



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver



September 2019
Volume XVI Issue IX

A Few Tips from the Field Ways to Enhance Teaching and Learning



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..*

Teaching is a profession in which one has to make decisions on a continual basis, both while planning units and lessons and within a lesson as it is transpiring. Even when it seems all is working well, alert practitioners know that at any moment they might have to change course and take a different approach. Good decision-making has been called an art because it involves an open mind, the ability to listen to others, the skill to be able to change course “in the moment” and the knack for asking important questions.

I pose below a series of questions we might ask ourselves in order to determine the next steps we could take to make learning experiences even better.



How might we respond when assessment results remain stagnant and students do not seem to be making progress?

In such cases, we might conclude that students are just not applying themselves or taking their responsibilities seriously. We might see the students as inattentive during instruction or ill prepared for assessments. We may be convinced that we are doing all we can to make sure students are learning. However, perhaps we should view things differently and take a different tact. Daniel Venable shares this conclusion from his work with professional learning communities: “I suggest for each time they (teachers) review and analyze student work, they should review and analyze teacher work twice. I have found a 2:1 ratio to be a healthy balance between looking at teacher work and looking as student work.” We might all take a different approach to our work by asking ourselves if we are being perfectly clear in our explanations, if we are asking periodic questions to determine if students are with us, or if we are providing opportunities for students to process with

a partner to make connections and clarify key points with each other. Periodic self-reflection can become a healthy and productive routine that may not just improve teaching but also improve assessment results.



Is it possible that we are guilty of fisheye syndrome?

Blogger Jennifer Gonzalez defines fisheye syndrome as “a condition that impacts our perception as if we’re looking through a fisheye lens (the kind used in peepholes). To those affected with fisheye, some students appear to be “larger” than others and so attract more attention and take up more energy with the result being that other students fade into the background. Equitable participation by as many students as possible should be the goal of each of us since it provides us with valuable formative assessment data, i.e., what’s going on in the students’ minds. In order to avoid the fisheye practice, Ms. Gonzalez suggests the following options:

- Explain what the syndrome is to your students and tell them you are trying to avoid it.
- Increase **Wait Time** so more students will join in the discussion.
- Provide shy students with the discussion questions ahead of time.
- Use **Think-Pair-Share** so all students can react to the new content.

If the information above rings a bell for us, we need to take it as a call to action.



What might we do when we realize that a lesson may not be working?

Unfortunately, some teachers decide to “press on” during a lesson despite evidence that the lesson is not being well received. A colleague recently shared an idea with me he calls the **turn signal**, i.e., a decision to move in a different direction during a class period. These in-the-moment decisions may include employing a different strategy that will allow students to become more involved. Quick possibilities include having students stand up and complete a simple movement to get blood flowing back to the brain (How about using “Touch your nose or touch your toes?”) or making an honest statement that it appears things are not going well and ask students for their input.



What might we do when there is clear evidence of stress or confusion around a particularly difficult concept or abstraction?

One option is to look out for such indicators, pause the lesson, and take a moment to inject



some humor into the situation. Cracking a joke or invoking laughter from students is good medicine according to Alison Beard. She writes, “Laughter relieves stress and boredom, boosts engagement and well-being, and spurs not only creativity and collaboration but also analytic presence and productivity.” Furthermore, after a moment of levity, it may be time to have students do some personal reflection and discuss with classmates their reaction to the new material. The results may be surprisingly positive.



What might we do when we realize that students are not retaining content that they have supposedly mastered?

It is a disheartening moment when we remind students of previously studied content and see blank stares on the faces of some students. It is reality that may happen, but we need not despair. A participant in a recent workshop shared an idea that he called **Distant Replay** (a play on the term “instant replay”). He includes in the daily lesson summary exercise a question from past content (hence, distant replay). He collects but does not grade student summaries but instead uses the responses to determine the effectiveness of the day’s lesson as well as the level of students’ retention and transfer of previously studied content.



How might we maximize the power of project-based learning (PBL) and simultaneously (and systematically) move students forward in the mastery of rigorous learning standards?

