

NEVER  
WORK  
harder  
THAN your  
students  
& OTHER PRINCIPLES  
OF GREAT TEACHING

Robyn R. Jackson

2nd  
Edition



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# PREFACE

## to the Second Edition

### The Gift

I loved being in Dr. Benn's English 301 class. Sure, we were learning pretty boring stuff—past participles, nominative predicates, and the like—but something about the way he parsed a sentence seemed, well, *profound*. It was as if he were unlocking the very secret of language itself. I'm not kidding. We would sit in his class in rapt attention for 90 minutes straight. Sometimes, I think I even forgot to breathe.

It wasn't just the way he explained some obscure phrase in a poem that did it. No. He made us feel *smart*. He had a way of asking questions that led us to the discovery of the answer ourselves. Years later, I realize that he was using Socratic questioning, but as a college freshman, I just thought, *This guy has it. He has the gift.*



Five minutes into talking to Sarah, I knew she had the gift. It was more than just her enthusiasm—I'd seen that plenty of times before. It was that she literally vibrated with a love for teaching. I watched her eyes light up as she shared how she got to know each of her students individually and learned to tailor her instruction to their needs. Her voice quivered with excitement as she talked about the growth her students made by the end of the year. The interview went on for 20 more minutes, but I had already decided to hire Sarah. She had the gift.



From the moment I entered Laura's classroom, I could feel the excitement. At first, I couldn't understand why. It seemed like a typical history class—she was showing her class images of Renaissance artwork—but something was different. I watched as she put the next slide on the screen. As if on cue, students jumped out of their seats to highlight on the interactive whiteboard what they noticed about the picture. They were explaining to the class how what they noticed indicated something about the Renaissance—the society, the social norms, the way of thinking. The students were having excited discussions about the influence of the Renaissance on modern thought and making comparisons between the Italian and English versions of the Renaissance. Laura asked a few probing questions and changed the images every so often, but she largely remained quiet and let the students drive the discussion. *She has it*, I thought to myself as I left the classroom. *She has the gift*.



If you asked me to define “the gift” back then, I wouldn't have been able to do it. I just knew it when I saw it. I'd walk into a classroom and see a teacher completely engaging a class full of squirmy 9th graders and I knew that teacher had the gift. I'd read a book written by one of those master teachers, those legendary ones who make you want to be a teacher yourself, and I wanted to touch the hem of that teacher's garment to see if it rubbed off on me. The gift.

When I first became an education consultant and worked with districts to improve the quality of teaching in their schools, I began to wonder if the mythology surrounding teaching was true. What if the gift really was some innate talent, some rare, mysterious, divine endowment? What if it couldn't be taught? If so, I was in the wrong business.

Clearly there are some people who are born with it. They have a natural propensity to be master teachers. But is there hope for those of us who weren't so lucky? If the gift were something that was bestowed upon the blessed few, what, I wondered, would become of the rest of us?

After years of working with teachers and school leaders, I now know that the gift is not a mysterious congenital ability. In fact, it's not really a gift at all. Being a master teacher is the result of a critical understanding of the principles of good teaching. It's a mindset that anyone can learn and,

by learning this mindset, you too can become a master teacher. True, some people come by this mindset naturally, but the rest of us can develop it too.

This book will show you how.

## My Story

When I first started teaching, I applied all the theories I had learned in my methods classes. I didn't smile at my students for the first month. I wrote lesson plans every day. I faithfully followed the textbook. I used proximity when students were talking out of turn and followed that up with a rigid set of consequences. I posted and enforced my classroom rules, all 10 of them. I created elaborate differentiated lessons designed to tap into each student's learning style and multiple intelligences. I used technology. I used collaborative learning, cooperative instruction, inquiry-based learning, multiculturalism—you name it.

Sometimes these strategies worked, sometimes they didn't. Either way, I was working awfully hard—much harder than my students. And the truth was, I was starting to see diminishing returns. The assignment I was so excited about, the one that took me two weeks to plan and prepare for, didn't excite my students as much as I had hoped. That really cool strategy I picked up at a conference didn't work as well as the presenter had promised. Yes, I was acquiring a large repertoire of skills, according to the experts and my evaluators, but I wasn't seeing the payoff in the classroom. My students still struggled, they were still bored, and to be honest, I wasn't sure that they were learning anything.

What I really needed, I thought, was more time, smarter students, more supportive families, stronger leadership, and more money. After beating my head against *that* brick wall for a while, I realized that I had better chances of winning the lottery—and I don't even play the lottery.

Still, I knew that there was a fundamental difference between much of what I was taught to believe about teaching and what I was experiencing in the classroom. So I spent the next year reading everything I could get my hands on. I pored through books about teaching. When I heard of school districts or teachers somewhere making a difference, I called them and grilled them on what they were doing that worked. If I read an intriguing research article about teaching, I hunted down the author and

asked follow-up questions. I attended conferences. I observed successful teachers and tried to uncover their secrets.

Then, I tried out what I was learning on my students. I raised my expectations. I started an online community to help build my students' capacity and independence. I created tiered assignments. I looked at the data. I took my students on field trips to expand their experience. I even baked them cookies to reward them for registering to take the Advanced Placement (AP) exam in the spring. Sometimes, these efforts were really effective. When they weren't, at least I did no harm.

I started to ask myself why certain techniques worked and others didn't, and why a strategy that might be wildly successful with my students one day could fall flat with them a week later. What I eventually learned was that there was no magic in any particular strategy. It wasn't so much what I *did* that made a difference but how I *thought*. Almost without realizing it, I was slowly incorporating principles of effective instruction into my practice.

This inquiry also let me reexamine my disposition toward teaching and my students. I realized that much of what I was doing in the classroom was designed to serve my own ego needs rather than help my students learn. I wanted my students to do well because their doing well meant that I was a good teacher. I wanted my students to grow up to be famous and give Oscar acceptance speeches that ended with, "And it was all because of Dr. Jackson. She turned my life around." I wanted to be the teacher they made a movie about. This is why it frustrated me so when a lesson didn't work, or when my students didn't achieve as much as I wanted them to. I was thinking about my needs.

Once I understood that the problem wasn't my students—that it had more to do with the way I thought about teaching than their inadequacies—I was free to look at my students differently. I shifted my focus from trying to manipulate them into learning to showing them how to learn and helping them see the value in learning. I moved from trying to find just the right strategy to making sure that I faithfully applied the principles of effective instruction. Concentrating on the principles rather than the strategies and my own ego needs freed me up to actually teach.

As the school year passed, I began to notice radical changes in my classroom. Because I no longer used my teaching to meet my own ego

needs, I was free to enjoy my students. When they faltered, I didn't take it personally. Instead, I focused on helping them understand why they failed and how to correct their mistakes. My process was messier, but much more successful.

I noticed that my students began to relax. They asked questions and tried to understand both what we were doing and why it was important. They came to class prepared to do the work, and when they were in class, they worked hard. I believe that they could see the shift in me—that now, I was focused on their success. Once I saw them as fundamentally capable, I stopped trying to protect them from the messiness of learning. Learning *is* frustrating. Mistakes *will* be made. When my students saw me take risks in my teaching, they saw it was safe for them to take risks, too. They learned that learning was the hardest, most demanding, and ultimately, most rewarding thing they could ever do.

None of this was magic. Nobody could make a two-hour Hollywood movie about the changes that happened in my classroom. And honestly, there were days when the messiness of learning was, well, too messy for us. We didn't always arrive at closure by the time the bell rang. There were days that my students and I left the class frustrated. On those days, I would remind myself, and them, that the frustration was a natural part our process. I kept coming back to the principles. I held onto them even when it looked like they weren't working.

It made all the difference in my teaching. Suddenly, I too had “the gift.” And eventually, I wrote this book to share these principles with my fellow teachers and show them that the gift was within their grasp as well.

## The Master Teacher Mindset

When *Never Work Harder Than Your Students and Other Principles of Great Teaching* was first published, the reactions I got fell into three general categories.

After hearing the title of the book, non-teachers would sniff, “Well, teachers don't work hard enough as it is.” Then they would go on to list all the ways the education system was broken. I got the flip side of this reaction from hardworking, dedicated teachers who were sincerely troubled by my cheeky title. “*Of course* we must work harder than our students,”

they'd argue. "That's our job! It's our calling!" They really believed weekends dedicated to planning lessons, late evenings spent grading papers, and long, exhausting days in the classroom were necessary conditions of the job—sacrifices required of good teachers.

And then there were the teachers who were burned out and frustrated by students who were checked out, didn't take their education seriously, and sometimes just refused to do their work. These teachers came to the book looking for solutions—strategies they could use to reduce their workload and their stress. They tended to come away from it disappointed with me. "This book doesn't show me how to work less. In fact, it seems that what you're asking me to do will require even *more* work!"

Finally, there was the reaction best summed up in a conversation I overheard at a conference. I was presenting, and during one of the session breaks, I grabbed a cup of tea in the lobby. A woman next to me had just visited the conference bookstore, and she set down her newly purchased stack of books to pour a cup of coffee. I noticed my book was on the top of the stack.

Another woman at the coffee station noticed it too. "Hmmm, *Never Work Harder Than Your Students*," she said. "I've got that book."

The first woman turned toward her and smiled. "Is it any good?"

The second woman shrugged. "My principal bought it for us this year," she said. "The title tells me to never work harder than my students, and since my students never read. . . ." She gave a little laugh. "I figured I didn't have to read it!"

What these reactions have in common is that they all miss the point. *Never Work Harder Than Your Students* is not about letting teachers off the hook for doing their work, nor does it suggest that the work a teacher does is or should be "easy." It's not about quick strategies designed to reduce the workload of overextended teachers. And it certainly was never meant to pit students against teachers in a contest to see who can do the least amount of work. This book is something much more fundamental: an approach to teaching in which the students are taught to do the cognitive heavy lifting. It's about teachers equipping students to think for themselves. Ultimately, it's about masterful teaching, and masterful teaching, it turns out, does take some work.

The thing is, all teaching is hard work, and everyone in this profession knows that. What can make the work frustrating and exhausting is when it doesn't yield fruit. It's when we spend hours planning lessons that don't succeed, days preparing students for assessments they ultimately fail, weeks covering material that doesn't stick, and years trying in vain to get better at this profession we love.

Masterful teaching focuses on doing the *right* kind of hard work, the kind that pays off. It's about focusing on principles rather than strategies, fads, or techniques. It's about nailing down a few simple guidelines that will make all the difference in your practice.

Most of all, it's about a mindset, a way of thinking about teaching that is different and yet not that different at all. I can't tell you the number of readers who have come up to me and told me, "You're not really saying anything new in this book of yours. In fact, I could have written it!" And you know what? They're right. I'm not saying anything new. These principles in *Never Worth Harder Than Your Students* have been around for a long time.

Any one of you reading this book could have written it. That's because we all know these principles to be true. The problem is that we have gotten away from them. We have gotten so caught up in fads and trends and tricks and strategies (either by choice or by mandate) that we have lost sight of what really matters.

