How to Prioritize and Do Less So Students Understand More

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TEACHING WITH CLARITY
How to Prioritize and Do Less So Students Understand More

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Understanding Clutter

This book is going to be challenging for you. If it were easy, I would simply ask you to do more, but as educators, I know we’re already good at that. Indeed, in my years as teacher, administrator, researcher, and consultant, I’ve never been in a school or district where everyone wasn’t already working hard. Everyone is busy; everyone is pursuing the next initiative.

In our pursuit of better meeting the needs of every child, entire systems are busy implementing new math or reading programs, or they’re establishing equity and social-emotional learning programs, or they’re setting up formative assessment systems or response to intervention programs, aligning curricula to state standards, or implementing new report cards. Or they’re doing everything at the same time.

In short, the underlying message is clear: *We’re not quite there yet because we haven’t added the right program.*

Teachers today are more adept at accessing and searching through information and resources than at any other time in human history. Somewhere out there on the internet is the next lesson idea, rubric, video clip, article, activity, performance assessment, assessment bank, incentive system, or bulletin board idea that might be better than the one you’re currently using (or you might find the magic solution that gets kids to put down their phones). The temptation to find these mythical solutions is real, but the
underlying message is clear: *We’re not quite there yet because we haven’t added the right resource or project.*

So why will this book be challenging for you? Because I’m going to ask you to do *less*.

If doing more in our schools and classrooms were the answer to better meeting the needs of every child, then we’d have met every goal and closed every gap by now. We don’t need more activities, resources, projects, assessments, or meetings. We need more *clarity*.

Clarity emerges when we prioritize our efforts to do less with greater focus. With this focus, we give our students time to prioritize their efforts and develop deeper understanding. The enemy of focus is clutter, which is anything that inhibits our ability to help students prioritize their strategic efforts to learn. Clutter is what happens when we do more with less focus. With clutter, there is never enough time or energy to find success; there is always more to cover and more to do. The first step on the path to clarity is eliminating the clutter we put in front of kids during the 16,380 instructional periods they experience in a typical K–12 education system.

Clarity begins to emerge when systems have the discipline to collectively answer three questions:

- What does it mean to understand?
- What is most important to understand?
- How do we prioritize our strategic effort to help students understand what is most important?

If we can’t provide clear answers to these questions, then no one in the system can prioritize—or align—their effort to their strategy. And when you try to accomplish something (whether it’s in school, at work, or with a hobby), a disconnect between your effort and strategy will almost always result in frustration or failure. What you mistakenly internalize as an ability problem (i.e., I tried hard, but I’m just not good at that), an effort problem (i.e., I guess I’m just not trying hard enough), or a time problem (i.e., I’d like to do that, but I don’t have time) is actually a failure to prioritize strategic effort.

Prioritizing and aligning strategy to effort is a challenge for all schools and teachers. However, this challenge requires educators to identify and
overcome a set of misguided assumptions about improvement that are outdated and rooted in the Industrial Age.

**The Industrial-Age Problem (and Irony) of Organizational Clutter**

During the Industrial Age, organizations and laborers worked to turn raw materials into a product of value. A passive set of raw materials would roll down an assembly line and get pieced together along the way. If everyone did his or her job right, a finished product emerged. If the product was of poor quality, the solution was to reorganize—the assembly line was restructured or the organizational chart was modified.

Schools today are still organized according to this somewhat archaic industrial model. Twelve years of formal education, class periods, and the accumulation of credits are an invention of the Industrial Age. According to this model, if we want a better product, then we need to structure things differently: we need to slow down the assembly line, ring the bells at different times, or ask workers to put in overtime. This Industrial-Age metaphor for restructuring schools to improve learning is clearly misguided, yet it persists. In *Five Levers to Improve Learning*, Jim Rickabaugh and I argue,

> Too often the effort put forth, the political chips spent, and the resources allocated to make these structural changes result in few, if any, meaningful differences in educational practices or student learning. . . . Changes such as moving to a block schedule, adding more computers, or developing a new report card fit neatly into strategic plans, and their implementation processes have clearly defined starting and ending dates. However, we argue that these types of changes often produce the least amount of leverage in terms of improving student learning. (Frontier & Rickabaugh, 2014, p. 10)

