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EDUCATION UPDATE

ASCD
LEARN. TEACH. LEAD.

Illustration by Donald Ely

How can you place learning goals front and center in a tech-rich classroom? Let the phrase "tasks before apps" be your reminder to focus on technology's purpose for learning, even when bright and shiny digital tools grab your attention.

As a teacher in a one-to-one iPad classroom, I strove to make the most of the tablets in my students' hands. From screencasting and moviemaking to reading activities and skill practice, these devices elevated and energized my students' learning experiences.

Digital platforms can give children access to learning experiences that meet their individual needs, such as when a student uses the free Microsoft Learning Tool Immersive Reader (www.onenote.com/learningtools) to hear a passage read aloud. Digital tools can open up the world to students, such as virtual-reality videos from the *New York Times* (www.nytimes.com/video/the-daily-360) that showcase a place they may never have the chance to visit.

In my current role as a professional development facilitator, I spend time in other teachers' classrooms in schools across the country. The phrase "tasks before apps" was born out of my coaching conversations and presentations to educators. It is a reminder that, even as we consider how technology helps students do new and amazing things with their learning, we must always place learning goals at the forefront.

Here are four strategies to make the most of technology and embrace a "tasks before apps" mindset this school year.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Illustration by Donald Ely

The Why and When of Walkthroughs

PAUL MURPHY AND RACHAEL GEORGE

Without context and regularity, classroom observations can damage trust between teachers and principals, as well as negatively affect teacher ratings. In this exchange between educators at different schools, a teacher identifies the flaws in the walkthrough status quo at his school, and a principal at another school shares her own journey to becoming a present and positive partner in classrooms.

Dear Principal,

A couple days ago, you did a round of walkthroughs. You popped into five different teachers' rooms for about five minutes each. I know this because at lunch later that day, we teachers talked about it. During your five minutes in my classroom, you noticed that Sarah had her head down while I was teaching and that I did nothing about it. You saw Patel go to the bathroom without asking, just as I got to the crucial part of my lecture. You saw Joseph sit by himself at the front of the room, and that didn't sit right with you. In your observation notes, my colleagues' classrooms had their own idiosyncrasies, and that also gave you pause. So, we have a request: **Please ask us why.**

It's human nature to focus on the negative. We get that. We also get that you're going to find something to criticize. When I conference with my best writer, I'm going to highlight some area where she can improve, even though she's head and shoulders above her classmates. My job, after all, is to help all students get better, just as yours is to help your teachers. Constructive criticism isn't the problem. We can live with that.

What's harder to stomach are the assumptions you make. You have an impossible job, often made more impossible by your own bosses in the district. You're pulled in a hundred directions, and you just can't get into classrooms as often as you'd like. We get that, too. But your presence matters.

Because the infrequency with which you visit our rooms leads to a lack of context. And that lack of context can lead to assumptions that are often wrong but may be used on our evaluations anyway.

So, ask me why. Ask me why, because you don't know.

You don't know what happened five minutes, five hours, five days, five weeks, or five months before you walked in.

You don't know that Sarah complained all morning about not feeling well and that she got only three hours of sleep because of her new baby sister. You don't know that the reason she's not "engaged" is because her body won't allow her to be, and that five minutes before you walked in, I told her to put her head down.

You don't know that Patel's mom emailed me at the start of the week to tell me that his dad is about to come home from prison after three years, and that Patel's anxiety over the change has manifested as a nervous bladder. You don't know that Patel and I have a deal to prevent a mortifying accident for which he'll be remembered the rest of his life: Don't ask; just go.

You don't know that I've tried everything with Joseph for the past five months, but the kid just can't sit near anyone without bothering them all day. You also don't know that his seating location is a sign of tremendous progress, that he finally acknowledged his problem and asked to sit by himself so

that he could focus better. He's not separated from his classmates because I gave up on him or I'm trying to shame him. He sits there because he *wants* to sit there.

You don't know these things because you lack context for what you're observing. That's not your fault. But it *is* your fault if you don't ask me why.

Why didn't you tell Sarah to sit up?

Why did Patel leave the room without asking?

