 Formative Assessment Strategies To Improve Student Learning." **NWEA**. August 2012.

www.nwea.org/blog/2012/dylan-wiliam-the-5-formative-assessment-strategies-to-improve-student-learning/

Kahai, Surinder. "Closing the Knowing-Doing Gap." **Leading Virtually**. July 2009.

www.leadingvirtually.com/closing-the-knowing-doing-gap-in-leadership/

"Knowing-Doing Gap definition and meaning." **Larapedia**.

www.larapedia.com/glossary_of_knowledge_terms/knowing_doing_gap_meaning_and_information.html

Pfeffer, Jeffrey and Robert Sutton. *The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Companies Turn Knowledge into Action*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2000.

Wiliam, Dylan. "Changing What Teachers Do Is More Important Than What They Know." **Dylan Wiliam Center**. March 2015.

www.dylanwiliamcenter.com/changing-what-teachers-do-is-more-important-than-changing-what-they-know/

© 2017 Just ASK Publications & Professional Development

Permission is granted for reprinting and distribution of this newsletter for non-commercial use only. Please include the following citation on all copies:

Oliver, Bruce. "The Knowing-Doing Gap" *Just for the ASKing!* June 2017. Reproduced with permission of Just ASK Publications & Professional Development. © 2017. All rights reserved.

Available at www.justaskpublications.com.