That's the good news *and* the bad news. You see, reconnecting to the principles of mastery teaching and reclaiming our master teacher mindset requires us to shift our focus from learning something new to submitting to a process of *unlearning*. There are a lot of false notions about what it means to be a good teacher, and sometimes those false notions drown out what is truly important. These notions can cloud our thinking, dull our instincts, and so distract us that we start to forget what good teaching looks like and—more important—what good teaching feels like.

We have also allowed mastery teaching to be put on a pedestal. Only a sainted few ever reach its lofty heights, and typically they do so just before retirement. What I believe, and what we all must believe, is that *any teacher can become a master teacher and every teacher should*. Not just because our children deserve a master teacher in every classroom, but because if you're going put in the work to be a teacher, you might as well experience the rewards.

So my goal in this second edition of *Never Work Harder Than Your Students* is not so much to enlighten you with something new as to remind you of what you already know. I want us to get to the core of what good teaching really means and has always meant. I want to help you unlearn what isn't important so that you can focus on what is. And, ultimately, I want you to recapture your love of teaching and experience the rich and varied rewards that only come from teaching masterfully.

To do that, I've updated every chapter to reflect what I have learned over the past 10 years. I've refreshed some of the references and left others alone, preferring to cite the original work if it is still relevant. I've also added some new material, including a new chapter that focuses on how to leverage the information in this book to master your evaluation process. And I've included a few new resources that I believe will provide valuable support on your journey to become a master teacher.

Although I offer several strategies in this edition, the strategies are not the point—the principles are. It's never been enough to simply apply strategies without regard to your particular students, to who you are and how you teach, or to your core values and those of your school. When you think about the principles that drive great teaching, consider your own core values and then select, adapt, or create strategies to align with both, then you will be a great teacher.

The other thing to remember is that no one strategy or group of strategies will be the magic key. Some teaching practices take time to work. Others might work for me and not for you. Teaching is not an exact science, and it's always a work in progress. If you are using a strategy and it isn't working, stop. Figure out what it isn't working and tweak it or toss it and find something that does.



I've got big goals for this book. I want every teacher who reads it to choose to pursue mastery or reaffirm that choice if it's already been made. I want mastery teaching to become ubiquitous to the point that it seems downright ordinary. I want you to be able to walk into your classroom every day confident that you are doing the right thing. I want you helping every student to learn more than even they thought was possible. Most of

all, I want you to know again the joy of truly making a difference in the lives of the students you serve.

Because that's the point, isn't it? Great teaching is not about scoring a certain rating on an ever-changing evaluation system. It's not about achieving a certain score on an assessment. Although these things may help you keep your job, they aren't necessarily going to help you transform lives.

What will transform lives—yours and those of your students—is to teach masterfully and with passion.

Let's dive in, shall we?

# INTRODUCTION

As to methods, there may be a million and then some, but principles are few. The man who grasps principles can successfully select his own methods. The man who tries methods, ignoring principles, is sure to have trouble.

Harrington Emerson

I am going to say something scandalous: Just because we went to school for teaching doesn't mean that we come out of school as master teachers. Even if you were a good student in school, it does not mean that you will be a good teacher. The tasks you were asked to do in school are fundamentally different from the day-to-day tasks you are asked to do as a teacher. In fact, most teachers will tell you that although their education courses and their student teaching gave them a good theoretical background, what they really learned about teaching, they learned on the job.

But teaching for many years is not enough to make you a master teacher, either. There are some teachers who have been teaching for more than 20 years and still think and behave like novices; other teachers have become master teachers after only a few years of experience. And the sad truth is that some of us never become master teachers, no matter how many years we've been teaching.

Experience alone does not make you a master teacher any more than practicing scales twice a day makes you a concert pianist. Mastery teaching is not about the time you put in. It's what you do with your time that counts.

You see, mastery teaching requires specific, intentional practice.

That's good news because it means—and this book is built on this very premise—that *anyone can become a master teacher with the right kind of practice.*

This book will help you get that kind of practice. And the more you practice the principles of this book, the more you will begin to think and act like a master teacher. I call this process *developing a master teacher mindset.*

## What Is the Master Teacher Mindset?

The master teacher mindset is really a disposition toward teaching. It is a way of thinking about instruction, about students, about learning, and about teaching in general that makes teaching fluid, efficient, and effective.

Many of us think that in order to be a good teacher, we need to have all the answers. We focus our time and energy accumulating strategies and skills, hoping that if we have a big enough bag of tricks, we will be prepared to face whatever happens in the classroom. The master teacher mindset means knowing that having all the answers isn't nearly as important as knowing what questions to ask. It means knowing that if you ask the right question, the question itself will lead you to the information that you need to examine to find the answer. Good questions reveal what information is relevant, when information is sufficient, and how that information should be used appropriately.

The master teacher mindset also means knowing how to ask students the right questions, the kind of questions that lead to deeper thinking, increased motivation, and more student ownership over their work. Master teachers spend more time refining their inquiry skills and their own curiosity than they do collecting strategies and skills.

Most of us experience a problem and quickly rush to find a solution. Developing a master teacher mindset means knowing that defining the problem correctly makes it more likely that you will find the appropriate solution. Master teachers spend more time thinking about why the problem is occurring than they do trying to find solutions. They examine the problem from all sides. The master teacher mindset means being willing to own your own contribution to the problem but, at the same time, being reluctant to cast blame on others because you know that casting blame is

not nearly as useful as looking for causes. Master teachers are willing to confront the brutal facts of their reality and account for those facts when developing a solution.

The master teacher mindset means not trying to teach like anyone else. Instead, you teach in ways that fit your own style. At the same time, you look for ways to make your teaching style relevant to your students' needs. Master teachers understand that there isn't just one way to teach and that effective teaching can be accomplished in a myriad of ways. They find ways that work for them *and* their students.

At the end of the day, most of us are so exhausted, we just want to go home, wade through the stack of papers we need to grade, plan for the next day, and go to bed. We rarely take the time to meaningfully reflect on our teaching. But with a master teacher mindset, you understand that meaningful reflection is critical to honing and refining your teaching craft. Master teachers take the time to reflect on their teaching in order to expose unwarranted or harmful assumptions they may hold, reveal fallacies in their thinking, illuminate problems, and determine directions for new growth. They see reflection as a necessary part of their day.

Ultimately, master teachers don't just magically develop the master teacher mindset. Teaching requires a vast body of knowledge. We have to know pedagogy, but also must be experts in our subject area or areas. This huge body of knowledge can be an overwhelming hodgepodge of largely disconnected facts, unless we have a system for organizing the information. Master teachers learn how to organize their teaching knowledge into meaningful patterns and, from these patterns, develop a set of key instructional principles. Their entire instructional practice is governed by this small set of core principles, and they rigorously select strategies and teaching approaches based on these principles rather than become enamored with every new strategy or technique that comes in vogue.

I call these principles the *mastery principles*, and the rest of this book is devoted to helping you learn to apply them to your own teaching practice. Here they are:

- 1. Master teachers start where their students are.**
- 2. Master teachers know where their students are going.**
- 3. Master teachers expect to get their students to their goal.**
- 4. Master teachers support their students along the way.**

**5. Master teachers use feedback to help them and their students get better.**

**6. Master teachers focus on quality rather than quantity.**

**7. Master teachers never work harder than their students.**

Master teachers often have a difficult time explaining the decision-making process that makes them masterful in the classroom. They have practiced these principles for so long that much of what they do has become automatic and seems almost natural. In the same way that learning to drive initially requires a lot of conscious effort and attention but eventually becomes so automatic that we rarely think about it, the disciplined practice of the master teacher principles will at first seem very awkward but will soon become automatic. Once you have practiced these principles to the point where they become automatic, it will take very little effort to maintain them.

You may be surprised that none of these principles seems especially earth shattering. They almost seem to be common (teaching) sense. Most of us know already that we need to set goals or to assess student progress. We learn it the first day in college. It's Teaching 101.

I would venture that most of us will claim we are already abiding by these principles in our daily practice. We already set high expectations for our students. We already try to get our students to do their own work. After all, what teacher will admit, "I don't have high expectations for my students" or "I don't provide my students with the supports they will need to be successful"?

So why is it that so many of us still find teaching so challenging? Why is it that we are still not successful with *all* of our students? If the principles are so effective, and if we are already using the principles in our daily practice, why are we still struggling to reach every student, every day?

Here is the crux of *Never Work Harder Than Your Students and Other Principles of Great Teaching*. We all learned these principles in school, but what separates master teachers from the rest of us is that master teachers learned how to use the principles effectively, and they rigorously apply these principles to their teaching. In fact, these principles have become such an integral part of their teaching that master teachers no longer have to consciously think about them. Applying these principles has become a natural response to students' needs.

Wouldn't it be marvelous if good teaching became that natural to all of us? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we no longer had to struggle through every teaching challenge? Wouldn't it be fantastic if we got to the point where we were faced with a teaching challenge and could quickly and automatically figure out how to address it effectively? Wouldn't it be great, in short, if we all thought like master teachers?

Many of us have been looking for a way to do just that for years. So we go back to school and get more degrees, or attend professional development workshops to gain new strategies, or spend our summers taking classes in the latest instructional approach, or read books that promise us "the secret" to improving our teaching.

But the master teacher mindset is not simply a response to good training. We don't go through school and come out automatically thinking like a master teacher. The master teacher mindset develops as a result of systematically taking all that we know about teaching, organizing it into a few governing principles, and rigorously applying these principles to our teaching until they become our spontaneous response to students in the classroom. The more we practice these principles, the more we begin to think like master teachers.

## How to Use This Book

If you are a teacher, this book will help you figure out where you are on your journey to becoming a master teacher and how to move from one stage to the next. For staff developers and instructional leaders, this book will help you learn how to support teachers on their journey to becoming master teachers by helping you diagnose where they are on that journey and showing you how to help them reach that next step.

At the end of this introduction is a self-assessment to help you diagnose where you are on your journey toward becoming a master teacher. Take the assessment and give yourself two scores: an overall score to assess where you are on the master teacher trajectory, and an individual score for each principle. You can use your overall score to focus your reading of the chapters and figure out how you can move to the next level. You can use your scores for individual principles to help you choose which chapters to read first and on which principles you need to spend the majority of your energy.

Chapters 1 through 7 outline each of the principles in more detail and explain how you can begin to practice the principle in your own classroom. Each chapter begins with a vignette that illustrates what most of us were taught about teaching and the challenge that such thinking often presents for teachers. Then you will be introduced to a principle and the research that explains why the principle is important. The next section, “Practicing the Principle,” gives you concrete advice about how you can integrate the principle into your own practice and provides practical examples of how the principle plays out in the classroom. These strategies are grouped under the heading “Try This.”

Because I know that you may be hesitant about trying some of the ideas in this book, each chapter also includes text boxes (“Yes, but . . .”) with content that acknowledges these feelings, recognizes common objections, and provides suggestions for overcoming your resistance. The intent is to help you resolve some of the practical challenges that could otherwise get in the way of your being able to implement the principle.

The principle-focused chapters end with a “Getting Started” section, which summarizes the main steps to applying the principle. You can use these steps to help you focus your thinking on the most important points of the chapter and as a reminder of the ways you can begin to apply the principle in your own classroom and work. This section also provides concrete steps you can take to move from where you are (as determined by your overall score on the self-assessment) to the next level in the mastery trajectory.