Why does Joseph sit by himself?

It's a simple word that invites teachers to provide you with the context you lack.

Because if you don't ask why, many of your teachers won't tell you. They don't want to rock the boat. They don't want to come off as whiners. They don't want to be the difficult one, because the difficult ones get let go when districts cinch their belts and principals are told to choose who leaves the island.

By not asking your teachers why, you put them in a difficult position. They can keep their mouths shut and risk having your ill-informed observations affect their evaluations and your opinion of them moving forward, or they can try to explain. But whenever people initiate explanations for their choices, they come across as defensive, and that can be perceived as a tacit admission of error.

By making a habit of asking why and truly listening, you honor the individuality of our students and the complexity of our craft as teachers. Please stop assuming that you understand the choices we're making in the five minutes you're evaluating us.

Ask us to tell you why. ■

Paul Murphy is a 3rd grade teacher in Michigan and a blogger at TeacherHabits.

Dear Teacher,

Thank you for sharing your experience with me. My heart ached after reading your letter. You are right: There is no excuse for principals not being in classrooms more and for not asking why. Being a principal has a lot of demands, but being there to support teachers and students should be at the top of the list.

Looking back on my time as a teacher, having administration or principals in my classroom on a daily basis was not something I consistently experienced. Over my career, I worked for five different principals, each with their own approach to classroom visits, ranging from multiple times throughout the day to only coming in during scheduled formal visits or if there was an issue that needed to be talked about. Without a strong, consistent model of what classroom observations should look like when I entered the principalship, I was left to my own devices to figure out what was best. I knew that, as a teacher, I wanted my principal in my room as much as possible so that he understood my struggles, celebrations, and the work I was doing to make connections with students. So perhaps this was where I could start.

Fast forward to my first weeks on the job as a principal. A fellow middle school principal calls to check on me and to see how things are going. I share how I am slammed with this, that, and another thing but am quickly interrupted with his burning question: **Had I been in classrooms yet that day?**

His question gave me pause as I considered my own experiences as a teacher. My former principals weren't consistently in my room during the first week, either. The conversation quickly ended, and I headed straight out to classrooms feeling incredibly guilty that I'd yet to leave my office and school was almost done for the day. Over the next few months, the principals that I connected with would regularly ask me how classroom visits were going and if I was making it to each classroom, every day. The fact that they were asking me this, that it was a social norm and expectation within this group of leaders was very powerful. It made me realize the importance of being present as a building leader. I feel very fortunate to have had these folks as my peer group at such a formative time because they really helped shape my practice of being in classrooms.

Now, my mantra as a principal is "every classroom, every day."

I believe that as an education leader, you have to be present and in classrooms on a daily basis in order to truly understand the full magnitude of the work both staff and students are taking on and accomplishing. Do I hit this goal every day? No, but by making being present in classrooms a core value of my leadership, I ensure that it happens more often than not and that my teachers are not surprised to see me circulating among their students.

So how do I get into classrooms on a consistent basis? I schedule it. Some of the best advice I received as a new principal is that my calendar reflects what I value. My primary job is to be an instructional leader, which means being present in the classroom. Although things do come up and there is always more to do in the office, those things can truly wait. My advice to fellow principals is to make a plan for getting into classrooms this year and then stick to the plan. Teachers need and want us to be visible partners in the success of their classrooms.

Over the past eight years, I have worked to refine my visits and the connections I make with students and staff when I come into the classroom. During my first few years as a principal, my district held extensive, job-embedded training in classroom observations: what to look for, best practices, and practicing debrief conversations. This training really helped me hone my observational skills and provided me with sentence frames for follow-up questions—like asking why. Nowadays, I am constantly talking to fellow principals in and out of Oregon about how they are approaching observations and suggestions for making this a meaningful, supportive, and positive experience for all involved. I read multiple books on this topic each year, take classes when I can find them on coaching teachers, and I visit other schools to see how they are supporting teachers.