These changes rarely prioritize efforts to be more strategic at the point of contact between the student and teacher. Therefore, we conclude,

> Efforts focused on large-scale reform haven’t been successful because those efforts have failed to change schools. They haven’t been successful because, too often, the transactional, structural approaches that can change schools have little or nothing to do with the less visible but far more powerful strategies
required to change students’ learning experiences in those schools. (Frontier & Rickabaugh, 2014, p. 164)

Ironically, rather than improve students’ learning experiences, we’ve merely added to the system or made it more complex. Unfortunately, administrators often fail to realize they’ve merely contributed to organizational clutter. They’ve changed the system, yes, but they haven’t built new capacity for students to strategically focus their efforts to learn.

The Information-Age Problem (and Irony) of Curricular Clutter

A curriculum is a sequence of learning experiences designed to help students achieve a goal. In the Industrial Age, schools were expected to produce individuals who had the knowledge and skills to contribute to the economy and be a part of a literate, informed citizenry. Teachers directed students along a path to give them the opportunity to gather and learn the information that would make them educated.

In the early 1900s, schools and universities were of value because they were the organizations that could provide students with access to that information. If students paid attention and learned, the return on their investment would be to contribute to the economy and democracy. However, as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television became more and more easily accessible fixtures of American society, information became accessible everywhere and to everyone.

Nobel Prize winner Herbert Simon (1971) explained the gravity of this change:

In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention. (p. 40)

In the 50 years since Simon made that observation, the internet and cell phones have steadily increased the wealth of information available to each of us at an astronomical rate. Indeed, Simon couldn’t have imagined the vast wealth of information, or the corresponding poverty of attention, that
exists today. Not only is there more information available, it’s more easily accessible, and because there are no barriers to entry for posting something online, large amounts of the information is of lower quality. However, this only addresses a symptom of an even deeper challenge.

As Tim Wu (2016) explains in *The Attention Merchants*, in an era of unlimited information, the most powerful companies in the world exist to get people to pay attention to their information. The cumulative result, he argues, is that we are all in a state of constant distraction. In 1971, Herbert Simon saw a “wealth of information.” Today, there is wealth in information. More than ever before, *information is a product, distraction is a marketing strategy, and attention is the economy’s most profitable commodity.*

As educators, I don’t think we’ve fully acknowledged how this commoditization of information and attention has changed the relationship between students and schools. When information is a profitable product that is accessible everywhere, *the battle for kids’ attention is everywhere.* Schools are no longer the exclusive spaces where students go to access important information and acquire skills so they can one day be hired by Industrial Age companies, such as Shell Oil or Ford.

Today, access to information is occasionally about schools and learning, but more often it is about eyeballs, page views, and clicks. As we prepare students to be successful in the Information Age economy, we compete with companies like Google, Apple, and Facebook to get students to pay attention to our information. Every day, these companies efficiently facilitate the millions of pages of new content and become more effective in their use of strategies to garner attention. Clutter and distraction aren’t bugs in the system; they are its central features.

Ironically, in our quest to get students to pay attention, we immerse ourselves in the same sea of clutter that is also the source of our students’ constant distraction. Google searches for “rubrics” and “lesson plans” yield nearly 100,000,000 results. It’s no wonder we’re endlessly searching the internet for the next interesting article, video clip, lesson idea, activity, or easy-to-use rubric. But as we click on those links, do those new resources create clarity for learning, or do they create more clutter?
Choosing Clarity: Shared Purpose and Process

What are the choices we make each day to build a system that makes sense from the students’ perspective? When this question becomes a habit of mind among teachers and administrators, kids notice. It helps teachers acknowledge that their individual efforts are less important than how they focus their collective energy to help kids prioritize their efforts to learn. In his book *Essentialism*, business consultant Greg McKeown (2014) states, “Our highest priority is to protect our ability to prioritize” (p. 101). That’s a powerful statement for both personal and organizational growth, but how can it be applied to schools to create clarity amidst the clutter?