Chapter 8 is new to this edition. Because so many teachers have told me over the years how they long to be master teachers but feel stymied by their district policies or by administrators who don’t support their efforts, I wanted to give you a few tools to help you take charge over your own practice and leverage your evaluation system to your advantage. That way, you’ll be able to chart your own course toward mastery and secure the support you need to do so.

Chapter 9 will take you step by step through the process of moving toward becoming a master teacher by systematically applying the master teacher principles to your practice. It helps you develop a viable action plan that you can immediately put into place, discusses the challenges you may face, and provides resources for getting support as you improve

your teaching. It can also serve as a great reminder three to six months down the road to help you analyze your progress, tweak your plan, and stay the course.

I've also included several tools in the Appendix to help you begin practicing what you learn in this book right away. Many of these tools can be adapted to your own purposes. And throughout the book, I also reference resources available on my website ([www.mindstepsinc.com](http://www.mindstepsinc.com)) that can help you extend your thinking.

The pathway to becoming a master teacher is by no means linear; there is more than one route to expertise. You may develop expertise in one area and still be at the novice level in another area. Thus, although I think it's best to read each chapter in order, you can figure out on what principle you received the lowest score, flip right to the chapter where that principle is covered, and discover ideas and strategies that will help address your immediate needs. Later, you can move through the rest of the book at a more leisurely pace and see how all of the principles connect.

However you choose to use this book, I hope it will inspire you to take a close look at your teaching, to challenge some of your assumptions about both teaching and the way that students learn, and to adjust your instruction or your instructional leadership so that your students can learn more effectively. Developing a master teacher mindset will change the way you feel about students, about learning, and about teaching in general. Your values will evolve. Your interest in your subject and in teaching will be revived. Your identity as a teacher will expand. In the process, you will rekindle your sense that what you do truly makes a difference in the lives of your students. And most of all, I hope that by reading this book you too will discover for yourself the gift that good teaching really is.

## The Mastery Self-Assessment

Mastery cannot be measured by the number of years you've been teaching. It is measured by how well you apply the mastery principles to your teaching. Thus, the first step to moving toward mastery is to assess how well you are currently applying the mastery principles to your own practice by taking the quiz on the following pages. Answer each question as honestly as

you can; think not about what you would like to do, but about what you are currently doing in your own practice. There are no right or wrong answers.

Use the scoring sheet on page 22 to keep track of your answers. Next to each number, write your answer to that question in the box provided. When you are finished answering the questions, use the scoring sheet to give yourself two scores. First, calculate an overall score. Then, give yourself an average score for each mastery principle. Your overall score will be between 49 and 196. Your average score for each principle will be between 1 and 4.

**1. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. I tend to look at my class as a whole and think of my students in terms of their group characteristics.
- b. I see my class as a group of groups and cluster certain students together.
- c. I see each of my students as individuals.
- d. I pay attention to the individual needs of my students but also notice how those needs and individual characteristics interact in the entire group.

**2. When faced with a new curriculum,**

- a. I use the lesson plans included in the curriculum guide.
- b. I figure out how I will cover all of the material in each unit and start creating lesson plans.
- c. I look at the assessment at the end of each unit and back-map my plans from there.
- d. I use the assessment to figure out what the “need-to-knows” are and determine how well students need to know each objective. Then I plan the assessments and learning activities based on each objective.

**3. When a student does poorly on a test,**

- a. I think the student did not study hard enough.
- b. I think it was a poorly designed test, and I will need to make a better one next time.

- c. I think the student did not understand the material. I will need to provide remediation to help the student do better on the next test.
- d. I think that I need to work with the student more carefully to ensure a better result on any reassessment.

**4. When examining data,**

- a. I consider all available data before making an instructional decision.
- b. I examine only the whole-class data before making an instructional decision.
- c. I examine both whole-class data and individual student data before making an instructional decision.
- d. I examine only the data that give me the best feedback to help me reach my goals and deliberately ignore the rest when making an instructional decision.

**5. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. I am still learning my discipline and I try to stay at least one step ahead of my students.
- b. I understand my discipline well enough to teach it, although there are times when I get stumped as to how to explain something to a student.
- c. For the most part I understand my discipline and have more than one way of explaining the major concepts to students.
- d. I understand my discipline and take time not only to explain the concepts and skills to my students but also to show them how to learn my subject on their own.

**6. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. I follow the curriculum guide step by step and try to cover everything.
- b. I follow the curriculum guide as well as I can, but I realize that I cannot get to everything.
- c. I pick and choose what I want to teach from the curriculum guide and try to cover the things that I think are most important.

- d. I assess the curriculum guide and divide it into those things students absolutely need to know in order to master the learning objectives and those that are nice to know.

**7. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. I am working much harder than my students.
- b. I am working somewhat harder than my students.
- c. I am working about as hard as my students.
- d. I am doing my work as the students do their work.

**8. When faced with a discipline problem in the classroom,**

- a. I look for a solution.
- b. I try a variety of solutions to see which one works best.
- c. I think about what may be causing the problem and select a solution that fits the situation.
- d. I look for patterns and develop a solution that will address not only the surface problem but also the underlying causes revealed by the pattern.

**9. When looking at the curriculum standards,**

- a. I try to figure out how I am going to teach them all in the time I have.
- b. I try to figure out which assignments and activities will best help my students achieve the standards.
- c. I try to figure out what assessments I will use so that I will know when my students have mastered the standards.
- d. I try to figure out whether the standard is asking students to master content or a process.

**10. What causes your success or failure in the classroom?**

- a. It depends. Some days things go well. Other days, they just don't. I really can never tell how things will go.
- b. It depends on how difficult the teaching task is. If it is an easy teaching task, I am likely to be successful. But the harder the teaching task, the less likely I am to be successful.

- c. It depends on how good a teacher I am. When things go well, it is because I am good at that part of teaching. If things go poorly, then it means that I do not have that teaching skill.
- d. It depends on my effort. If things go well, it is because I worked really hard at making sure that things went well. If things go poorly, it means that I have to work harder to make sure things go better next time.

**11. When grading students' papers,**

- a. I write a great deal of comments on their papers, pointing out where they went wrong.
- b. I mark student errors but write few if any comments. The final grade is what matters to students.
- c. I make a few marks and write summary comments at the end to give students an overall assessment of their performance.
- d. I mark student errors and write only comments that will coach students toward better performance next time.

**12. When a student seems to misunderstand a concept,**

- a. I press ahead and hope that the student will understand later.
- b. I try to meet with the student after school or during lunch to clear up the confusion.
- c. I give the student an alternate reading or supplementary materials to help clear up the confusion.
- d. I try to understand why the student is getting confused and then work to clear up the confusion.

**13. When it comes to homework,**

- a. I assign homework just about every night. I think it is important that students have homework.
- b. I use homework as a way to cover those things I just can't cover in class.
- c. I use homework to help students develop good study habits.
- d. I use homework to provide students with independent practice for things they have learned in class.

**14. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. I keep track of my students' grades. If students want to know how they are doing in my class, they can ask me or wait for the progress report or the report card.
- b. I keep track of my students' grades, but I regularly post their grades online so that they can also keep track of how they are doing.
- c. I keep track of my students' grades, but I post them regularly and also show students how they can track their own grades and figure out their course average.
- d. I keep track of my students' grades, but I also require that they track their own data. In fact, analyzing their own achievement data is a part of how we regularly run class.

**15. When it comes to "soft" skills such as how to study or organize a notebook,**

- a. I expect my students to know how to do those things already. It is not my job to teach them how to study or organize their notebooks.
- b. I require that my students use specific skills in my classroom. I give them a quiz on the chapters I assign for homework to make sure that they study and conduct notebook checks to make sure that they keep their notebooks organized.
- c. I show my students how to gain these skills. For instance, I give students a study guide and I have a system for how notebooks should be organized.
- d. I first look at how students are studying and organizing their notebooks, and then show them how to improve what they are already doing.

**16. When writing learning objectives,**

- a. I try to state them using the wording favored by the district.
- b. I figure out what activities I want my students to complete and list them.
- c. I figure out what concepts or skills I want my students to master.
- d. I figure out what I want students to learn and then how I can communicate that in a way that students will understand.

**17. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. All students can achieve at high levels if they have supportive parents, a strong educational foundation, and the innate intellectual skills they need.
- b. All students can achieve at high levels if they are motivated to do so.
- c. All students can achieve at high levels if they are given the proper support in school.
- d. All students can achieve at high levels and can actually get even smarter if they are taught how to exert effective effort.

**18. After grading a set of papers,**

- a. I record the grades in my grade book.
- b. I record the grades and look to see which students passed and which students failed.
- c. I record the grades and get a general sense of how the class is doing as a whole.
- d. I record the grades and, based on student performance, figure out how I need to adjust my instruction going forward.

**19. When a student has demonstrated mastery of the objectives of a unit already,**

- a. I give the student an A.
- b. I ask the student to help some of the other students in the class who haven't gotten it yet.
- c. I try to find an enrichment activity the student can do while the rest of the class works through the unit.
- d. I take what I am already teaching and introduce more complexity and ambiguity into the concepts and skills to keep the student challenged.

**20. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. I stick to the curriculum guide.
- b. I stick mostly to the curriculum guide, but I do include a few assignments that are just for fun.

- c. I use the curriculum as a guide, but I add assignments that cover material I think is important or enjoyable.
- d. I choose what I teach based on what assignments will best help my students master the objectives stated in the curriculum guide.

**21. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. I try to give my students as much help as I can, but sometimes I wonder if I am really doing the work for them.
- b. I try to limit the amount of help I give my students because they are going to have to learn how to learn on their own. They won't have the same supports once they get to the next level.
- c. I try to balance helping my students with teaching them to be independent, but sometimes my students seem unable to figure things out on their own.
- d. I give my students just enough help so that they can figure out how to do things on their own.

**22. When students come to class without the “soft” skills that they need to be successful,**

- a. I talk to their counselors to make sure that they are properly placed in my class.
- b. I try to teach students the skills the students need, even if it means that I don't always get through my entire curriculum.
- c. I look for ways to help students acquire the skills that are most necessary while trying to get through as much of my curriculum as I can.
- d. I look for ways I can show students how to capitalize on the skills that they do have in order to acquire the skills that they don't have.

**23. When it comes to assessments,**

- a. I use the ones included in the curriculum guide.
- b. I write my own, usually after I have taught the unit.
- c. I write the assessment after I have planned the unit, once I have a sense of what material I will be able to cover.
- d. I write the assessment prior to planning the unit.

**24. When looking at student data,**

- a. I select which data I will pay attention to. I tend to focus on the data I know and understand and disregard the rest.
- b. I look at all of the data but sometimes make excuses for the information that is unfavorable.
- c. I average the data. As long as most of the students are doing OK or my averages are high enough, then I am fine.
- d. I consider all of the data important and consistently analyze the information in terms of individual student progress rather than averages.