Through it all, we principals will get our best feedback from talking with teachers like you. During my first year as a principal, a veteran teacher gave me some feedback that still resonates. We were meeting to go over her observation, and as we were wrapping up, she noted that she appreciated my positive comments. In fact, she noted that her previous observations had been heavier on criticism instead of being balanced. She appreciated that I made an effort to point out the great things she was doing. This feedback hit me hard and I reflected on it for a long time. In fact, it still comes to mind every time I am writing up an observation. Principals need to be consistently present in classrooms, but we also have a duty to ensure that our feedback includes and elevates the positive things we see in your classrooms every day. ■

Rachael George is an elementary principal in Oregon.

TASKS BEFORE APPS

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

To ensure that technology integration is meaningful this school year, step back and review your curriculum goals for the first quarter. With your curriculum goals in mind, how can you use technology to provide relevance to students, meet their individual needs, and do something that wouldn't have been possible five or 10 years ago? The use of a Chromebook, interactive whiteboard, or tablet isn't always the answer. But when you locate a moment in your unit when students can participate in a video conference with an expert, collaborate with a partner classroom on another continent, or build empathy as they watch a video of life in another corner of the world, powerful, integrated learning experiences can happen.

Nearpod (https://nearpod.com) has been a go-to tool since I first tried it with students as a 5th grade teacher. Through the use of this interactive presentation tool, my students were able to take a deep dive into the causes of the American Revolution while closely examining primary-source documents on their screens. Nearpod is free to use (with premium upgrades available) and lets instructors check for understanding, provide moments for collaborative discussions, and even embed virtual-reality experiences.

Earlier this year I used this tool with a group of 1st graders to discuss the life cycle of a frog. Although a read-aloud book might have helped students make connections and understand the topic, an interactive presentation took this experience to the next level. Students were able to draw pictures of frogs on their tablets, interact with a life cycle slideshow, and talk to their tablemates about their observations after viewing a 360-degree image of a pond. In this moment, Nearpod was the tool of choice to give students an opportunity to closely view media, apply their learning, and extend their thinking about the topic.

Content consumption is powerful, and with technology, it can be transformative. Applying critical thinking skills to viewing, reading, and listening are essential habits for students in the digital age. However, content consumption is often a default activity when technology is introduced into the classroom. As you shift your thinking toward "tasks before apps," identify moments for students to *create* products that showcase and celebrate their learning.

Your students might create a movie, website, e-book, podcast, or other shareable product to demonstrate understanding. An open-ended creation tool gives students the space to show what they know in a creative way and connect with an audience through the use of multimedia.

There are many powerful open-ended creation tools for the classroom that empower students to share their stories and demonstrate their mastery of content. Soundtrap (www.soundtrap.com/edu) is a collaborative tool that students can use to create podcasts and record music. Your students might interview veterans in your community as part of a narrative writing project and share their interviews as a podcast. Adobe Spark Video (https://spark.adobe.com/edu) is a moviemaking tool that can capture student voice and help students combine a variety of media, including icons and images. Your students might chronicle the steps of a science experiment in a tutorial for a partner class. Book Creator (https://bookcreator.com) is an e-book tool perfect for poetry anthologies, how-to guides, or anything you or your students can imagine. Both Soundtrap and Book Creator are free to use (with premium upgrades available), and Adobe Spark has made their premium features free for K–12 students.

Honoring student interest can help establish buy-in and communicate the relevance of the content goals you have identified for this school year. Digital tools, like surveys, make it easier to gauge student interest so that you can figure out what your students are excited about learning. Technology can also help you locate and curate classroom resources related to their interests.

A simple interest survey can help you decide in what direction to take a unit or how to group students together. Two of my favorite tools for conducting surveys are Google Forms (www.google.com/forms/about), which lets teachers choose the type of questions they would like to post (e.g., a rating scale, check boxes, or open-ended questions), and Kahoot (https://kahoot.com), which lets teachers project questions to which students must

quickly respond while a clock counts down and music plays. Google Forms and Kahoot are both free to use.