I’d like you to envision a system in which principals, teachers, and students all have the same answers to the three questions about alignment of understanding, strategy, and effort that I previously posed. Now imagine those principals, teachers, and students have one—and only one—priority to support that system. Consider the following six statements.

**Clarity of Shared Purpose**

- We have a shared understanding of what it means to understand.
- We have a shared understanding of what is most important to understand.
- We prioritize our use of time and strategies to support students’ strategic efforts to develop important skills and understandings.

**Clarity of Process**

- Administrators’ highest priority is to protect and develop their teachers’ ability to prioritize.
- Teachers’ highest priority is to protect and develop their students’ ability to prioritize.
- Students’ highest priority is to prioritize their strategic effort to learn what’s most important.

When this level of clarity is pursued as a system, both teachers and students are the beneficiaries. Less clutter translates to greater focus and more time and effort to pursue what is most important. Clarity is a strategic
choice, and you must be willing to do less by investing focused effort on what is most important.

As educators, we like to think we’ve already prioritized what is most important in our schools and classrooms. We haven’t. This book will help you understand why. This book is about focusing our collective efforts on the learning that matters most, creating systems that help students understand what those things are, and empowering students with the tools to focus their strategic efforts to improve. Not surprisingly, we’ll connect educational research to best practices. Six elements of clarity will be used to guide our efforts. We’ll also apply some powerful metaphors for prioritization drawn from fields ranging from medicine to mountain climbing, ideas for decluttering drawn from tips for tidying one’s home, and elements of design used to make your phone so easy to use.

The first step on the path to clarity is acknowledging that we have a clutter problem. To better understand this problem and how to address it, we need to consider what clutter looks like through a student’s eyes.

**Understanding Clutter: Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

- As a school, how have we clarified for students what it means to understand?
- As a school, how have we clarified for students what is most important to understand?
- As a school, do our initiatives typically result in doing more or in focusing our efforts to do less more effectively? Explain.
- How well do we prioritize our use of time and strategies to guide students toward the most important understandings? What evidence points to our successes? Challenges?
- How might students benefit if they were clearer about where, and how, to invest in their strategic efforts to learn?
improve in the areas that matter most. Clarity doesn’t happen by chance. Clarity happens by choice.

The first step to solving a problem is acknowledging that one exists. If we are serious about protecting our students’ ability to prioritize, we need to acknowledge the root causes of clutter and look for evidence of how clutter and the clarity paradox impede the effectiveness of our teaching and can have a debilitating impact on learners and learning. As you read the descriptors in Figure 9.9, take an empathetic approach. Stand in your students’ shoes and ask yourself if they notice evidence of clutter or the clarity paradox. They might not have the vocabulary or insight to explain what they experience in the language we’ve used throughout this book, but the results are predictable: they internalize their inability to navigate clutter as an internal deficiency in their ability to learn.

