

HOW TO TEACH STUDENTS TO THINK FOR THEMSELVES: STUDENTS AS DECISION-MAKERS

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The ongoing focus on content coverage and test preparation has been troublesome for many educators and students alike (Kohn, 2000). The mastery of minimum content knowledge and application competencies do not assure that students are prepared to become thoughtful members of our society and world. Similarly, content knowledge (often viewed as the end of the testing movement) is a means to develop thinking skills that help children make sense of the world around them, make thoughtful decisions, and hopefully impact it in positive ways. The intent of No Child Left Behind is clearly not to produce thinking-illiterate compliant students who can merely reproduce knowledge-based tidbits and step-following solutions. But if the means become the ends, children will find themselves left behind in the real world and unable to think their way ahead.

Making sure students learn to think

Making certain students learn how to think in these times may be challenging, but highly qualified educators have effective teaching strategies at their fingertips. Being “highly qualified” includes much more than content knowledge. Highly qualified teachers know how to enable a diverse range of students to understand and transform content. This belief is reflected in the National Middle School Association’s (2003) call for multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to young adolescents’ diversity. Hence, the definition of *qualified teacher* includes the pedagogical expertise teachers possess and demonstrate through their teaching repertoire. Quality teachers are continually assessing students, getting to know their backgrounds, experiences, prior knowledge, individual learning styles and interests to inform instructional decisions. Based on these assessments and connections with students they decide when to use approaches such as differentiated instruction, engaged and inquiry-based learning, scaffolding, social construction of knowledge through cooperative learning, or varied levels of questioning and learning modalities.

Highly qualified teachers know about thinking skills and how to get students to think at high levels. They train students to *think about thinking* via metacognitive strategies. They teach far beyond the goals of testing. The challenge is to be *given* the time and the freedom to implement this knowledge and expertise so they can allow middle grades students to question and develop the thinking skills needed for life beyond the classroom. Trusting administrators allow quality teachers to plan without pacing guides and make connections across content standards. They understand that content can be addressed through complex integrated studies and that meaningful learning increases retention of knowledge. Real learning assures that

the tests will take care of themselves. The added benefits are increased student motivation, decreased discipline problems, and that students learn how to *THINK* and become thoughtful decision makers.

How do students learn to make decisions?

John Goodlad (1984) in *A Place Called School* likened schools to prison in many respects. No where else in our society are so many strangers forced against their will to be in such close proximity for such extended periods of time with relatively no privacy, no power and no voice. Schools are compulsory for about ten years of a person's life and may be the only compulsory institutions for all citizens, although those with full membership in schools are not yet treated as full citizens of our society (Brennan, 1996). Even the physical structures of schools are very institutional with cold, hard floors and walls, cold hard seats and tables, and window blinds usually drawn to prevent "distractions" from learning. Increasingly school doors are locked for security purposes and some schools are surrounded by fences and gates.

The concept of limited power and voice is evidenced through the limited decisions students get to make while in school. Often students are assigned seats, told when and how they may speak and move about, and when they may use the restroom. Work habit decisions are highly controlled including what order to complete tasks, how much time to spend doing so, how to take notes, the best way to answer a question, which books to read, what sources to use, what types of questions are valued, and how many pages of writing equal a complete set of thoughts. Even at lunch, decisions are limited by what is served in the cafeteria, especially if students receive free or reduced lunch, or lunch is packed by mom. In some lunchrooms teachers or volunteers monitor the room making sure students eat all of their food, like it or not. In what may be their only free time, students are often told where they must sit and in some cases punishments such as silent lunch remove the freedom to speak from entire classes. Students seldom get to make decisions about what they are learning and how they are learning it. Typically the curriculum is predetermined and the learning activities are set forth by the teacher. Not only are students told what to do, but they are rewarded for doing so, and punished if they do not.

We teach students to solve equations by having them solve equations. We teach them to do experiments by having them complete experiments, to read by reading, to write essays by writing essays, to research by conducting research. So how and when do they learn to make good decisions if we discourage and structurally keep them from making decisions? Selma Wassermann, as quoted by Alfie Kohn (1996) shares:

I have heard teachers give it up after a single attempt, saying, 'Children cannot behave responsibly,' then remove all further opportunity for students to practice and grow in their responsible behavior. I have also heard teachers say, 'Children cannot think for themselves,' and proceed thereafter to do children's thinking for them. But these same teachers would never say, 'These children cannot read by themselves,' and thereafter remove any opportunity for them to learn to read."

Are we surprised that employers and the world of business remark that our students do not know how to make decisions, to be self directed innovators, problem solvers, or free thinkers once they leave the world of schools? Where do we encourage and reward them to be these people on a regular basis beyond an occasional assignment within our classrooms?