A few weeks before kicking off a new unit, dedicate time within your lesson for a wondering activity to get your students' wheels spinning. For example, if you are planning to start a unit on nutrition with your 8th grade students, pose a series of questions to students such as "What is your favorite healthy snack?" and "Where do you go to figure out if a food is good for you?" Gathering this information will help you honor students' natural curiosity about a topic as you prepare tasks aligned to learning goals. A popular option for video responses is Flipgrid (https://flipgrid.com). With this tool, students can respond to a prompt in a video as opposed to answering a series of questions or writing a response. Flipgrid is free to use (with premium upgrades available).

Working in a school with supportive, enthusiastic colleagues can make a hard day in the classroom so much easier. This is especially true when you are trying out new ideas and want to brainstorm with a fellow teacher. You may already have a go-to person in your grade level or department to whom you turn for advice—someone you always ask to join in when you try out something new. This same person could become your partner in tech—someone you work with to set goals for purposeful technology integration.

If finding someone in your building or district is a struggle, there are a few

> *"Even as we consider how technology helps students do new and amazing things with their learning, we must always place learning goals at the forefront."*

virtual options you may want to consider. You can locate a Twitter chat on Participate (www.participate.com/chats) by searching by topic or time. This is a great way to find like-minded educators who are passionate about the same subject and who can help you problem-solve while trying something new. In addition to Twitter, Instagram is a great place to find inspiration. I started using Instagram this year (https://instagram.com/classtechtips) and love how easy it is to follow a hashtag to find educators with similar interests.

As you review your curriculum goals this year, reflect on creation opportunities, take stock of student interest, and find your partner in tech in order to ensure intentional tech integration that uses meaningful tasks to guide your curation of apps. ■

Monica Burns *is the author of* Tasks Before Apps: Designing Rigorous Learning in a Tech-Rich Classroom *(ASCD, 2017), the founder of ClassTechTips.com, and an ASCD Faculty member.*

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Awards

SEVEN AWARDS FOR ASCD PUBLICATIONS

ASCD had a strong showing at the 2018 Association Media & Publishing EXCEL Awards, with our periodicals picking up five awards. *Education Update* won the Gold award for General Excellence for newsletters and the Silver for Editorial Excellence, while *ASCD Express* brought in the Gold for editorial excellence among digital newsletters. *Educational Leadership* landed the Bronze in the category of Single Topic Issue (for magazines with circulations of 100,000 or more) for its October 2017 issue on "Unleashing Problem Solvers." And the magazine won the Silver in the Feature Article category for the piece "Building Bridges Across the Autism Spectrum" by Barbara Boroson.

In the Apex Awards, an annual acknowledgment of design and editorial achievement run by the marketing organization Communication Concepts, ASCD picked up two awards. *Educational Leadership* won an APEX Grand Award for the December 2017 issue on "Mental Health in Schools." And our "About ASCD–75 Years" brochure, a collaboration between the communications and design teams, won an Apex Award of Excellence in the category "Print Media: Organization Capability & Identity Materials."

Making Room for Movement and Play in Upper Grades

BARBARA MICHELMAN

Humans were made to move. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors reportedly walked 13 miles a day. Although we no longer need to travel such distance for daily sustenance, the mind–body benefits of exercise and play are well documented. Yet the majority of our time is now spent sitting, and this trend negatively affects school-age children as much as adults.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Heart Association, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are just three of many national organizations that recommend that children of all ages participate in a minimum of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per day. Few states, however, set a daily minimum amount of time that students must participate in physical education, play, or recess. If recess is offered, it's mostly relegated to preK through elementary school–age children.

Playful Learning

"It's a strange way we've set up the education system—that play is 'extra,' something that just little kids do," says Wendy Ostroff, an associate professor at Sonoma State University's Hutchins School of Liberal Studies in Rohnert Park, Calif. "To bring play to a screeching halt just as students hit adolescence reflects a misunderstanding of the research literature on the importance of play for learning."

Ostroff, the author of *Curiosity in K–12 Classrooms: How to Promote and Sustain Deep Learning* (ASCD, 2016), says that play is crucial for learning because it is "open-ended, self-directed, and fun/engaging."

"Play uses all the functions of the prefrontal cortex of the brain, the same part of the brain that learners use for critical thinking, flexible reasoning, and creativity," notes Ostroff. "We want to strengthen these brain areas as much as possible throughout all of schooling."