**Figure 9.9**

**Systems That Choose Clutter: Indicators of Concern**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Causes of Clutter</th>
<th>Evidence of Clutter</th>
<th>Evidence of the Clarity Paradox</th>
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| **Scattered Priorities for Learning** | • Little or no articulation of what is important in a discipline or course.  
• Little or no articulation of what it means to understand in a discipline or course.  
• Success criteria are arbitrary.  
• Students and teachers are overwhelmed with expectations and resources. | Individual teachers establish their own priorities for curricular programs, use their own descriptors and scales for success criteria, and use their own definitions of key assessment terms—but students see clutter as they move from course to course and grade to grade. |
| **Random Assessment** | • Assessment tasks are not aligned to priority standards or shared success criteria.  
• Tasks emphasize coverage of a lot of surface-level knowledge or activities detached from standards. | Assessments are aligned to teacher’s own expectations or interests—but students see little or no continuity related to the most important evidence of learning as they move from course to course or grade to grade. |
| **Arbitrary Expectations** | • Individual tasks are assessed with different success criteria each time.  
• Success criteria are based on what is easy to observe (e.g., directions, quantitative descriptors) rather than important evidence of understanding. | Individual teachers can justify their expectations for how assessment evidence relates to their own success criteria—but as students move from teacher to teacher, they see expectations as arbitrary. |
<table>
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<th>Transactional Feedback</th>
<th>Effortful Teaching</th>
<th>Reactive Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback is justification of a grade, about effort rather than strategy, about the task rather than the standards, or given as vague praise.</td>
<td>The curriculum invests a lot of time in activities without understanding or in coverage of content without prioritized constraints.</td>
<td>Students are overwhelmed with expectations amidst a misalignment of expectation and opportunity resulting in a disconnect among ability, effort, and strategy, resulting in a diminished belief in one's capacity to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is little or no expectation that students are to use feedback in meaningful ways to improve.</td>
<td>Everything is taught, and everything is of equal importance.</td>
<td>If students don't do well, it is assumed to be due to a deficiency in the student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual teachers can justify the validity of their feedback and give thoughtful feedback to students—but students don't know how feedback &quot;works&quot; and aren't sure what to do with it.</td>
<td>Teachers put forth tremendous effort but are frustrated with results.</td>
<td>Due to a lack of continuity across programs and courses, students don't have time to develop the most important transferable skills and strategies. Alternatively, teachers don't see their discipline from the perspective of a novice and fail to provide important opportunities to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual teachers can justify their curriculum and assessment, but as students take different courses, there is little continuity among standards, success criteria, and priorities. Teachers believe they have to put forth a lot of effort to catch students up or reteach what they believe should have been taught.</td>
<td>Students prioritize efforts to comply or forget, rather than learn.</td>
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Fortunately, once evidence of the clutter problem and the clarity paradox has been identified, we can do something about it. The action steps described throughout this book can be used as a road map toward system-level clarity. Figure 9.10 shows success criteria (for us, not our students!) that would be evident in a system that has prioritized and aligned teachers’ and students’ strategic efforts to learn.

Throughout this book, we’ve articulated a systemic approach to prioritizing collective efforts aligned to what is most important to learn and what it means to learn. This approach requires the disciplined use of a framework that makes it possible to choose clarity through prioritized constraints. These constraints reap the greatest benefits for teaching and learning when they are used by everyone in the system to guide choices about what they will—and will not—do. Prioritizing without decluttering is really just reorganizing the clutter. If we are going to protect our students’ ability to prioritize their
Figure 9.10
Systems That Choose Clarity: Evidence of Success

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Shared Priorities</th>
<th>Evidence of System-Level Clarity for Teachers and Teaching</th>
<th>Evidence of System-Level Clarity for Learners and Learning</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focused Success Criteria</strong></td>
<td>We use a shared scale for success criteria as aligned to a manageable number of prioritized standards to focus our collective attention and energy on what is most important to learn and what it means to learn.</td>
<td>Students see clear, consistent expectations for what it means to understand and clear priorities for what is most important to understand across programs, courses, units, and lessons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intentional Assessment</strong></td>
<td>We use a shared language of assessment terms and are intentional in designing high-quality assessment tasks to gather the most important evidence of learning as aligned to the prioritized standards and success criteria.</td>
<td>Students can prioritize their attention and strategic effort to focus on assessment tasks that are intentionally designed to minimize clutter and elicit clear evidence of important understandings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reliable Inferences</strong></td>
<td>We agree how the most important assessment evidence relates to the most relevant level of shared success criteria. We have established a high level of interrater reliability in evaluating students' work.</td>
<td>Students have a clear and accurate understanding of how success criteria can be used to describe their assessment evidence, and they use that information to plan, monitor, and evaluate their strategic efforts to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Meaningful Feedback</strong></td>
<td>We use our shared understanding of how assessment evidence relates to success criteria to give high-quality judgmental and developmental feedback that is used by students in meaningful ways to prioritize their strategic efforts to learn.</td>
<td>Students are clear about the purpose of judgmental and developmental feedback and use feedback in meaningful ways to affirm and inform their strategic efforts to learn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shared Purpose</strong></td>
<td>We establish a shared purpose for learning and communicate a clear, concise, and consistent set of priorities related to what it most important to understand and what it means to understand across programs, courses, units, and lessons.</td>
<td>Students are clear about the purpose of school, courses, units, and lessons. They prioritize their strategic efforts to deepen and internalize their understanding of what is most important to learn, and they transfer those understandings to authentic contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responsive Teaching and Learning</strong></td>
<td>We protect students' ability to prioritize and develop their capacity to invest effort in the deliberate use of strategies that empower them to be responsive to opportunities to learn.</td>
<td>Students believe strategic effort is more important than innate ability and trust their teachers to provide learning opportunities that help them prioritize their strategic efforts to learn.</td>
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strategic efforts to learn, we need to commit to using resources and making decisions each day that are focused, intentional, reliable, meaningful, and purposeful to ensure the system is responsive to their learning needs.

