



# Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver



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## Trending Topics 2018

### Unconventional Now... But Perhaps Mainstream in the Future



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.

Throughout my career, there have been on-going changes in the field of education. New research emerges, new classroom procedures become potential panaceas for all of education's problems, and the spotlight focuses on the gurus of the day. For some educators, the response to new ways of thinking is "not another thing for me to do when I am already overwhelmed." Some practitioners take a breath and resort to the old adage: This too shall pass. Others investigate the new theories, initiatives, and practices, and, with deliberation, determine if these new ways of thinking might help them be a better teacher.

What is especially interesting is that an idea that initially seems "off the wall" or impractical, may eventually become mainstream. Approaches and tools such as differentiation of instruction, STEM, Project-Based Learning, PowerPoint slides, Smart Boards, ungraded formative assessment data, and Professional Learning Communities were once considered radical ideas.

Some seemingly unconventional new ways of thinking have recently surfaced. Exploring these ways of thinking in more depth reveals that these non-traditional approaches are getting positive results. As professionals, it is important for each of us to investigate new these new ideas. Since we cannot predict the future, we cannot determine if these ideas may be established practice in tomorrow's classroom.

### Minimal Screens

In their new book, *Screen Schooled: Two Veteran Teachers Expose How Technology Overuse is Making our Kids Dumber*, Joe Clement and Matt Miles, high school teachers with strong technology backgrounds, make a powerful case for minimizing the use of "screens" during instruction, and instead creating learning experiences that include student-to-student interactions, physical movement, increased commentary, and reaching valid, evidence-based conclusions. They base their thinking about less screen time on three principles:

- Deliver instruction in the simplest possible manner
- Focus instruction on what students are able to do
- Foster face-to-face interaction and opportunities for community building

In their work the authors clarify that "they don't want to dispose of iPads, YouTube, Prezis, and Google Docs."

As they state, these tools in and of themselves do not make for better teaching. They write, “In fact, as we have seen, more use of technology - inside and outside the classroom - can make it more difficult for students to learn and teachers to teach.” In their experiences, they have found that making sure that all students know how to use technology properly takes up considerable instructional time.” Clement and Mills counter the current belief that students need to interact with technology since it is so much a part of the world beyond school. As they note, “This may be an appealing idea, but it is folly. Students need no help from schools developing their tablets, smartphones or Twitter skills. What they need is critical thinking, problem solving, and community building.”

## Mindset Shifts

There are some educators who, based on personal experiences, believe that children from poverty will not do well in school. The research firm **RTI International's** studies on the topic conclude that such ideas “bedevil our educational system.” The **RTI** report states, “a decade of research shows that students of color and those from low income households are often treated differently from whites and middle-class students.”

Educators who have participated in the Sacramento, California based **Teacher Home Visits Program** see it quite differently. The goal of the program is to promote a better understanding of family dynamics that can eventually lead to improved student performance in school. The program has shown that the home visits give parents a clearer idea of how to support their children's studies, and they help teachers learn more about students' interests, and how to motivate them in class. Participants in the program typically make two visits a year; the first visit focuses on “hopes and dreams” rather than academics which builds trust and reduces anxiety. Educators who formerly felt that parents did not take an interest in their child's education concluded that they were wrong. Because of the mind shifts, teachers saw students in a different light as individuals with capabilities who could be motivated.

## The Hands-Off Teacher

Most dedicated teachers spend considerable time creating lessons that are engaging, far reaching, and hold students' attention. Even after such detailed planning, not all students will buy into what the teacher has to offer. Authors Hunter Maats and Katie O'Brien take the approach that “we need to let America's children struggle if we want them to develop the skills to succeed on their own in the workplace of the future.” Maats and O'Brien cite a study by the **National Academy of Sciences** that concluded that the key to effective learning is to maximize the amount of metacognition (thinking about thinking) students are asked to do. When teachers do the majority of their students' thinking and provide solutions for their problems, they are not doing them any favors. As the authors conclude, “A great teacher teaches as little as possible while modeling behavior of how to figure something out.” The authors provide some examples of what teachers can do to promote metacognition:

- At least once a class period, do not answer a student's question and instead have all students engage in an effort to find the the answer/possible answers
- Instead of marking mistakes on a paper, essay, or homework assignment, tell students how many mistakes there are and challenge the student to find them
- After a test, give students the same test again; fill in the test with actual wrong answers. As the students grade the “new test” they should provide corrections, thus thinking about the right way to do things.