Melanie Dana, who teaches at North Star Self-Directed Learning for Teens in Sunderland, Mass., describes teens as "big toddlers, both having newish cognitive abilities, and both being on an equally rapid part of their learning growth curve." Dana says 3-year-olds as well as 15-year-olds are pushing new personal boundaries, so they need a lot of freedom to do so—within safe confines.

Play is integral to North Star's approach to teaching and learning, where "joy, curiosity, and cocreating an experience" are valued, says Dana. "I think the best way to incorporate play in the classroom is to cultivate a playful attitude. Teachers have to have faith that leaving things open-ended is not a recipe for chaos."

Play Their Own Way

Students all need to move, but not necessarily in the same way or at the same time. How and when we move is important, asserts Allison Posey, a curriculum design specialist and proponent of Universal Design for Learning, an education framework that incorporates neuroscience research to create flexible learning environments that accommodate the different ways in which students learn and process information.

Posey urges educators to "steer away from the 'let's all do 10 jumping jacks together!'" mentality about movement. "Moving at the same time is silly … Some students may be deep in a learning moment; now they are being asked to run around," she says. "That's maybe not what they need. When we are more flexible and

> *Exercise decreases the free radicals that can build up and be toxic and shields us from stress. When we sit all day, the blood is not flowing."*

offer alternative ways for kids to move, that's also being more inclusive."

"When I wake up, I decide: 'What do I need to eat?' I self-regulate to achieve daily goals," says Posey. "Our students need to be able to do this. Ideally, across our K–12 education system we'd be saying (daily) to students, 'Here's a menu of movement options from which to choose.' "

Missing Milestones

Physical education used to be a daily requirement across K–12 schools. It was a dedicated time period that taught health, movement, and agility and sports skills, in addition to providing socialized play time. Even as recess and physical education time decreased in the school schedule, more kids were still playing in the after-school hours and at home—and not with technology, explains Martha Kaufeldt, author of *The Motivated Brain: Improving Student Attention, Engagement, and Perseverance* (ASCD, 2015).

In her workshops, Kaufeldt offers this example: "When I came home from school, even though we didn't wear uniforms, I had to change into 'play' clothes. I put on dungarees to go outside and get dirty … that's the whole idea. I didn't stay inside and work on homework right away, and I wasn't always being shuttled every day to after-school activities, as many kids are now."

One of the challenges experienced by high school educators, Kaufeldt says, is that many of today's students didn't play as young children; therefore, they may have missed some developmental stages. For example, a high school physics teacher who pulls out equipment to teach a complex physics concept such as force, motion, inertia, may become upset because the students are just "playing with the materials and acting immature," she explains. That might be because, when they were 5, instead of playing with open-ended manipulatives like toy cars or blocks, these students were playing with devices or passively staring at a screen, Kaufeldt adds. She advises teachers planning lessons that use manipulatives or equipment to first give students time to handle or play with the new materials before teaching the lesson.

"Allow high schoolers to role play or to engage in play, games, or mini-competitions," she says. "It encourages students to be curious and try new things."

Thinking on Your Feet

Our biology drives us to move, and our brain is wired to learn through play. Middle and high schoolers need movement and play as much as their elementary peers. To get kids moving within the school day, Kaufeldt encourages teachers to engage in "daily differentiation," or instructional variety. Teachers need to "mix things up a bit by getting students to do things with others, to create more partner and group activities. Weaving in little things such as games, activities, and encouraging students to be playful gets kids up and moving."

She also wants teachers to understand the "neuroscience rule of thumb": Children can only handle sustained, focused attention in a sedentary state for about as many minutes as they are old, plus or minus two (e.g., 10–14 minutes for a 12-year-old), she said. "After sustaining focus for about 15-18 minutes, even the average adult brain then needs to do something, such as move, talk, and so on."

Kaufeldt suggests that teachers limit their "talking time" to about 15 minutes and remember to engage back and forth with students and insert frequent moments to 'turn and talk.' "

"We know the basic science behind exercise is that when you move your body, (this causes) increased blood flow, including oxygen to the brain," says Posey. "Exercise decreases the free radicals that can build up and be toxic and shields us from stress. Nothing is jaw-dropping about any of this, but when we sit all day, the blood is not flowing."

