



# Just for the ASKing!

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**September 2012** *Just for the ASKing!* is a monthly e-newsletter that addresses the interests of all those who strive to be instructional leaders. In this issue, we explore commonalities of great teachers who consistently promote high levels of student learning.

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## What Great Teachers Know and Do



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

Great teachers are all around us. Some of them are veterans while others achieve an exemplary level of excellence early in their careers. As you watch them in action, there is a sense of calm about the way they approach their jobs. They look confident and you can almost see the wheels turning as they move through their lessons with great deliberation. Their students are tuned in, almost without the teacher asking for their attention. The young people great teachers serve seem to want to know what's going to happen next as the lessons unfold. These determined teachers have learned that it is important to deliver content in chunks and then give their students time to digest the information. As they move around their classrooms interacting with their students, they seem to have eyes in the backs of their heads as they instinctively know where to move and whom to check on in order to keep the lesson moving. Experience has taught them that there is nothing magical about achieving success with young people and, as a result, they have an expansive repertoire ready for use at any moment. As Paula Rutherford describes in the **ASK Construct**, they are knowledgeable and skillful with both the content and the learners they are teaching. That enables them to make purposeful selections from their repertoires to connect the content and learners.

Great teachers have discovered that there are best practices to use if their students are going to learn. There is a predictability about their actions and decisions, yet there is nothing robotic about how they come across to their students. They are well read, well versed in research, and totally devoted to their chosen profession.

I have had the opportunity to interact with many accomplished teachers, see them engaged in their work, and talk to them about their craft. I have discovered that there are patterns that successful teachers follow. Their knowledge base about the art of teaching includes:

- Great teachers know that student learning is the primary goal of teaching.
- Great teachers know their curriculum backward and forward.
- Great teachers know how to present their content in a variety of ways that totally immerses their students in lessons that connect to the world beyond the classroom walls.
- Great teachers know that they must establish strong and lasting relationships with their students, especially those who might be easily overlooked or forgotten.
- Great teachers know that collaboration with their peers is essential to their success.
- Great teachers know that they must welcome change as a challenge and not view it as an obstacle.

**Great teachers recognize that there is a considerable difference between knowing what they should do and translating this knowledge into actions.** They are expert diagnosticians as they create, develop, and produce lessons that will intrigue their students and result in higher levels of learning. They understand that success builds confidence and that confidence leads to even greater success. Thus, they continue to examine the research on best practice; they participate in on-going discussions with other professionals to refine and expand their repertoires of instructional options. Putting all this knowledge together, they develop practices that they follow so that they can bring excellence, and yes, greatness, to their classrooms every day.

**Great teachers** consistently plan for the year, the unit, and lessons with a focus on what students are supposed to learn, rather than on what activities students will complete. They plan units by formulating essential questions/understandings that transcend the objectives of individual lessons. At the start of the learning sequence, students are informed about these big ideas and how their mastery of the learning objectives, big ideas, and key concepts will be assessed. Additionally, these teachers are clear about how ongoing assessments will be embedded in the unit; that way, they and the students know where they are on the learning journey and can take action to accelerate the learning.

**Great teachers** get inside their students' heads. They understand the importance of connecting new learning to past experiences. Thus, a routine practice is to assess students' prior knowledge on the subject/topic/concept to be studied. Purposefully connecting new learning to past experiences inside and outside of school and surfacing misconceptions and naïve understandings helps students know how to file the new information. Using data they gather through this process, they are better able to plan a unit that will take into account where individual students or the class as a whole stands in terms of their interests and knowledge bases.

**Great teachers** are transparent. They tell their students what they are going to learn, how they are going to learn it, and how their learning will be assessed. They repeat this process throughout their lessons and units so the context of the learning remains front and center. Intermittently throughout the unit, they administer formative assessments, and they are explicit about if and how these practice assessments will be similar to the summative assessments that will follow. This sets students up for success.

**Great teachers** establish and maintain a strong classroom culture. From the first day, they assert and demonstrate that the classroom is a safe, non-threatening environment. In order to guarantee this setting, the teacher is supportive and not punitive; each day is filled with an abundance of positive comments and a minimum of corrective actions. In these learning environments, students are supported in developing skills that allow them to resolve their own problems rather than relying on teacher help; the message is that a struggle is a normal part of the road to success.

**Great teachers** personalize their instruction. This does not mean that they have an individual lesson plan for each student; however, they keep the needs of individual students in mind as they make their daily plans. They become aware of individual strengths as well as student interests, learning styles, and readiness to undertake learning tasks. They carefully think through the components of lessons to ensure that students have the prerequisite knowledge and skills to complete the assigned task.

**Great teachers** provide excitement, vitality, and even intrigue as they teach. They capture student attention at the outset of the class or lesson with an attention-getting story, musical accompaniment, a silly costume, an unusual prop, a stimulating visual, or a riveting "off the wall" question. These teachers use techniques such as mnemonic devices, songs, or funny stories that are personal to the teacher and the students in the class. When they use such devices, they demonstrate their sense of humor and personalities as well as their love of their subject matter and, at the same time, promote student retention. These classrooms are joyful

places where students are eager to learn.

**Great teachers** ensure that lessons are rigorous and challenging without being overwhelming and confusing. Busy work, mundane activities, and stifling packets are off limits in their classrooms. They understand that their lessons must be high interest and must stretch student thinking. Their questions, which are frequent and require and demand student responses, are rarely at the recall level, but instead are planned ahead and are consistently at the higher levels of **Bloom's Taxonomy**. These professionals, group and regroup their students based on lesson goals to complete assigned work that will challenge them at the appropriate level.

**Great teachers** wrap things up properly. Lessons do not end in a rush with the teacher still talking as students are packing up and heading toward the door. Teachers who want to lock in learning, and determine how successful the lesson was, bring closure to the lesson by giving students time to reflect on the lesson and their learning; students are asked to complete a summarizing exercise such as a **journal entry, 3-2-1, a Ticket to Leave, or an ABC Summary**. These teachers then have a strong sense of who learned what or who may need more support the next time the students meet. This summarizing practice is a must and is never omitted because the teacher knows that the wrap-up will provide crucial data about student learning.

**Great teachers** are reflective. They take time on a regular basis to replay their lessons in their heads to determine what worked, what did not work, and what may need some tweaking to make future lessons run more smoothly. They understand that data is occurring all around them as their lessons unfold, and they become accustomed to using classroom data to make on-the-spot decisions and to inform their future planning and instructional delivery.

The average citizen may not be aware of just how difficult the job of teaching can be. It requires innumerable skills that, for the most part, must be developed over time. We are fortunate that so many of our practitioners rise to a level of distinction that puts the "pro" in professional. There is a level of emerging greatness in all of us. By keeping open minds, we can add to our knowledge bases and then transfer that knowledge into actions and skills that will enable us to reach our goals and be deservedly described as great.

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