**25. Which best describes your typical response to students' answers during class discussions?**

- a. Praise: I want to encourage them to participate, so I praise them even if the answer is not exactly right.
- b. Evaluative: I want to encourage them to participate, but I also want them to know when they have given the wrong answer.
- c. Corrective: If they give the wrong answer, I want to show them where they went wrong so that they will know how to give a better answer next time.
- d. Coaching: If students give the wrong answer, I want them to figure out how to arrive at the right answer.

**26. The time to help a struggling student is**

- a. Once the student has failed the marking period.
- b. Once the student has shown that he or she is failing, at the interim report.
- c. At the first sign the student is struggling (usually a failed quiz or test).
- d. Before the student begins to struggle.

**27. When teaching a new skill or concept,**

- a. I try to cover it as best I can given the time I have.
- b. I make sure that my students know it well enough to pass the test.
- c. I make sure that students know it in their sleep.

- d. I decide whether students need to know it to the level of automaticity or controlled processing.

**28. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. Sometimes I am so busy trying to deal with my students' outside problems that I have a hard time getting to the curriculum I am supposed to teach.
- b. I cannot solve all of my students' problems, so I just focus on what I can do in the classroom to help them learn.
- c. I recognize that my students' outside problems influence what they do in my classroom, so I try to find a balance between helping them solve their problems and mastering the curriculum.
- d. I recognize that it is not my job to solve all of my students' problems, so I focus on finding ways to help them develop the skills they need to solve their own problems.

**29. When a student does not seem to be a "good student,"**

- a. I question whether the student is motivated.
- b. I question whether the student is academically capable.
- c. I question what I can do to get the student to meet my expectations.
- d. I question whether my expectations fail to consider alternate ways of demonstrating mastery or motivation.

**30. Learning objectives are communicated to students by**

- a. Posting them on the board each day.
- b. Posting them on the board and reading them to students at the beginning of class.
- c. Posting them on the board, announcing them to students at the beginning of class, and listing them in my syllabus or in letters home to parents.
- d. Posting them in class, explaining them to students either verbally or in writing, and listing them in my syllabus and in parent communications.

**31. How would you characterize yourself?**

- a. I am an optimist. I believe that all my students will learn.

- b. I am a realist. I know that some students will not learn because of the various constraints they face.
- c. I am a pragmatist. I believe that all students can learn, but they may not all be able to learn from me.
- d. I am a visionary. I believe that all students can learn and that it is my job to figure out how to best make sure they learn in my class.

**32. When a lesson does not seem to be working,**

- a. I press on anyway and hope that things will get better.
- b. I switch tactics and try something else.
- c. I use more explanatory devices or other instructional strategies to help students become engaged and to facilitate more student understanding.
- d. I pay attention to the feedback I am getting from students and make adjustments to the lesson to better meet students' learning needs.

**33. When planning lessons, you can predict where students may become confused based on**

- a. What material seems to have the most explanation in the curriculum guide.
- b. What material has been confusing to my students in the past.
- c. What I know about my subject and the common misconceptions that exist.
- d. What I know about my subject and where students are in their conceptual development.

**34. In order for students to learn a new skill,**

- a. They need to study hard and memorize it.
- b. They need to practice it from start to finish so that they can learn the entire process well.
- c. They need to build on their emerging skills until they have learned to practice the entire process.
- d. They need multiple opportunities to practice parts of the skill over time and master them, as well as opportunities to practice the full-length performance.

**35. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. I haven't had a chance to establish routines for everything yet.
- b. I use routines to keep students in line. I find that if we have routines, students are better behaved.
- c. I use routines to help our class go more smoothly and maximize students' time on task. When there are routines, students can spend more time on learning and less time on logistics.
- d. I use routines to help students take on more of the work in the classroom.

**36. When rewarding students,**

- a. I decide on a list of rewards and give them to students when they meet some criteria.
- b. I don't typically reward students. Learning is reward enough.
- c. I try to find rewards that I think will motivate students to keep up the good work.
- d. I pay attention to what students value and find a way to connect what they value to what they should be doing in the classroom.

**37. To differentiate instruction,**

- a. I group my students into high-, medium-, and low-ability groups and plan three different lessons based on students' abilities.
- b. I group my students into high-, medium-, and low-ability groups and plan three different versions of the same lesson.
- c. I focus on planning lessons that accommodate students' multiple intelligences.
- d. I plan one lesson that starts at the standard and make adjustments to that lesson that are designed to help all students meet or exceed the standard.

**38. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. Although I hold very strong beliefs about the value of what I do in the classroom, I am often so overwhelmed or pressed for time that my teaching practice does not reflect those things that I really believe are important.

- b. I used to hold strong beliefs about the value of what I do in the classroom, but over time and after so many challenges, I am not so sure I believe the same way anymore.
- c. I still believe in the value of what I do in the classroom, although my beliefs are tempered by the reality I face each day.
- d. I believe that what I do is important, and that belief only grows stronger the more I interact with my students.

**39. In your class, an A means that a student**

- a. Is passing my class.
- b. Is smart or potentially gifted.
- c. Has worked hard.
- d. Has mastered the objectives of the course.

**40. If a student fails a test,**

- a. I record the grade.
- b. I offer the student extra credit opportunities to make up for the low grade.
- c. I figure out why the student failed and offer remediation.
- d. I institute some corrective action and allow the student the opportunity to retake the test.

**41. When evaluating lesson plans each year,**

- a. I figure out how I can cover the material better next time.
- b. I figure out how I can combine activities or shorten the amount of time I spend on activities so that I can make better use of my time next time.
- c. I figure out how I can teach the assignments differently and more effectively so that my students can better master the objectives.
- d. I try to identify things I can stop doing so that I have more time to help my students master what is really important.

**42. When students do not fulfill their classroom responsibilities,**

- a. I create new rules or responsibilities.
- b. I punish students.

- c. I find a system of rewards to motivate them.
- d. I hold students accountable by applying logical consequences.

**43. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. I feel that culture has no place in my curriculum.
- b. I don't change my basic curriculum, but I do try to include culturally relevant material, such as stories or interesting facts, and I acknowledge the contributions of other cultures.
- c. I adjust my curriculum so that it includes multiple cultural perspectives.
- d. I alter my curriculum so that it can capitalize on my students' backgrounds, experiences, and preferences.

**44. To make learning objectives concrete,**

- a. I state them in kid-friendly language so that my students can understand them.
- b. I try to figure out what the goal really means and what activities or assignments will best fit each goal.
- c. I try to figure out how the goal will be assessed and make sure that all the assignments and activities I chose are a good match for the objective.
- d. I try to figure out what mastery of the goal will look like and what steps students will have to take in order to achieve mastery.

**45. Which of the following statements is most true for you?**

- a. I believe that if I have the right strategies and resources, I can handle any teaching task I face.
- b. I believe that there are just some teaching tasks that I am not prepared to handle.
- c. I believe that most teaching tasks can be handled, but some are so difficult that I do not have the time or the resources to handle them effectively.
- d. I believe that there are some teaching tasks that are more difficult than others, but that I can handle any teaching task if I realistically

assess the situation and maintain unwavering faith that I will prevail.

**46. Students' progress is judged on**

- a. Their overall average in my class.
- b. Their individual grades on tests, quizzes, and assignments.
- c. Formative and summative assessment grades.
- d. Various data sources such as formative and summative assessments, assignments, class discussions, and performance tasks.

**47. When a student begins to struggle,**

- a. I tutor the student one-on-one after school or during lunch.
- b. I tell the student to come see me after school or during lunch. If the student chooses to come in, I will provide remediation. If not, then the student has chosen to fail.
- c. I try to figure out why the student is having difficulty and provide help both in class and outside of class.
- d. I implement a predetermined intervention designed to quickly get the student back on track.

**48. When selecting assignments to give to students, the most important factor is**

- a. What I can reasonably accomplish in the time I have.
- b. What I enjoy doing and will be enjoyable for my students.
- c. What makes the most sense given my students, my own teaching preferences, and the amount of time and resources I have.
- d. What will most efficiently and effectively help my students master my learning objectives.

**49. If a student is working on an in-class assignment and comes for help on a particular question,**

- a. I give the student the right answer. I don't want the student to struggle.
- b. I tell the student to ask another student or look up the answer.
- c. I give the student progressive minimal cues.
- d. I show the student how to find the answer himself/herself.

## Scoring Sheet

Give yourself 1 point for every (a), 2 points for every (b), 3 points for every (c), and 4 points for every (d).

Principle 1	Principle 2	Principle 3	Principle 4	Principle 5	Principle 6	Principle 7	Total Rows
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
8	9	10	11	12	13	14	
15	16	17	18	19	20	21	
22	23	24	25	26	27	28	
29	30	31	32	33	34	35	
36	37	38	39	40	41	42	
43	44	45	46	47	48	49	
Principle Total	Principle Total	Principle Total	Principle Total	Principle Total	Principle Total	Principle Total	Overall Total
Principle Average	Principle Average	Principle Average	Principle Average	Principle Average	Principle Average	Principle Average	

## Give Yourself an Overall Score

### 177–196 Points: Master Teacher

Good teaching for master teachers is fluid and automatic. They invest most of their time up front in planning and thinking through their teaching situation. Master teachers unpack the standards and set learning goals for students that represent minimum rather than maximum performance. Not only do they make conscious decisions about what students need to know and how well they need to know it, they also decide early on what evidence of student mastery they will collect and use this feedback to inform their instructional decisions while helping students move toward reaching their learning targets. They incorporate supports into their instructional practice to catch students before they fail and appropriately balance the work of learning between themselves and their students. They recognize the currencies students bring with them to the classroom and help students use these currencies to acquire classroom capital. At the same time, master teachers base their expectations not on what their students can do, but on what *they* can do to help their students.

### 138–176 Points: Practitioner

Most veteran teachers score in this range. They have been teaching for a few years and make conscious choices about what they do in the classroom based on experience. They unpack the standards of their curriculum and have a pretty clear understanding of their learning goals, but they do not always break down these learning goals into concrete steps toward mastery. Practitioners align their assessments and learning activities to their learning goals most of the time and use this feedback to adjust their own instructional practice. However, practitioners may not always provide students with the growth-oriented feedback they need to improve their own performance. Practitioners intervene with struggling students but may not always intervene *before* students begin to fail. And, although they confront the brutal facts of their reality, their faith is based on outside factors rather than on what they can do to change things. Although practitioners recognize and appreciate the currencies students bring with them to the classroom, their focus is on helping students acquire new

currencies rather than on showing them how to use the currencies they have already. As a result, in their attempts to balance the work between themselves and the students, they still rescue students when things become too uncomfortable.

### 98–137 Points: Apprentice

Good teaching for apprentices is based on having the right strategy. They take time to understand curriculum objectives and how they can cover those objectives in the limited time they have. Because apprentices realize that some rules can be broken, they often pick and choose what activities they will use for each unit and decide early on what assessments they will use. However, they do not always use assessment results to inform future instructional decisions. Apprentice teachers make some attempts at differentiating instruction but base their instructional strategies on “high,” “on-level,” and “low” students rather than on individual student needs. They recognize that students have different abilities and values but attempt to get students to exchange their values for those that are accepted in the classroom. When students do not adopt these values or otherwise do not meet their expectations, apprentices may lose faith and become disillusioned.