Students in far too many classrooms sit for hours on end, when their bodies were engineered to move. Redesigning the learning environment so that movement can occur organically within the scope and sequence of the curriculum will support more effective teaching and learning. Simply adding standing desks to the classroom or giving students the chance to move around the room for discussion or active learning is a great place to start. ■

Barbara Michelman *is a freelance writer and CEO of High Bar Communications.*

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ROAD TESTED

★ Removing Roadblocks to Learning and Leading

LIZ ORTIZ

The Power of the Blank Page

Teachers give so much of themselves in their daily work. This giving can be fulfilling, but also draining. As an elementary and middle school principal for 10 years, I knew that my job was not only to support teachers' development, but also to take care of them when they needed space to process what went on in the classroom.

Through my longtime work as a trainer with Abydos Literacy Learning, an organization that teaches educators to be better writers, revisors, and editors, I saw the positive effect personal writing could have on well-being. That's why I began the regular practice of journaling with my own teachers—a surefire way to tap into their emotions and re-energize them.

The process of seeing our thoughts more clearly changes us. I started each school year by giving teachers a blank composition book with a quote from E. M. Forster on the cover: "How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" I explained that we would carve out about 10 minutes to write together at the beginning of our monthly staff meetings, and I hoped they would use the journals when they wrote with students, too. Journaling would be a way to reflect on their feelings and experiences to improve teaching. As editors Audrey Friedman and Luke Reynolds write in *Burned In: Fueling the Fire to Teach* (Teachers College Press, 2011), "It is through such reflection that teachers re-collect and re-create themselves and, in the process, regain their sense of direction."

When I first implemented journaling with teachers, they often behaved like student writers: avoiding the task, whispering to a neighbor, taking a restroom break, or sneaking a peek at their cellphones. But in time, each teacher would have a breakthrough with a piece a writing that touched him or her deeply.

Here are a few ways school leaders can make journaling work:

See journaling as a priority—and realize its power.

It would be easy to *write off* journaling as an extra. But devoting just 10 minutes of a staff meeting to write is enough time to make the exercise meaningful. It was often the first item on my meeting agenda. Once, when I asked teachers to write from their students' point of view, a teacher came up to me after the meeting with tears streaming down her face. She'd been having problems communicating with one student, but trying on his perspective was powerful. "Now I know why you've asked us to write all this time," she said. "What I wrote today has changed me, and I will be a different teacher tomorrow."

Use meaningful prompts that elicit emotion.

Whether it's writing six-word memoirs (sharing a life story in six words), answering questions based on a poem or a book excerpt, or reflecting on letters from former students, providing some direction gets teachers in the writing mindset. Try reading the poem "In Color" from *Put Your Eyes Up Here* by Kalli Dakos and have teachers write three things they would do to change students' lives from "black and white" to "color." Or read a section from the children's book *Silver Packages* by Cynthia Rylant and ask teachers: What gifts have you given and received as a teacher?

Allow time for sharing.

The option to reflect publicly on a writing exercise—either in small groups or with the entire faculty—can be an instigator of connection. In my own school, teachers' willingness to share their joys and difficulties through writing, both personal and classroom-related, deepened conversations in smaller team and department meetings. The process made us all feel more connected as a community. We were honest in a way that we often couldn't be in regular conversation and developed better understanding of our shared goals.

Teachers need support to become the best they can be. Sometimes, the most effective encouragement is not an expensive professional-development program or the latest gadget, but a simple piece of paper and a pen. As literacy coach Penny Kittle writes in *The Greatest Catch* (Heinemann, 2005), "Writing releases pain and often brings hope. … Not answers, but strength to continue." You'd be surprised what a blank page can do. ■

Liz Ortiz *is a retired elementary and middle school principal. After 38 years in education, she is now an adjunct professor at San Jacinto College in Pasadena, Texas, as well as an education consultant and curriculum writer for Abydos Literacy Learning (formerly the New Jersey Writing Project in Texas).*

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