



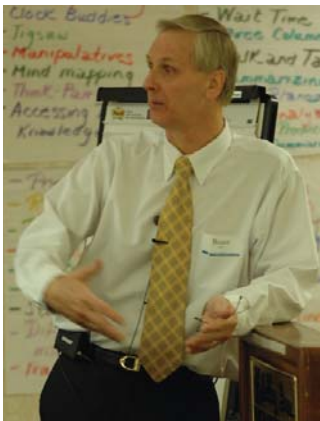
Just for the ASKing!

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 support administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. The focus this month is on the following questions: Have we become so driven in our need to attain test scores that we have lost sight of the true purpose of our schools? Shouldn't we be preparing our students for the world in which they will live after they complete their formal education? In short, have we become so myopic in our thinking and constrained in our practice that, as a result, we are missing the big picture and ignoring the world in which our students live?

Tomorrow Is Today



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

The role of the visionary is to help us look into the world of tomorrow. In his ground-breaking best seller, *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman convincingly builds a case for his belief that a global revolution in the field of information technology is leveling the worldwide playing field as well as resulting in the relocation of jobs. He further posits that globalization will be more and more driven by non-Western countries. In his latest book, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, Friedman expands his analysis of our flat world by showing how climate changes, growth in population, and an expanded global middle-class are resulting in the next great revolution: energy technology. Although guardedly optimistic, Friedman believes that our country must be energy independent and that we must encourage the creative and entrepreneurial skills of our leaders if we expect to be a world leader in the future. Daniel Pink has received national acclaim for his book, *A Whole New Mind*, by emphasizing the abilities that citizens of tomorrow must possess in order to compete on a global scale. Among the qualities that Pink feels are critical are big-picture thinking, creativity, intrinsic motivation, the need to see patterns, and the ability to empathize with others by viewing situations from a variety of perspectives.

I point out the ideas put forth by these authors to make the case that as educators we must give our students opportunities to practice skills that will enable them to be productive, creative, and successful citizens of tomorrow. In order for today's educators to provide exciting and engaging learning opportunities for their students, we must contrast what may be happening in their classrooms with the reality of the world we live in. As educators, we must address these questions: Have we become so driven in our need to attain test scores that we have lost sight of the true purpose of our schools? Shouldn't we be preparing our students for the world in which they will live after they complete their formal education? In short, have we become so myopic in our thinking and constrained in our practice that, as a result, we are missing the big picture and ignoring the world in which our students live?

On a recent flight, a fellow passenger and a father of a high school student talked about how disenchanted and disconnected his son had become with his school. The young man felt that his day was filled with too many lectures, questionable assignments, unnecessary busy work, and content that was irrelevant to him. Although the young man's father was highly educated and a successful businessman, he understood his son's plight. As the father noted, "I understand that there is some importance in learning about the Monroe Doctrine and the Pythagorean Theorem, but where is the connection to my son's real world?" He further stated his belief that he wished his son's school could be a place where his imagination was tapped and where he could become excited about his classroom experiences.

The Internet, as well as innumerable publications, proclaims the skills and knowledge our children will need to lead successful lives and be able to compete in a global economy. Terms such as results that matter, rigor, relevance and relationships, a vision for the 21st century, and the partnership for 21st century skills abound throughout current literature. There is certainly not a paucity of ideas, opinions, or suggestions. But are educators listening? As one high school administrator recently observed, "I worry that our students are walking into classrooms more in tune with the 1950's and then walking out and functioning in a completely different 21st century world. There is a huge disconnect." To put it another way, Daniel Pink states that far too many students are indoctrinated to come up with the right answer rather than wrestle with important issues for which there are multiple possibilities. He feels that educators must design learning experiences that will allow our students' "intrinsic motivation to blossom."

If we take our responsibilities as educators seriously, we must move beyond an awareness of what our students should be experiencing in our schools and bring more of today's world into our classrooms. Since I have the opportunity to interact with many educators, I am convinced that we possess the ability to provide exciting, challenging, and truly engaging learning experiences for their students. We have the answers. But many continue to feel restricted because of the pressures of achieving AYP. We seem to be trapped in the ultimate catch-22. We know what we should be doing but we also know what we have to do to survive.

There there is hope. Below are some of the ideas and practices that current educators have shared with me that will help us integrate the world of today into our classrooms, and thus construct better learning experiences for our students.

- **Promote more collaboration among educators.** When teachers and administrators engage in conversations about how to incorporate more of today's world into their classroom environments, exciting ideas can emerge. I have heard the response, "That's a great idea!" again and again in grade level or curriculum content meetings. Taking it to a higher level, a focused conversation on how to include more creativity, relevance, and problem solving into daily lessons will enable teachers to bring more of the world of today's students into their learning environments.
- **Talk to the kids.** If teachers plan their lessons in isolation without thinking deeply about the world today's students live in, their plan will be less likely to be successful. By engaging students in conversations about what they want to learn and how they want to learn it, teachers may realize several exciting results. First, the students will know that the teachers truly care about what their students think. Second, teachers will learn more about their students' "world." Third, teachers will set the tone that the students have much to teach adults and that our classrooms can provide opportunities for everyone to learn. And finally, some stimulating and thought provoking ideas for future lessons will become more apparent.
- **Let students problem solve with important issues.** Evan Glazer, principal of one of our country's leading high schools, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax, Virginia, recently shared one of his fundamental beliefs about the purpose of schooling. He believes that school should be a place where students pose questions, the questions become ideas, ideas then lead to projects, the projects produce results, and the results lead to a better world and a better learning environment. Shouldn't we give all students the chance to participate in such a rich learning environment?

- **Make technology a natural part of learning.** School districts across the country continue to invest huge sums of money into the purchase of textbooks at the expense of allocating adequate funds to expand the inclusion of technology in all classrooms. How antiquated it must seem to today's students to look around their classrooms and see nonexistent or limited access to technology. A high school student expresses his feelings this way: "When I go to school, I have to power down." Students should be strongly encouraged to bring their knowledge of technology to the content they are learning, and it is the responsibility of today's educators to ensure that the use of technology in learning is as natural as checking the roll. Our students are familiar with concepts such as blogs, wikis, podcasts, web-cams, virtual learning, online collaboration, and web quests. Let them apply what they know to new learning.
- **Help students view situations from different perspectives.** If our students are to be successful in tomorrow's world, we must ensure that their thinking is expanded beyond their unique orientation. They must be able to develop global perspectives by engaging in learning experiences that will enable them to cross cultural barriers and geographical borders. By focusing on the larger world as a whole, our students will be less parochial in their thinking and more expansive in their understanding of today's world.
- **Seek opportunities to integrate our 21st century world with required teaching standards.** Good teachers continually strive to help students make real-world connections with the content standards they are learning. As teachers plan units and lessons, they should devise student-centered lessons that empower students to engage in lively dialogues that promote imaginative and creative thinking, that include the use of modern technological applications, and that make teaching standards much more engaging for today's learners.

Authors such as Thomas Friedman and Daniel Pink provide arguments that promote necessary discourses among citizens across the globe. Teachers and administrators should make sure that our young people are provided the opportunity to participate in these important discussions. We must make sure that terms like "problem solving" and "critical thinking" are not simply fancy words in educational publications. We must bring these words to life. As we plan our lessons for tomorrow, we should do so with a mission to incorporate the world of today into our thinking.

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