## Insufficient Writing

Many colleges bemoan the fact that students lack writing skills when they enter as freshmen. As well, employees are often dismayed when they learn that potential hires cannot express themselves clearly in



writing. Washington Post education writer Jay Mathews addressed the issue in recent weeks under the headline: “Too Many Students Can’t Write Well.” He notes, “Almost no U.S. high school students are required to do long research papers, except students in private schools or public schools with International Baccalaureate programs.” Mathews points out that the best instruction in writing happens on school newspapers, which usually have talented faculty advisors and upper classmen willing to help untrained freshmen.

Mathews does not simply point out that the problem exists but offers a viable solution as well: “Require students to take at least one semester of reading and writing instead of their regular English class.” In this class students complete a piece of writing due on Monday. During class time, students may read or work on their next essay; the teacher works with students one-on-one to help them edit their papers. In addition to a concentrated focus on literacy, Mathews proposes the enlistment of volunteers who are proficient writers (retired or semi-retired wordsmiths) who could also work with individual students to improve their skills. If the semester class were to become part of the school’s schedule, students would certainly produce more writing than they are currently required to complete.

## Disappearing Homework

A lot of opinions are being bantered about in journals, videos, workshops, and meetings on the topic of homework. A closer examination of the topic led me to some distinct ways of thinking. An infographic entitled “There is No Homework in Finland” contains a video that points out what makes schools in Finland so successful. Included in the depiction is the fact that students in Finland have minimal or no homework. When teachers justify the practice, they explain that students need “more time to be kids.” Interestingly enough, Finnish schools have a comparatively short school day and school year that supports their belief that “There’s just so much more around than school.” The Finnish system truly has no child left behind and virtually no achievement gap. Minister of Education Krista Kiuru explains what they want for their students: “We try to teach them to be happy. We want them to play, socialize with friends, and grow as human beings.” The bottom line goal is for the students to respect others and to respect themselves. By the way, Finnish schools are consistently ranked near the top in international rankings.

Another source addresses a different approach to homework that occurred at Clintondale High School in Michigan. A YouTube video entitled “When the School Got Rid of Homework, It Saw Dramatic Outcomes” explains the school’s new approach. In the video, Principal Greg Green takes you on a tour of his school and shows how his school became the first school in the United States to “flip” every classroom, thus redefining homework. Student view lectures or lessons on line at home and use class time to tackle problems or complete assignments. As a result, the failure rate dropped significantly and college admission rose over a two-year period. In a concluding remark, Green calls the approach “the great equalizer.”

Homework is one of those practices that is ingrained in our educational system. More and more teachers are changing the way they approach homework, carefully choosing the type and amount they require students to accomplish. It is a far cry from the automatic assignment of work at home on a nightly basis.

## Below the Surface

In an *Educational Leadership* article, University of Virginia Professor Carol Ann Tomlinson shines a light on a topic many educators might not consciously address in her article entitled “One to Grow On/ The Iceberg Theory of Teaching.”



Teachers are required to develop units that support the standards they are required to teach; lessons should be learner-centered and delivered in an enthusiastic manner. Accomplished educators watch for signs of student learning including how students respond to checks for understanding, how they perform on formative and summative assessments, the cooperation they display when they work with peers, and the work habits they exhibit while working independently. All of these **observable** signs are representative of a positive learning environment. But as Tomlinson points out, there is so much more going on in our classrooms that is **non-observable**. Much like an iceberg, there are things going on below the surface in children's lives including "escalating poverty, overburdened parents, homelessness, precarious immigration status, hunger, chronic illness, and whatever other struggles you know exist in your classroom." She further notes that if teachers only prepare lessons for the faces in front of her, they could be making a mistake. She concludes, "My students live beneath the surface, and I have to do whatever I can to see beneath the surface so I am prepared to reach them where they live." With knowledge about students in hand, teachers can reach young people by consciously getting to know them and keeping that knowledge in the forefront of their thinking as lessons unfold.