Making sure students learn to think and decide (for themselves)

I look at our students daily and realize that they are our future, those who will not only be the leaders of our country in the 21st century, but whose every day decisions will impact life as we know it for future generations. I realize that I don't just want them to know things, understand things and think deeply about things. I want them to use all of that knowledge and understanding to make good decisions. Students need not only learn to think, but perhaps most importantly to think for themselves. Further, it is the right thing to do. According to Paulo Freire (1970) to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects. In a democracy and in a world that is increasingly global and diverse, and increasingly technologically complex, making wise decisions, cognizant of how one's actions impact others seems a daunting and critical task. This is a skill that should not be taken lightly and that takes much practice, support and thoughtful guidance to learn. We can teach students how to become thoughtful decision makers by letting them be active participants in making decisions about the classroom setting, assessment of learning and curriculum. This will encourage students to think about not only understanding the content they encounter, but to also think about themselves as a community of learners and members of the future world community.

Making decisions for the classroom

Young adolescents need to make decisions that teach them how to live with others in a fair and productive manner, to decide on mutual goals, and to distinguish right from wrong. They have to learn to struggle with issues of perspective, relativism, the uniqueness of circumstances and how to balance individual vs. group needs. They need to wrestle with the complex issues that govern decision making processes when living in a democracy. The classroom, if treated as a democracy, is the perfect place for students to learn how to think about and make these decisions. They can consider how their individual decisions impact the learning and daily experiences of everyone in the classroom. Students should not only be trained to live in a democracy when they grow up; they should have the chance to live in one today (Kohn, 1993). There are many levels at which middle schoolers can begin to understand and analyze their own behaviors and that of others. They can develop tools and strategies to problem solve and to meet their own needs and the needs of the class as a whole by engaging in class meetings, individual goal setting and analysis of classroom and school issues and concerns. They can then learn to work within the broader community, the nation, and perhaps even the world through service learning .

Teaching students to think in these terms, to give them the tools to analyze and strategize, is very different from surface attempts at giving students choices. Often students are given false choices such as “you can choose to sit down and be quiet now or go to the principal’s office”. They may get to choose a class reward for following rules in which they had no voice or sign a behavior contract they had no part in writing. Or the “choice” may be generating a list of “consequences” for breaking rules instead of generating the rules themselves or working to solve problems. These surface choices do not help students to think about and make the types of decisions they will encounter as future incumbents of our democracy.

There are models and tools for helping us to get students to learn to think about their decisions and choices that could move this agenda ahead. Glasser’s (1998) choice theory gives teachers a place to help students examine their actions and begin to look at individual needs. Focusing on common needs for survival, love and belonging, power, freedom and fun helps students to analyze and understand their own behavior choices and those of their peers. Conflict resolution and peer mediation provide perspective taking, develop empathy, help to understand diversity and develop problem-solving strategies. These approaches also help students’ moral development as they begin to make decisions in terms of what is ethical, or how their actions impact the social contract with others, rather than acting out of fear of punishment (Kohlberg, 1976). Generating a class contract based on students’ goals for learning vs. rules and consequences can give students more voice. Student voice in the learning and curriculum processes increases student motivation and ownership and decreases the need to focus on behavior management. The themes of equity, diversity and justice are central to student development over time, especially throughout adolescence (Beane, 2002). So too are these themes central to our world. Making them central to how we teach students to make everyday decisions about their lives in our classrooms seems like an opportunity too good to miss.

Decision making in instruction through assessment

I can not tell you how often I have heard teachers bemoan the fact that the quality of student work over all (there are always the highly motivated grade-conscious students) is not acceptable and worse yet, students don’t seem to care. Where have a sense of pride in accomplishment and the American work ethic gone? Explanations have been offered ranging from the impact of television, technology, video games, and the internet, to the breakdown of the American family, unsafe neighborhoods and the lack of parental involvement and support. How about the idea students are just plain lazy? If we focus instead on student voice and decision making in the realm of classroom instruction and assessment we may then offer an alternative explanation: a lack of relevancy and ownership in the learning process and its products. Could this be why students don’t seem to care?

NMSA (2003) calls for assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning. Student ownership promotes caring about learning and thus an increased focus on quality. But ownership means more than choosing activities and projects. Wiggins’s (2005) concept of backwards design allows the decisions, dialogue and ownership to start with issues of expectations, quality, and ultimately

the purpose of learning. Learning and its goals become more authentic and purposeful, the questions become more essential and challenging, and relevant discussions of quality are answered with and by students.