For a summary of important ideas and strategies discussed in this chapter, see Figure 9.11.

Responsive Learning: Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- How do I/we clarify for students that aligning strategies and effort to learning goals is more important than innate ability?
- How do I/we use the right instructional strategy, in the right way, at the right time to support students to prioritize their strategic effort to learn?
- If components described in this chapter were implemented in our school/district, how might teachers and students benefit after a few years of consistent efforts to use them to prioritize students’ strategic efforts to learn?

Responsive Learning: Revisiting the Scenarios

In the first scenario (The unresponsive path to learned helplessness), despite the concern and care demonstrated by the teacher, the conditions for responsive learning were not present. This course was a walking tour past some interesting landmarks. It emphasized coverage of content rather than using specific instructional strategies designed to scaffold students to deeper levels of understanding. Furthermore, the course concealed how comedians use strategies to think like a comedian. Because of the absence of reliable success criteria and valid assessment evidence, the teacher was not able to make reliable inferences about where students should prioritize strategic efforts to learn. The feedback given to the student to improve was invalid. When the student responded to the feedback and still did poorly, he attributed his inability to demonstrate evidence of understanding as an internal deficiency rather than as an inability to develop and apply appropriate strategies.
In the second scenario (How alignment supports a thriving response), the teacher revised the course to effectively align elements to prioritize her students’ strategic efforts to learn. There is a clear focus on important priority standards that have been aligned to a reliable scale for success criteria. The revised assessment tasks intentionally direct students’ attention and effort to the most important content, skills, and strategies throughout the entire course. Because the evidence is a valid representation of what is most important, the teacher—and her students—are able to make accurate, reliable inferences and generate meaningful feedback to affirm and inform next efforts for learning. The purpose of the course is now clear. Students are well positioned to be responsive to the opportunities that are presented throughout the course to prioritize their strategic efforts to learn.
### Figure 9.11
Responsive Learning: Avoiding Clutter, Minimizing the Clarity Paradox, and Choosing Clarity

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<tr>
<th>Clutter</th>
<th>Clarity Paradox</th>
<th>Clarity</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>To avoid clutter</td>
<td>To minimize the clarity paradox</td>
<td>To choose clarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Don’t assume students believe they have the ability to be successful in your discipline.</td>
<td>• Acknowledge and act on the shared belief that our highest priority is to protect and develop our students’ abilities to prioritize their strategic efforts to learn.</td>
<td>• Develop students’ ability to strategize by modeling how the right strategy can be applied in the right way, at the right time, to improve learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Don’t give walking tours past important landmarks as a strategy to help students develop deep understanding.</td>
<td>• Strive to see the entire system, not only our classrooms, through the eyes of our students.</td>
<td>• Develop students’ ability to apply strategies effectively by teaching them to plan, monitor, and evaluate their efforts to learn.</td>
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<td>• Don’t conceal strategies (like a magician) in a manner that causes students to think innate ability, rather than strategy, are what determine one’s ability to learn.</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Protect students’ ability to prioritize by accepting a limited number of shared constraints to clarify what is most important to understand, what it means to understand, and what we accept as evidence of understanding.</td>
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