Jenny Pieratt, an education consultant who specializes in **PBL**, provides some excellent advice in a recent *Education Update* article. She debunks five myths that can help us better design our and guide PBL lessons. Below are the myths and words of advice:

- **Myth #1: All work must be collaborative.**
Reality: Although collaboration may be highly beneficial, many projects may be done independently and may not result in the feeling of unruliness that may accompany group work.
- **Myth #2: Students should have voice and choice over all things.**
Reality: At the beginning of PBL work, the teacher can begin by identifying an enduring understanding that will be the result of students’ work, as well as a driving question that will be at the heart of students’ efforts. Each of these evolves through students’ voice and choice. Ms. Pieratt recommends a balance between voice and choice as well as structure and routine. We become the orchestrators of learning who make sure that the learning remains on track.



- **Myth #3: The teacher must always take a back seat.**

Reality: Common sense must prevail as we monitor the work, point students in the right direction, and serve as the “co-pilots” to students’ deeper learning.

- **Myth #4: “Management” is so 20th century.**

Reality: Some teachers refer to PBL work as “messy” as it may seem disorganized and noisy. In her writing, Ms. Pieratt distinguishes between messy and “hot mess.” She notes that successful facilitators put in place a good deal of structure and routine at the beginning and they reinforce their expectations throughout the project. They also avoid any deterioration of the work by including group contracts and daily plans as well as daily reflections as exit tickets and warm-ups.

- **Myth #5: Assessment is a dirty word.**

Reality: Savvy teachers put in place benchmarks that can be embedded in the PBL work the students are doing. As a result, we can see how the students are making progress toward mastering the necessary skills and content required by the standards. We might also employ rubrics that allow students to periodically pause and reflect on their learning. Although we may not be assessing in the traditional way, student learning is still being assessed.

Ms. Pieratt concludes, “...we must recognize that our work for this new generation of PBL adopters is about honoring current best practices and showing teachers how bringing those into the field of PBL will ensure that projects do not lead to lawless learning.”



Are there practices that have become so commonplace that we don’t stop to think about whether we should be using them?

Teacher **Justin Minkel** answers the question definitively in his *Education Week* piece entitled “4 Things Teachers Shouldn’t Be Asking Their Students To Do.” His ideas are certainly worth consideration. He writes, “Have you ever given thought to the things we ask children to do that are simply a tradition rather than a necessity?” He continues, “Children aren’t just smaller versions of adults. They are their own kind of beings. They need to move, talk, question, and explore more than we do, because they’re in the midst of that mind-boggling explosion of cognitive, physical, and social-emotional growth that mark childhood in our species.” Below are Minkel’s suggestions:

- **Silent passing**

Teachers often have a no-talking rule when students are moving through the hallways so as not to disturb other classrooms. What makes this practice questionable is that teachers often talk to their peers or reprimand particular students outside classrooms, both of which can be equally distracting.

- **Sitting still for a long time**

When teachers shadow students for a day, they often find that sitting still and passively listening can be uncomfortable or exhausting. Minkel suggests the length of teacher talk should be “five minutes for kindergarten, 15 minutes for high schoolers.” He also believes that students should get up and move periodically.

- **Forced apologies**

Minkel believes that requiring students to apologize for a mistake is not the best practice, especially immediately following the infraction. Forcing a student to say “I’m sorry” may not be sincere. He explains, “Turbulent emotions take a long time. We need to give kids time.”

- **Zero tolerance for forgetfulness**

Teachers may have requirements about following classroom rules, completing assignments, or remembering steps in a learning process. When students forget, they may be reprimanded or punished. Minkel advises teachers to “take a deep breath and cut the students some slack.”

Author Brad Johnson adds to Minkel’s thinking when he writes, “We are so used to telling students, ‘Sit still in your desk, be quiet, be still, pay attention.’ That goes against how kids learn. A classroom should sound more like a construction site than a museum.” He concludes, “A kid in motion is a kid learning.”

As professional educators, we all want to be the best we can be. Reaching that goal requires being tuned in to different ways of thinking, trying new approaches, and not just giving lip service to the concept of “life-long learning,” but actually taking steps to “walk the talk.”



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