Let us consider what backwards design may look like in a middle level classroom. Students traditionally may engage in a coverage or activity-based approach to a topic, such as statistics. The teacher decides that students will know how to do problems related to determining mean, median and mode. She plans activities such as completing problems in the text, working out problems on white boards with a partner and statistics Jeopardy. She will have students set up data charts and represent these in multiple forms such as bar graphs, line graphs and pie charts. Then students will use these to help them understand what each statistical term means and looks like. In backwards design the focus is on the outcome and answering a real-world based essential question. Why do we need statistics, what are they used for, can we (and should we) believe them? The teacher then decides (with the class) how students will show that they understand statistics, not just how to calculate them and represent them, but why they are needed, how they are used and even misused...for what ends? Learning then comes from this end goal with students needing to research statistics in the real world (elections, economics, opinion poles, test scores.....what ever they are curious about) and analyze their use. In order to do this they of course have to learn about the problems and representations, but that is only means to get to and answer the bigger questions. They then need to demonstrate that they can do so through the analysis and research in the form of a production, newscast (podcast) where they must use all of their skills to answer questions about statistics in the real world (along with a well –crafted rubric they can help to design).

The focus shifts from compliance with seemingly arbitrary expectations set by others to necessary components of quality determined by the nature of the tasks and real audiences for student performances (whenever possible). The motivation for quality becomes intrinsic rather than extrinsic and multiple opportunities to meet these high expectations allow for students to decide how to meet these expectations in multiple ways that are better aligned with their characteristics and abilities as students. They may explore and develop new areas and abilities, sometimes individually and sometimes working with others, to demonstrate mastery of complex learning, rather than stopping at recalling facts and reproducing procedures.

Deciding and setting worthwhile goals, intrinsically caring about quality, and working toward its achievement in a thoughtful manner on one's own or with others are all important abilities for citizens of a functioning democracy. Deborah Meier (1995) describes this as viewing children as inventors of their own theories, critics of other people's ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on the world. She states that it is an idea with revolutionary implications. If we take it seriously.

Decision making in curriculum

The pressure to cover content efficiently makes the challenge of cultivating student decision making in the realm of curriculum daunting. Middle level teachers themselves sometimes report they feel their voices in this area are increasingly

limited. However, the benefits to be gained by teaching students to make curricular decisions are great. Because of who they are, what they know, and how they are positioned, students must be recognized as having knowledge essential to the development of sound educational policies and practices (Cook-Sather, 2002). Further, strategies such as curriculum integration lead to increased student motivation, better relationships between and among students, and even increased student achievement (Arhar, 1997, NACC, 2000, Vars, 1996, 1997). An examination of a democratic curriculum (Beane, 2002) indicates that such an approach is a better match with meeting student needs and addressing their questions about the world around them. Such a curriculum would bring young people together in situations in which they would experience the democratic way of life, connecting self-interest and the common good, addressing significant issues and using multiple sources of knowledge. Students would learn to understand themselves, one another, and the world around them. This allows the curriculum to help students solve problems concerned with their social world, interact with peers and the community, and to begin to explore the world of their future. Students have lifetime questions and legitimate concerns. Teachers can use the standard curriculum and its skills as the *means* to explore these questions with developing student thinking as the *end* goal. The skillful weaving of required curriculum with legitimate student voice teaches students that curriculum is authentic and concerned about their lives rather than about test prep, test taking, and comparing schools and districts. Which message do we want citizens of our future to get about school? Which lessons do we want them to learn as they prepare to take the reins of our society and our future?

Conclusion

Multiple strategies may be employed to encourage students to think about ways their education relates to their lives. Experts such as Wiggins (2005) and Beane (2002) speak to curriculum and assessment in a way that promotes this goal. Further, development of thinking skills promotes intellectual growth and fosters academic achievement gains (Cotton, 1991). Studies indicate that middle school students’ ability to think and reason are a strong predictor of skill achievement and retention (Tobin, 2006) and that the ability for students to reason correlates with success on standardized testing measures (Strahan, 1988). Below are specific approaches that have been successful in the middle school classroom (Thornton, 1998) which may serve as examples of teaching students how to think.

Supporting Students as Thinkers: Increased Decision-Making

Classroom Decisions	Assessment Decisions	Curriculum Decisions
Develop two-way expectations with students: What do students need from each other and the teacher; what does the teacher need from them to support	Engage students in individual goal setting and monitoring of their own goals/learning with the teacher	Frame units of study around students’ questions about democracy and the world (Beane)

learning in the classroom		
Have students engage in peer mediation, conflict resolution, and class meetings to solve problems as they arise	Utilize portfolios with student selection of and reflection on portfolio artifacts	Integrate required curricula's knowledge and skills into student chosen topics and themes
Ask students the why behind their actions to address their concerns and needs via individual contracts and goals	Include student participation in assessment design and use via self and peer assessments and student designed rubrics	Develop essential questions (Wiggins) with students that are relevant to students' lives to guide curricular decisions

"How can the relatively passive and docile roles of students prepare them to participate as informed, active and questioning citizens?" asks the Carnegie report (Boyer, 1983). As we continue to talk about 21st century goals for 21st century students we need to move beyond rhetoric to make certain that we do not forget that to achieve these goals students must first be able to think. In this time of change, to continue to develop and support our democratic way of life and stay connected with the greater world, students will have difficult decisions to make. What do we really hope to accomplish in our 21st century schools? Maybe we should start by asking the students and trusting them to decide.

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