### 49–97 Points: Novice

There are two types of novices. Some teachers are novices because they have just started teaching and are still learning the ropes. Other novices have actually been teaching for some time, but still approach teaching with a novice mindset. Good teaching for both types of novices requires careful thought and planning. They look for rules or recipes to guide their practice. Many times they are so overwhelmed that they rely on the objectives and activities provided by the curriculum guide without really understanding what they mean. Novices work very hard to get through the curriculum by focusing on coverage and task completion. They have a limited number of explanatory devices and depend on remediation to help students who are very far behind. Novices use assessments to evaluate student performance and often use the tests that come with the curriculum guide. If they do create a test, they typically do so after they have

taught the unit. Their understanding of who their students are is based on generalizations and stereotypes, and their expectations for students are based on their perception of what they believe students can do. Because of these expectations, novices typically work very hard, doing the lion's share of the work in the classroom.

## Give Yourself a Score for Each Principle

Now that you have given yourself an overall score, give yourself a score for each principle. To calculate your score, begin by totaling the number of points in each column of the scoring sheet. Then, divide that number by 7 for your average score. Record your average score for each principle. (For an example of how to develop an action plan based on the completed scoring sheet, see Tool 2 in the Appendix, p. 236.)



## Start Where Your Students Are

All learners construct knowledge from an inner scaffolding of their individual and social experiences, emotions, will, aptitudes, beliefs, values, self-awareness, purpose, and more. In other words, if you are learning in a classroom, what you understand is determined by how you understand things, who you are, and what you already know as much as by what is covered, and how and by whom it is delivered.

Peter Senge, *Schools That Learn*

I was teaching an on-level class of 11th grade students. The students who were quiet, polite, obedient, and respectful were my favorites, regardless of how they performed in the class. They were what I considered “good students.”

Keisha, on the other hand, was not what I considered a good student. She was loud and disrespectful. Her work, when she turned it in, was sloppy. She came to class late and rarely had anything to contribute to the discussion. At first, I tried to believe in her. I encouraged her and told her, “You can do it.” I gave her extensions on her assignments and invited her to come in at lunch for extra help. I did my best to treat her as if she had great potential.

But, to be honest, I didn’t see any potential in her and I was getting tired of trying. Every day in class was a battle. I’d ask her to take out her pencil and get to work, and she’d cross her arms and stare out the window. Some days, I would push it, cajole or order her to do her work, and the exchange would erupt into a battle. Many days, things got so bad that

I would end up sending her to the office. Other days, I hate to admit, I just didn't feel like fighting. If she wanted to fail, I wasn't going to get in her way.

One day, in the midst of one of our battles, she yelled, "I hate you!" And, to be honest, I couldn't stand her either.

It had come to that.

I realize now that because I had difficulty handling Keisha, I looked at her in terms of her deficits rather than her strengths. She did not fit my image of a good student, so I expected her to fail. More important, because I had difficulty reaching her, I blamed her. If I were really honest, I didn't like Keisha because she didn't swoon over my lessons. I had worked hard on those lessons and was working very hard to teach her what I thought was a valuable skill. After all the work I'd done, she sat there with her head on her desk. Surely there must be something wrong with her.

One day, I was complaining about Keisha to Cynthia, one of her other teachers. We both commiserated about her terrible attitude and how hard it was to get her to work. As we talked, I slowly began to realize that although we both had the same view of Keisha and the same challenges with Keisha, we had different results. Keisha did work in Cynthia's class. In fact, Keisha was currently earning a B.

"You know that child is brilliant, don't you?" Cynthia commented.

"Yeah," I snorted. "She's so brilliant that she's failing my class."

Cynthia got serious. "I mean it, Robyn. That girl is brilliant."

I looked at Cynthia incredulously. "Brilliant? Are you kidding me? She doesn't do work in class. She just sits there during discussions. And the papers she turns in are full of grammatical errors." I was starting to get upset.

"None of that has anything to do with how smart she is," Cynthia replied calmly.

"Of course it does," I began. Then I stopped. Cynthia's words began to sink in.

"Have you ever had a conversation with Keisha?" Cynthia asked.

I shook my head adamantly. "How can I have a conversation with her? She is completely unreasonable. She fights me at every turn."

"Yes. That child can be pretty stubborn and ornery," Cynthia agreed. "But you really should try to get to know her."

“Cynthia, I have 130 students. I don’t have weeks to spend trying to get to know each one personally. Besides, how does learning her favorite TV show or her favorite band help me get her to do her work?”

“You don’t have to take her out to lunch or invite her home for the weekend, you know,” Cynthia said, amused. “I am just saying that you need to look beyond how mean or inappropriate or stubborn she is being and pay attention to who she is and what she wants. Keisha acts out because she doesn’t have a more appropriate way of getting what she wants. But if you can get beyond that, you will find that she writes really good poetry, and she can out-argue anyone. She has a really good mind. You just have to show her how to use her powers for good instead of evil.” Cynthia winked at me.

I thought about what Cynthia said. We had the same student, but we saw her in entirely different ways. How was Cynthia able to see beyond Keisha’s attitude and uncover her other abilities? And, more important, if Keisha really was as brilliant as Cynthia said she was, why wasn’t I seeing it in my classroom?

## Common Practice

We all at some time or another have come across a student or two whom we felt we just couldn’t reach. In some cases, we’ve even come up against an entire classroom of students who seemed unmotivated and incapable of learning no matter how hard we try, and we struggle all year to find a way in.

Many textbooks and teacher preparation programs argue that the way in is to get to know your students. They suggest that you do a battery of pre-assessments and getting-to-know-you exercises. Although these can be useful, they are not sufficient. Students have their own experiences and therefore present their attributes and abilities in different ways. If you only pre-assess and play getting-to-know-you games, you may be ignoring other powerful components of who they are.

Some teachers recognize that getting-to-know-you exercises are not enough to really understand who students are. They realize that students’ cultural backgrounds are also powerful influences on how they learn. Many school systems understand at least superficially the power of culture

and therefore require their teachers to take a class on cultural competence. But these classes often amount to little more than heroes, holidays, and “foods of the world” classes where teachers spend six weeks eating their way to an understanding of culture.

The problem with this approach is that it treats culture as if it were a monolithic thing that can be reduced to a list of characteristics and preferences. And it assumes that our students have only one culture when, in fact, our students—all of us, for that matter—are members of several cultures. There is their racial or ethnic culture (e.g., Latino, African American, Asian), their regional culture (e.g., Southerner, urbanite, Californian, Midwesterner), their religious culture (e.g., Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Jewish), their social culture (e.g., athlete, rebel, nerd, theater kid), and their generational culture. If we spent time trying to understand all the cultural influences that make our students who they are, we would never have time to teach. And even if we went through the trouble of learning all of the preferences and characteristics of our students’ various cultures, how would we use that knowledge to motivate our students or help them learn?

It is undeniable that students’ choices and learning preferences are influenced by their various cultures. But rather than focus on learning superficial information about students or even learning the common attributes of their cultures, it is more important to understand the concept of intellectual and cultural currency; how it is acquired, negotiated, and traded in the classroom; and how you can marshal its power to help students learn.

## The Principle

Knowing your students means more than knowing their demographics or test scores. It means recognizing what currency they have and value and then using that currency to help them acquire the capital of the classroom.

The capital of our classrooms is the knowledge and skills that lead to high achievement. It includes both *content knowledge*, like the concept of whole numbers and the effect of the Magna Carta on modern government, and *procedural knowledge*, like how to add and divide whole numbers or how to write a five-paragraph essay. When students acquire classroom

capital, they do well on achievement tests and make good grades. Classroom capital is what we typically associate with intelligence.

However, simply knowing the facts does not ensure success for most students. Several researchers (Polanyi, 1958/2015; Sternberg et al., 2000) suggest that academic success is not based solely on knowing the right answers; it is also based on an entire subset of “tacit knowledge” or “soft skills” that make acquiring the right answers easier. In order to do well on a test, for instance, you need to know more than just the information being tested; you also need to know how to take notes, how to read the text, how to study effectively, how to distinguish what information is important, how to answer multiple-choice questions, how to eliminate incorrect answers and make educated guesses when you do not know the answer, and how to pace yourself so that you can complete the test in the time allotted. You might need to know how to ask the teacher for help on the information you did not understand, how to identify what it is that you do not know, how to get the notes from another student if you are absent, how to conduct independent research, or how to allot enough time to study.

These soft skills operate as a form of *currency* in the classroom. In fact, any behavior that students use to acquire the knowledge and skills important to your grade level or subject area functions as currency, and this currency is actively negotiated and traded in every classroom interaction. Although these soft skills and behaviors are not often made explicit to students, they are crucial in acquiring the capital of the classroom.

We all have preferences for styles of behavior, communication, and relationships. We all have notions of what is worth knowing. These preferences are what we use to impart value to the currencies we use and accept in the classroom. If students behave in a way that we value—if they head their papers properly, for example, or come in for extra help, if they raise their hands before speaking and refrain from talking during the lecture—they are more likely to receive favorable treatment, extra help, high expectations, and access to opportunities. As a result, they are more likely to learn. If students do not have these currencies, they have a much more difficult time acquiring the capital of the classroom.

We all have preferred forms of currency. Suppose you advertise that your house is for sale and I come take a look. I like what I see and declare

that I want to buy your house. “Great,” you say as you take out the paperwork and prepare to draw up a contract. Meanwhile, I dig into my pocket, pull out a few shiny beads, some seashells, and a couple of wood carvings, place them on the table, and ask for the keys. How would you react?

What if I told you that in my culture, shiny beads were of tremendous value, the wood carvings were of a sacred nature, and the seashells were our accepted currency? Would you then accept them as a form of payment for your house?

The same type of exchange happens in classrooms each day. We have capital (knowledge and skills) that we are trying to help our students acquire. Our students have various currencies (knowledge and behaviors) that they bring with them and attempt to use in order to acquire the capital of the classroom. Often, however, there is a disconnect between the currency we value and the currency they are spending. Or our students do carry the currency recognized in the classroom but refuse to spend it because they do not find the classroom capital particularly valuable.

This disconnect is to be expected. Just by virtue of being adults, we have preferences for behavior and notions of what is valuable that differ from our students’ sense of what is valuable. The trouble comes when we see this disconnect as a sign that our students are somehow deficient because they have currencies and values that are different than our own.

Just because students come to us with alternate forms of intellectual and cultural currency does not mean that they are less capable. It means that they have skills that may be unrecognized in the classroom context and potential that has yet to be developed. Or it might mean that they do not yet see enough value in classroom capital to expend the effort it takes to acquire it. Rather than see them as deficient, we should reshape our approach to instruction so that we capitalize on students’ currencies rather than overriding or negating them.

## Practicing the Principle

Ultimately, if we want students to be successful in our courses, we have to help them use their currencies to acquire classroom capital. In order to do so, we must first figure out what currencies we are accepting and what currencies our students are spending. Next, we have to determine

whether there is a disconnect between the two. If there is, we need to figure out why that disconnect is occurring. There are two possible explanations. One, the disconnect is occurring because students do not have the currencies we are accepting in the classroom. If that is the case, we need to help students acquire this currency. The other explanation is that students have the currency but refuse to spend it. In this case, we have to help them value the capital of the classroom.