## The No-Grades Movement

In 2017, *Education Week* published a special report focusing on ten big ideas in education. One article by titled "The Gradeless Classroom" really grabbed my attention; it was written by Mark Barnes, founder and CEO of **Times 10 Publications**. With so many classrooms including STEM labs, sophisticated electronic devices, and project-based learning, teachers are spending more time in the middle of the action. Barnes asserts that with changing methodology, teachers should be assessing progress in different ways. He writes, "Imagine classrooms where teachers never place numbers, letters, percentages or other labels on students' work; where report cards don't exist; and where the GPA has gone the way of the dinosaur."

At first reading the idea of a gradeless class sounds unrealistic and radical. But as Barnes explains his thinking in more detail, his approach begins to make sense. When he switched to a gradeless approach a decade ago, he put into place a system based on observation, feedback, repetition, and student self-evaluation. He discovered that "students began completing all assignments, became more engaged in learning, and even passed standardized tests at higher rates than their peers in classrooms with traditional grading. The big question remains: What grade do students receive on their required report card? Barnes's approach is to sit with students and discuss what work they completed, what skills they acquired, and what they had learned as a result of the feedback they received. The students are then asked to grade themselves most of whom do so realistically.

In a separate article on the same topic, *Education Week's* Kate Stoltz concludes that the goal of the no-grade movement is to steer students away from passive learning and into a more active role in their schooling. "The focus is on the learning process rather than the score; the pressure of performance replaced by an environment where students feel free to make mistakes, continuously self-evaluate, and develop deeper understanding. It also champions increased parent involvement and teacher feedback."

## Embracing Uncertainty

College Professor Ronald A. Beghetto writes, "In the context of classrooms, educators often replace uncertainty with overplanned learning experiences. We go to great lengths to clearly define the problems our students will solve, how they should solve them, and the desired outcomes." Although this approach



can help to maintain a sense of consistency and control in the classroom, it can be limiting. Not all problems have ready-made solutions, and we need to let our students dabble in the unknown if we really want them to be good problem solvers.

Beghetto takes the approach that we should welcome uncertainty and he offers advice to teachers that will help students deal with unpredictability and even ambivalence:

- **Think of uncertainty in a positive way.** We want our students to deal with the unknown and to ask good “what if” questions. If all problems had step-by step solutions, they are not really problems.
- **Try lesson unplanning.** After teaching students a predictable method of dealing with an issue or problem, move to a more open-ended situation that might have multiple approaches. As Beghetto states, “The more opportunities students have to practice working through problems when things are less spelled out, the more likely they’ll be able to tackle an increasingly complex challenge.”
- **Provide progressively complex challenges.** As students become more acquainted with unpredictability, the teacher can give students more complicated issues to tackle. When students face harder obstacles, the teacher can provide more structures to help them through the obstacles and gradually withdraw the support as students apply creative thinking.
- **Explore Backstories.** Telling stories about how famous solutions came about such as scientific laws, technological inventions, and major social movements after a great deal of struggle and trial and error can help students be more persistent in the work they are doing. Additionally, teachers can enlist the aid of local accomplished professionals to visit classrooms and tell their stories.
- **Establish never-ending projects.** Typically, when students work on projects or problems, there is a timeline with a designated end date. Beghetto believes that some topics can be so complex that they require more time and on-going investigation.

Beghetto’s approach to lesson planning can have positive repercussions. As he notes, his goal is to engage students in “authentic complex challenges,” that have the potential to make a lasting contribution beyond the classroom.

## Replay

Atypical thinking can be powerful. Whether it be less screen time for students, the benefits of home visits, promoting metacognition, increased student writing, minimal or non-existent homework, the importance of knowing the whole child, eliminating grades, or promoting uncertainty in the classroom, each topic has potential merit. Knowledge is power. Increasing our knowledge of new ways of thinking can prepare us for changes in the future.

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