## Understand What Currencies You Are Accepting in the Classroom

Most classroom problems have at their root a disconnect between the teacher's preferred form of currency and the students'. Thus, while it is important to understand and respect the students' currencies, you must also understand and respect your own.

As much as we may try, we cannot escape who we are. We have values we bring into the classroom. These values will come across in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, so it is important that you are just as observant of yourself as you are of your students. Ask yourself how your values affect the way that you see your students and your role in their lives. Examine how the way you teach is affected by the way you were taught, and develop an awareness of how all of this plays out in the way that you understand your students and the lens through which you see every interaction that takes place in the classroom.

Beliefs and values drive behavior. They have a direct consequence on what we teach, how we teach, and why we teach. Yet how often do we take time to examine our own beliefs and values? If we are going to help students use their currencies to acquire the capital of the classroom, we must first examine our own beliefs about what is acceptable in the classroom, about what makes a "good student," and about what constitutes learning.

### **TRY THIS**

- Divide a piece of paper into two columns. On one side, list the behaviors and characteristics of your ideal student. What would that student look like? What would that student know? What would that student do? (For

example, your ideal student might be one who is neatly dressed, comes to class on time, raises his or her hand before speaking, completes the homework nightly, participates actively during classroom discussions, and knows how to read critically.) This list will help you see what currencies you value. Next, place an asterisk next to each characteristic that is necessary in order to master the objectives of your course or grade level. On the other side, list the characteristics, behaviors, and values of the students in your class. What do your students look like? How do they behave? What do they value? Compare your lists to see what currencies your students are spending and what currencies you value. Where are the similarities? Where is the disconnect? How many of the starred characteristics do your students have already? What can you do to help your students acquire the starred characteristics they don't have already?

- Pay attention to the metaphors you use about teaching. Do you see teaching as gardening, or coaching, or shaping students, or leading students on a journey? These metaphors provide powerful clues about your beliefs about students. If you see teaching as gardening, you see your students as plants to be tended. If you see teaching as coaching, you see your students as players on a team. In one scenario, students are passive and must be coaxed and nurtured in order to grow. In the other scenario, students are more active and need to be guided in order to reach peak performance. By paying attention to our metaphors about teaching, we will be more aware of our own beliefs and values and how they influence the way we see our role as teachers, and the way that we currently approach instruction.
- Now ask your students to create similes for learning by having them complete the following sentence: "Learning is like . . ." Examine your students' metaphors. See how they are similar to and different from your own.

## Understand What Currencies Your Students Are Currently Spending

Not only do we need to understand what currencies we value, we also need to pay attention to what currencies our students bring with them.

*Yes, but...***Can't I just use what I know about students' backgrounds and cultures already?**

The danger in this approach is that it may result in subtle forms of stereotyping. Although there are cultural guidelines that exist that might help you develop an entry point into students' lives, you cannot rely on these stereotypes in order to see your students. Instead, observe your students. Listen, really listen, to them, and try to understand what they bring to the table. We tend to think that we must immediately have the answers. When our students exhibit certain behaviors in the classroom, we immediately jump to an explanation of the behaviors. This principle asks that you take a step back and not jump to a conclusion. Rather, take your time to look for ways to help students capitalize on their abilities and potential in order to acquire the capital of the classroom.

Their academic performance will help paint part of the picture, but in order to discover what soft skills students possess and whether or not they are using them effectively, we need to look beyond test scores and grades.

William Sedlacek's (2004) research offers us a useful lens through which we can start to recognize and capitalize on the various currencies students bring to the classroom. In his book *Beyond the Big Test*, he argues that students have noncognitive characteristics and skills that are more predictive of academic success than the traditional measures of intelligence. Standardized tests and prior grades offer only a limited view of a student's potential.

Dr. Sedlacek identified eight noncognitive characteristics that are predictive of academic success in college:

1. *Positive self-concept*: The confidence that leads to the determination to succeed.
2. *Realistic self-appraisal*: The ability to accurately assess your own strengths and weaknesses and to use this assessment to further your own development.
3. *Successful navigation of the system*: Knowing how to access resources and how to use the system to help you achieve your goals.

4. *Preference for long-term goals*: Knowing how to set and achieve long-term goals, delay gratification, and persevere in spite of obstacles.
5. *Availability of a strong support person*: Finding someone to confer advice, particularly in times of crisis.
6. *Leadership experience*: Having the ability to organize and influence others.
7. *Community involvement*: Being involved in a community.
8. *Knowledge acquired in and about a field*: Having the explicit and implicit knowledge of a particular field of study.

These eight variables offer us a way to see and value students' currencies that may otherwise go unrecognized in the classroom.

Recognizing the array of strengths students bring with them to the classroom gives you a starting point from which you can help students acquire classroom capital. If you see a student with a positive self-concept, for example, you can help her use her confidence to persevere on more difficult tasks. If you have a student who demonstrates a realistic appraisal of his strengths and weaknesses, you can show him how to use this appraisal to set attainable learning goals and be more strategic about how he studies. If a student has leadership experience, you can show that student how to use it to form study groups or to take on more responsibility during classroom routines.

When you actively look for evidence of alternate currencies, you can show students how to use the currencies they have to acquire the capital of the classroom. And by showing them that you recognize their strengths, you can challenge them to reach beyond their natural limits.

### **TRY THIS**

- Use the eight noncognitive characteristics to discover what currencies your students already bring with them. Discuss these characteristics with students and help them see what characteristics they have already and how these characteristics will help them do well in your class. Look for ways to help students develop the characteristics in which they are not strong. For instance, if students need help in leadership, find informal leadership opportunities for them within the classroom, such as

facilitating a class discussion, being in charge of caring for the class pet, or being the group leader during a small group project.

- Use parent conferences to learn more about your students. Ask parents to talk about their students' strengths, talents, likes, and dislikes, and apply this information to provide students with opportunities to use their talents and preferences to acquire the capital of the classroom. If you cannot accomplish this during parent conferences, send home a questionnaire for parents to complete.
- Create opportunities for students to share their own stories as a way of not only learning more about students but also making the curriculum more relevant. When giving an example in class, ask students if they have ever had a similar experience. When teaching a new concept, ask students to explain how that concept might play out in their own communities or might be relevant to their own lives. Have informal conversations with students in and outside of the classroom where you ask students to share their stories.
- Use the "artifact bag" exercise suggested by Jonathan Saphier and Robert Gower (1997) as a way of learning more about your students and creating a classroom culture that welcomes and values students' various currencies. Have students bring in an unlabeled shopping bag containing five items that represent something about their lives or their interests. At various intervals during the first month of the year, have a student select a bag at random and display the items one at a time. After the fifth item is shown, ask the class to make a collective guess as to its owner. Then, ask the bag's owner to explain the significance of each item.
- Use information, illustrations, and examples from students' cultures when teaching the principles, theories, and concepts of your course or discipline.

## Help Students Acquire Additional Currencies

In addition to recognizing the different forms of currencies students bring to the classroom, we also need to identify what currencies students don't have. From there, we can help students acquire additional currencies that will help them be more successful in the classroom.

When I first was introduced to Dr. Sedlacek's (2004) research, I lamented that my students didn't have many of the noncognitive skills

they needed to be successful. Many of them didn't have strong support systems available to them. Most of them had no preference for long-term goals and would easily give up. Few, if any, of my students had a realistic understanding of their strengths or where they needed to grow. If these eight skills were necessary for student success, I thought, then my kids were in trouble.

So I decided that if these skills were crucial, and if my students didn't come to me with them already, it was my job to help them develop these skills during the semester they were with me. I looked at how my classroom was currently structured and decided to radically overhaul what I was doing so that my students could not only master the objectives of my course but also develop the skills they needed to be successful in my class and in school in general.

I began by forming student study groups as a way of giving students a strong support system inside the classroom. These study groups met once a week outside of class (either in person during the school day or after school, or virtually in online chat rooms I set up for just that purpose). If students were absent from class, they didn't check with me to see what work they had missed; they checked with their study group. Students who were struggling with a concept went first to their study group for help, not to me.

I also restructured my assignments to make many of them long-term assignments as a way of helping students learn to successfully set and work toward long-term goals. At first, I broke the assignments into smaller parts and set up several checkpoints along the way to help students stick with the project to the end. As the year progressed, I had students break the long-term assignments down and set up checkpoints for themselves so that by the end of the year, I gave the assignment and the students did the work of breaking it down into manageable parts. In that way, I helped students learn how to set and achieve long-term goals.

To help students develop a more realistic understanding of their own strengths and areas for growth, I adjusted the way that I provided them with feedback (for more on this, see Chapter 5) and gave them grade tracking sheets so that they could track their progress toward mastery of the objectives. I met with students regularly to discuss their progress toward the learning targets and to help them figure out what adjustments they needed to make in order to reach those learning targets.

It took some work but by the end of the semester, my students had developed many of the noncognitive skills they needed. And, because these skills were not bound by my subject matter, they could transfer these skills to other courses and subjects.

### TRY THIS

- Find out what necessary currencies your students are missing (use the list of eight noncognitive skills as a starting point). Then look for ways that you can help students acquire these currencies while doing the normal work of your classroom.
- Explicitly teach the academic vocabulary of your discipline or grade level as a way of helping students better access the curriculum.
- Set up student study groups as a way of helping students learn from one another and develop strong support systems within your class.
- Project students into examples as a way of helping them relate to things with which they have had no direct experience. Use phrases like “Suppose you were . . . ,” “Imagine yourself . . . ,” or “What would you do if . . . ?”
- Help students personalize learning goals by asking them to take the learning objective and identify what specific knowledge implied in the learning goal is of particular interest to them.
- When introducing new material with which students are completely unfamiliar, spend some time early on giving background information and creating context so that students can acquire some of the unstated or implied understanding of the topic.

### Show Students How to Carry and Spend Multiple Currencies

It is important, however, to be careful in the process of helping students acquire other currencies that you don’t cheapen the currencies they already have. How do you avoid imposing your idea of what is valuable on the students and thus devaluing the currency that they bring to the classroom?

You teach students to carry more than one type of currency. Students naturally do this anyway. As Judith Rich Harris points out in her book *The Nurture Assumption* (1998), children often act differently at school than they do at home. In fact, they are experts at adapting their behavior to their contexts.

*Yes, but...***Are you saying it's OK for students to use nonstandard grammar? Won't that handicap them in the future?**

Am I excusing nonstandard English and saying that students should be allowed to trade exclusively in their preferred form of currency? Of course not. Doing so would limit students' opportunities in education and their mobility in society. But just because standard English is the language of the tests does not mean it is the language of students' lives. It is not an either/or situation. Rather, it is a matter of giving students more options by giving them multiple currencies and showing students how to use the most appropriate currency in each situation they face.

When I first became an English teacher, I was told that one of my biggest challenges would be to help my students abandon their slang and learn to use "proper English." I went about my task with almost religious zeal, correcting every "ain't" and "don't got" with a holy conviction. I insisted that my students use "the King's English."

Of course, when I wasn't teaching, I occasionally slipped in an "ain't" or two. In fact, when I talked with my friends, I rarely spoke the "proper" English I was imposing on my students.

One day I was in my office during a lunch period, working with a student. The phone on my desk rang, and I excused myself for a moment to answer the call. It was my sister, and we were trying to make arrangements for getting together later that day. I chatted with her for a few moments and hung up the phone. "I'm sorry about that," I apologized as I returned to my student. He just sat there and grinned at me.

"What?" I asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

"I knew it!" he exclaimed and began to laugh. "I knew you didn't talk like that when you weren't in the classroom."

And he was right: I didn't. Among my friends and family, I used a very different dialect than I did when I was in front of my students, or on a job interview, or interacting with my supervisors, or conducting a workshop. If I didn't use the same dialect all the time, why was I demanding that my kids did?

It was then that I began to introduce to my students the concept of multidialectalism. We talked about how English has several different dialects. I asked my students how they spoke at home. Some used a patois of English and their or their parents' native language. Others used a variation of slang. Still others didn't speak English at home at all. I asked them what would happen if they went into their neighborhoods and spoke "proper." They laughed.

"I might get robbed," shouted one.

"Man, no one would know what I was talking about," offered another.

"What about clothes?" I asked. "Can I go into your neighborhood dressed like this?" I indicated my pantsuit and heels.

"Heck no!" laughed one of my students. "Not unless you want to be jumped."

"They would think you were a social worker or a probation officer," another one exclaimed.

"You'd be fine in my neighborhood," a third offered. "Everyone dresses like that."

"Not in my neighborhood," a fourth said. "Women don't wear pants."

"It's the same way in the business world," I explained to my students. "If you don't dress the part and talk the part, you lose your street cred, regardless of the neighborhood you are in, whether that is Southeast or Wall Street."

I had their attention. "How many of you want to go to college?" I asked. They all raised their hands. "How many of you want to be rich?" Again, all hands went up. "Then you are going to have to learn the language of the dominant culture."

Now they were really interested. They weren't being told that the way they spoke was "wrong" or to abandon their own culture; they were being given the key to a different culture, a culture to which they previously had been denied entry. The message wasn't that by acquiring the capital of the dominant culture, they would somehow become "better" or "smarter." It just meant that they would become more mobile. They would now be able to move freely between cultures.

How empowering is it for students to be able to spend several types of currency and to know how to determine which currency works in which economy? How much more empowering is it for kids if they feel

comfortable moving between and among cultures? And how many more options will they have as a result?

As teachers, we act as navigators of unfamiliar social and cultural terrains. Our job is to help students acquire multiple forms of currency so that no matter what culture they enter, they have the knowledge and skills they need to move freely in that culture. Rather than try to erase your students' cultures and get them to conform to the dominant culture, look for ways to help them use their culture as an entry point into this culture. Look for ways to help them become multicultural and to "code switch." Look for ways to value what they bring to the table and yet show them how they can use different currencies to acquire other forms of capital.

We also need to learn how to code switch ourselves, which means looking for ways to adjust or even reshape the curriculum to capitalize on students' tacit knowledge, skills, and experiences rather than overriding or negating them. By connecting what we are teaching to students' lives, we both help students access the curriculum more easily and honor students' ways of knowing, understanding, and representing information—and thus make it more likely that students will learn and retain what we are teaching and interact with the material at a more rigorous level.

### ***TRY THIS***

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- Early in the school year, ask students to identify at least three areas in which they consider themselves to be "experts." These areas do not have to have anything to do with your subject area or course. Compile a list of classroom experts. Use this list throughout the year to look for opportunities to use students' areas of expertise as a way of explaining a new concept, adding to whatever it is you are teaching, and using their knowledge as a launching point for new concepts or skills.
- Model for students the various thinking processes involved in completing a complex task. Explain to students how a task is completed and then ask students to come up with alternative ways to complete the same task. Encourage students to adapt the process to fit their individual learning styles, modalities, and needs.
- Structure your lessons so that students can view issues, events, and concepts through multiple perspectives. For instance, use resources outside the text and deemphasize the notion that there is one right

answer. Have students come up with several answers to a problem or read several perspectives on an issue or event. Or require students to present both pro and con arguments on a controversial issue.

## Help Students Choose to Spend the Currency They Have

Sometimes, students do not have the currencies they need to be successful in the classroom. Other times, students have these currencies but refuse to use them.

There are four factors that influence students' choices to spend their currency in your classroom. The first is whether they think it is important to do well on a particular task. The second is how enjoyable they think doing a particular task will be. The third is how well they think a particular task will help them achieve their goals. And the fourth is what they think doing a particular task might cost them. If students have the currencies you are looking for and refuse to spend them, you will need to address one or more of these factors.

At the root of all of these factors is the question of value. Students will not spend their own currencies if they do not believe that what they will get in exchange is valuable. They'll need to believe that what you are teaching is relevant or worth their effort. There are two ways that you can help students value classroom capital. The first way is to create a classroom community where students can have some ownership over the routines and protocols of the classroom. In this way, they will become active participants in the classroom economy and will come to value its capital. The second way is to help students connect what they value to classroom capital.

### ***TRY THIS***

- Have students come up with their own ways of demonstrating mastery. For instance, after a lesson on scatter plots, have students develop their own scatter plots using something that interests them. One student could create a scatter plot of the batting averages of her favorite baseball players, while another student could make a scatter plot of the various characteristics of his favorite bands.
- Allow students frequent opportunities to discuss among themselves what ideas mean and how they can be applied. This helps students

express ideas in their own words and relate what they are learning to what they have learned already.

- Ask students to explain to the class how they arrived at a solution to a problem. Show students that there are multiple ways to solve a given problem and help them find the way that works best for them.
- Help students understand how they learn best. Give them an assessment that helps them discover their multiple intelligences, will drivers, or preferred learning modality. Then show them how to use this information to predict the difficulty of assignments that do not match their will driver, learning style, or preferred modality; how to seek help; and how to adapt their studying, note taking, and even the learning task itself to better meet their learning needs.
- Actively listen to students and demonstrate interest in their lives beyond school. Point out the connection or ask students to connect what they are learning in class to their experiences outside of class.
- In order to find the “hook” for students, look for ways to demonstrate how what they are learning is similar to what they have already learned in the course or to their own experiences. You can also encourage students to create their own hooks by having them create analogies using new concepts and familiar concepts outside of your subject area (e.g., How is a cell like a factory? How is the nuclear arms race like a game of poker?). To make this process a little more concrete, bring a box of common random objects such as an old shoe, a broken toy, a roll of duct tape, an empty soda can, and so forth. Have students randomly select an item from the box and then work in groups to figure out how the new concept you are teaching is like that item (e.g., foreshadowing is like a map because it tells you where you are headed before you get there).

## Help Students Value Classroom Capital by Creating a Classroom Community

Walking into Dannette’s classroom is like walking into another world. The bulletin boards are covered with quotes from everyone from Led Zeppelin to Socrates. There is a picture of John Belushi during his *Animal House* days hanging next to a picture of Audrey Hepburn. Students’ artwork and pictures from home hang on the walls. There is even a corner of cubbies where students keep their class notes and study materials. In the front of

the classroom there is a gong, and students walk up to it at seemingly random times and give it a good whack. The class looks up, smiles, and then gets back to work. During class discussions, students push the desks aside and plop down onto bean bag chairs in the center of the room.

One day I walked by her classroom and could hear the students chanting, "Eat it! Eat it!" Curious, I stepped in. There, in the middle of the classroom, five students were dangling chocolate-covered crickets above their mouths. Surrounding them were other students wearing buttons that declared, "I ate a bug." As each student swallowed, the rest of the class erupted in wild cheers and Dannette pinned a button on their shirts.

Why were students in an AP World History class eating bugs? It certainly wasn't part of the curriculum, and it seemed almost disruptive to the rest of the class. In fact, it was the kind of thing more appropriate in a frat house than in a high school classroom. Why was Dannette wasting valuable instructional time on something that had no relation to the curriculum and did nothing to prepare students for the test at the end of the year?

"We had just finished studying world cultures and I told my students that in some cultures, they eat bugs. They were so grossed out that I got the idea to bring in some chocolate-covered ants and crickets," Dannette explained. "I wanted my students to do something that they didn't think they could do. I wanted them to know that if they could eat a bug, then they could take and pass an AP test."

Dannette created a classroom community. They were not 32 different students anymore; they were all a part of the I Ate a Bug Club.

"We bonded," Dannette said. "I looked at the Marine Corps and I looked at summer camp and I looked at sports teams, and I saw how they would take a group of people from different backgrounds with different abilities and make them into a team. Together, that team would do things that seemed impossible to the individual person. These kids have never taken an AP test before, and it seems impossible to them at the beginning. But when they become a team, they encourage each other, they pull for each other. Suddenly, the test doesn't seem as impossible for these kids."

Dannette's classroom is not all fun and games. She doesn't eat bugs one day and play Capture the Flag the next, nor does she believe that eating a bug alone will help her students pass the AP World History exam at the end of the year. She isn't arguing that eating a bug will somehow magically transform her students into history scholars.

*Yes, but...***I don't have time for these kinds of fluffy activities. I have to get through my curriculum.**

We often ignore team-building activities because we feel that they detract from our curriculum. But when used judiciously, these activities can help our students find an entry point to what we are trying to teach them. The key is to make sure that you select these activities with an end in mind, rather than doing them for doing's sake. Use these activities to help you reach a particular curricular goal, and they will go a long way toward helping your students buy into what you are trying to teach them and into your class in general.

But she is making a powerful argument for using what is important to students to help them acquire what is important to you and to your course. Dannette recognized the huge influence of peers for teenagers, so she used this to help motivate students to meet the rigor of her course. She also changed the context of the classroom. Traditionally, classrooms are set up for individualization. Each student is responsible for his own behavior and learning. They are, in a sense, on their own. But what would happen, she asked, if collectivism trumped individualism? Challenges that once seemed daunting or even uninteresting when faced alone suddenly seem possible and desirable when faced as a part of a team.

Dannette used those currencies to help her students meet the challenge of a very rigorous course. She didn't waste time trying to motivate her students to do well. Instead, she created a classroom culture around trying hard and working together to accomplish goals. She then let the students see for themselves that they were capable of doing far more than they thought they were. By starting with currencies that her students valued, she successfully helped students learn to value the classroom capital and work hard to obtain it. As a result, they didn't need her to motivate them; they were motivated themselves because they valued what they were learning.

**TRY THIS**

- Identify the implicit rules of engagement currently in your classroom. I am not talking here of the rules for how students behave that are

typically posted on the wall at the beginning of the school year. I am referring to those tacit rules for how discourse takes place in the classroom or those unstated protocols for how things get done. Ask students to identify these “rules of engagement” and discuss ways to make these rules more useful for them. Give students the opportunity to suggest more efficient protocols and procedures and, together, decide how classroom business will be conducted.

- Create interdependence in your classroom by teaching students to use each other as resources. This can be accomplished by reciprocal teaching, jigsaw and study groups, online discussion boards, subject-specific chat rooms, cooperative learning activities, and seeding (teaching some students a skill and then having that small group of students teach the rest of the class).
- Include team-building activities in your curriculum. Although these activities are often seen as “fluffy” and unrelated to the curriculum, they actually help create a classroom community that makes students more efficient and interdependent. Team building also can motivate students and help them persevere in the face of difficulty because it creates a sense of “we’re all in this together.”
- Build in opportunities for students to have some influence in or control over what goes on in the classroom. Give students choices about what they study, how they solve problems, and how they pursue learning that best fit their own learning preferences, interests, and needs.
- Use the following questions suggested by Stephen Yelon (1996) as a starter set to help students connect to the curriculum:
  - How will students use the topic in their worlds?
  - How will the topic help students explain their own experiences?
  - How will the topic contribute to or deepen students’ current interests?
  - How can the topic help students fulfill their aspirations?
  - How can the topic help alleviate students’ fears and concerns?
  - What will students gain if they learn this topic or lose if they do not?
  - What will happen if students use this new skill or knowledge well and what will happen if they do not? (pp. 16–17)

## Reward Students in Their Own Currency to Help Them Value Classroom Capital

One of the biggest mistakes we make as teachers is that we assume that our students value classroom capital. As a result, we try to motivate students by rewarding them with things they don't value. Many of us think that good grades should be enough of a motivation for doing the work. But for many of our students who have not bought into the economy of our classrooms, good grades mean very little. If we want to motivate students, we have to reward them with currencies they value. Take my friend Cynthia, for example.

One day, I dropped by her classroom to work on a presentation we were giving together at an upcoming conference. Although it was also Cynthia's planning period, she had a handful of students in her classroom making up a test. Her teaching assistant, Onerlin, monitored the students while we worked at a table in the back of the classroom.

It wasn't long before our work was interrupted by Onerlin's exasperated sigh. "Jesse," she said, "I have told you three times already to get to work. Take out your pencil and finish this test."

"I'm finished," Jesse said. He slumped in his seat and put his pencil on the desk.

"You are not finished, Jesse. You still have two pages to go. Now, get to work," Onerlin admonished.

Jesse threw the test on the floor and got up.

"Excuse me," Cynthia whispered, never taking her eyes off Jesse. "I'll be right back."

She put a smile on her face and went over to Jesse. "Boy, sit your little self down," she drawled playfully.

Jesse didn't smile, but he did reluctantly sit back in his seat. "Ms. Gill, I don't want to do this test. It's boring." He crossed his arms.

Cynthia leaned over Jesse's desk and whispered something to him. He looked up at her quizzically, and she looked him directly in the eye and smiled.

Jesse reached for the test. "I don't have a pencil."

"I've got one right here." Cynthia reached in her pocket and handed Jesse a pencil. "Now hurry up. You only have about 20 minutes."

Jesse got to work.

When Cynthia returned to the table, I whispered, “You’re amazing. What on earth did you say to him?”

“Who, Jesse? Chile, I just told him that if he finished his test, I’d make him a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

I laughed aloud, and Cynthia smiled enigmatically. “Don’t knock it, honey. It works.”

We didn’t hear a peep from Jesse for the next 20 minutes. He hunched over his desk and completed his test. When time was up, Jesse brought his test over to Cynthia.

“Did you do your best?” she asked him sternly.

“Yes, Ms. Gill. I even went back over it to check my work.”

Cynthia flipped through the test and checked each page. Then, she went to her desk and took out a loaf of bread, a vat of generic peanut butter, a jar of store-brand jelly, and a plastic knife. She made what was perhaps the ugliest peanut butter and jelly sandwich I had ever seen, but to Jesse, it was a work of art. When she finished the sandwich, she handed it to Jesse, who cradled it lovingly in the palms of his hands, grinning.

“Thank you, Ms. Gill,” he said reverently and carefully made his way to the door. As he left the classroom, we could hear him yell in the hall, “Hey Tito, DeMarco. Look what Ms. Gill made me!”

I asked Cynthia once about those peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Why were these kids willing to work so hard for something that seemed so trivial? She used cheap bread and cheaper peanut butter and jelly. The sandwiches she made were positively ugly. What was it about these sandwiches that could get kids motivated when nothing else would? After all, wasn’t it just a bribe—the high school equivalent of giving students candy if they finished their work?

“You’re focusing on the wrong thing. It’s not the sandwich itself that matters. It’s the fact that *I* make it for them. Cooking for someone else is one of the most nurturing acts a person can do. These kids don’t get enough nurturing at home. Jesse’s mother works two jobs. She doesn’t have time to make him a sandwich. So when I make him a sandwich, he feels nurtured and loved. Jesse has to know that I care about him before he will do anything else. When he feels like I care about him, he will do the work.”

*Yes, but...***Surely you don't expect me to start making my kids sandwiches!**

I am no Cynthia. Although I love to tell the peanut butter sandwich story, I did not go out and immediately buy a loaf of bread and start making sandwiches myself. I am just not that way. But I got her point. We did, after all, have the same students. My students, too, needed a certain amount of nurturing in order to be motivated. Most students do.

But no, I am not the same kind of nurturer as Cynthia is. If I had gone out and started making sandwiches, I would have been little more than a poor imitation of Cynthia, and my students would have seen right through me. I would have come off as false and insincere. I had to find a way to nurture my kids that was authentic and that fit with who I was.

Often when we read inspiring stories of great teachers or see a feel-good teacher movie, we want to rush out and do what they do. We grab a bullhorn like Joe Clark, or take them to an amusement park like Michelle Pfeiffer did in *Dangerous Minds*. We keep them after class for hours like Jaime Escalante. But we fail to consider whether our students are like those in the movies, or whether we are like those teachers. We want to be like them, sure, but we have to take into account our own personalities. What made Joe Clark or Jaime Escalante so successful was that they found a way to reach their students by being who they were.

Kids are smart. They can see through us. They know when we are being sincere and when we are being “fake.” Although they may cut us a little slack in the beginning, they will soon begin to rebel against our teacher act if we are not sincere. If we don't believe it, why should they?

So if making sandwiches is not your thing, figure out what is—and do that.

Cynthia understood the idea of paying kids in their currency. Rather than impose her value system on Jesse, she recognized what currency he was taking and used what worked in his economy.

Sure, Jesse should have been motivated by the intrinsic reward of doing well. But in Jesse's economy, the intrinsic reward was not nearly as important as that peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

When you start where your students are, you don't think in terms of “should.” If you want to motivate students to learn, first find out what

currency they are spending (or what currency they value), and pay them in that currency. From there, you can teach them how to find the reward in other things. For many of our students, intrinsic motivation has to be developed. It comes only after they have experienced the pleasure of doing well and know the rewards of success. At the beginning, many of our students haven't experienced consistent academic success and are not convinced that it will bring any pleasure. In fact, academic success has been a source of pain for them because it has been heretofore an unachievable goal. This is why it is so important to start with what motivates them and then, as they experience more success, help them transfer or become motivated by that success.

For some students, it will take grades or points or extra credit. For other students, it will take the promise of some more tangible reward like extra time on the playground or a field trip.

For Jesse, it took a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

### ***TRY THIS***

- Think about the rewards you currently have in place in your classroom. Are they consistent with what your students value? If not, think about how you can make them more consistent with your students' values. Pay attention to what your students value (or ask them!). Then, think of how you can reward them in ways that they value.

## **The Principle in Action**

One day, I was doing a formal observation in Chris's 7th grade math class as she was teaching students how to solve quadratic equations.

"How do we solve for  $x$  in this equation?" she asked, as she wrote an equation on the whiteboard.

Several students raised their hands. Chris waited a few beats and then called on one student. As the student talked, Chris wrote on the overhead. When the student finished, Chris asked, "Why did you choose to solve the equation the way that you did?"

The student paused for a second and considered his answer. Then he began to explain his reasoning to the class. When he finished, Chris asked the class, "Did anyone use a different way to solve this equation?"

A few students raised their hands. Chris called on a student who explained another way to solve the equation. When that student finished, Chris asked her, "Why did you choose to solve the equation that way?" Again, the student explained her reasoning. Then Chris asked the class, "Is there another way to solve this equation?"

This time, the students were less quick to raise their hands. Chris waited and let them think about her question for a moment. When after several moments, no one raised a hand, Chris prompted, "Let's see, you've added, subtracted, multiplied . . ." Again, Chris waited. Suddenly one student raised his hand. Chris called on him. "You could divide the two sides by 6," he offered.

Chris smiled. "OK, tell me how that would help me solve this equation." The student talked her through the equation as the other students took copious notes. Chris put down the whiteboard marker for a moment. "We have at least three ways of solving a quadratic equation here," she announced, pointing to each as she summarized the three methods. Then she asked, "Why would I use Method 1?" The students offered a few answers. Chris nodded her head, and then paused. "Well, are there situations where Method 2 might work better?" The students thought for a moment and then offered a few scenarios. Chris listened and probed with more questions until the students had suggested several different situations where Method 2 might work better than Method 1. "What about Method 3?" Again, the students explored the different scenarios.

When the students finished, Chris began to hand out a worksheet. "Now that we have learned how to solve quadratic equations, I want you to practice. This worksheet contains 12 problems. I want you to experiment with the three different methods that we just examined and find which method works best for you."

Chris didn't just teach her students one way to do things. She acknowledged that there were several different ways to solve the problem and allowed students to select the method that worked best for them. She helped them examine each method so that they understood the advantages and disadvantages that each offered and then let them decide based on their own preferences. As a result, Chris honored the currencies and preferences of her students and, at the same time, helped them acquire new currencies that they could use to be successful in her classroom.

## Getting Started

1. Examine your own currencies. Which currencies do you value in the classroom?
2. Pay attention to your students to discover which currencies they value and what currencies they are spending.
3. Look for any disconnect between the currencies you are accepting in the classroom and those the students are spending. Also look for ways that you may be spending currencies that the students do not value.
4. If the disconnect is because the students do not have classroom currency, help students use a currency they have to acquire classroom currency by showing them how their currencies are valuable, helping them acquire additional currencies and learn how to code switch.
5. If students have classroom currency but refuse to spend it, create a shared classroom community and reward them in currency they value.

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**Robyn R. Jackson, PhD**, has been an educator for over two decades. As a National Board–certified English teacher, she increased the enrollment of minority and nontraditional students in her AP Language and Composition classes and tripled her overall course enrollment within one year, without a decrease in her students’ test scores. As a middle school administrator in Montgomery County, Maryland, she worked to revise the district’s gifted and talented policy to be more inclusive of all students and helped craft the district’s critical Middle School Reform Plan. She also helped lead the largest middle school in the district to state and national Blue Ribbon status. As an educator, she has served as an adjunct professor and presents her own research at several national conferences.

Because of her practical approach to instruction, Dr. Jackson has become an internationally recognized presenter and consultant who has been featured in the *Washington Post*, a PBS/Annenberg television series, and Lifetime Television’s *Lifetime Live*. She believes that any teacher can become a master teacher with the right kind of support and practice. Thus, she works with schools and school systems throughout the world, helping them increase rigorous instruction, support and motivate struggling learners, give better teacher feedback, and build stronger school cultures. Dr. Jackson also hosts the popular podcast *School Leadership Reimagined*.

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