

Monday's Focus

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What Great Teachers Do Differently – 14 Things That Matter Most Todd Whitaker

Number 10: Base Every Decision on the Best People

We have all heard the expression to “teach to the middle,” where the majority of the students cluster. However, as long as we teach to the middle that is where the majority of our students will remain whether we like it or not. Great teachers take a different approach. Great teachers aim high. Great teachers make decisions following three simple guidelines:

1. What is the purpose?
2. Will this actually accomplish the purpose?
3. What will the best people think?

The first rule seems very straightforward. One way of reflecting on our teaching practice is to look at why we do what we do. Too often however instead of asking “what is the purpose,” we settle for “what is the reason?” For example, we might ask why we choose a particular homework assignment, why we assign a certain page, or why we ask students to solve certain problems. If we examine closely we might see that the reason is different than our purpose. Ever wonder why we ask students to do an entire page of problems? Why we read all of a play instead of selections? Why we show an entire movie? Does the reason we do these things fit the purpose?

The second rule takes a little more thought and examination. How will we recognize if what we are doing is actually going to accomplish the purpose? We've all seen signs warning shoplifters and threatening prosecution. Do shop keepers really think these signs discourage shoplifters? I think they already know it is against the law and that if they get caught they face prosecution. But do shop keepers ever wonder how those signs make honest shoppers feel. We all know of instances where a teacher assigns a consequence to an entire class because of

the actions of a few. Does that really stop or change the behavior of the disruptive students? For us, do we “differentiate” instruction or offer different methods when we reteach or do we just give more of the same?

What will our best people think? It’s a mistake to focus on the least effective people. When we do that, at best we make our best people feel guilty and at worst we insult them. Teachers face this problem in their classrooms. Blanket statements, broad directives, and global statements are unfair to those we all know our most effective people don’t need to hear. Great teachers treat every student with the best student in mind. Not necessarily the ones with the best grades, but the nicest, most caring, and most well rounded student teachers welcome into their classrooms. Our best students want misbehavior dealt with and students who disrupt dealt with, but they want us to do it respectfully. Great teachers know that if we teach to the middle we sell our best students short. The atmosphere in a well-run classroom is charged with positive energy and where every student is engaged. Great teachers don’t let the best students rounded students at the forefront when making decisions. Your classes will be better off and your job will be more enjoyable.

How to use groups effectively was suggested as the next topic for information to help you in the classroom. I hope today’s first installment will be a beneficial start.

Dynamics of Learning Groups-- Meeting the Needs of All Students:

Plan!

Start by defining, in your own mind, the purpose of using groups in your classroom. If you want a type of temporary study group, then kids could probably group themselves. If, however, you're planning to have students do projects or review activities throughout the year in groups, structure the groups accordingly to achieve the best possible results for all learners.

Structure!

Organize groups heterogeneously. It's often helpful at the beginning of the term to give informal, yet informative, personality profiles and learning style inventories to help you assess the individuals in your classroom.

Balance!

When you know the learning styles of each student, you can then group your students so that you include an auditory learner, visual learner, and kinesthetic learner in each group. You want to avoid having a group of all visual learners, for instance, to best provide for all types of activities you might choose to do. I have also grouped students with a focus on their multiple intelligences.

Designate!

After observing the personalities in your classroom, designate roles within each group. A personality profile may help you determine which student in each group would enjoy serving as leader, which as spokesperson, which as recorder, and which as helper (these roles are based on Spencer Kagan's Cooperative Learning Methods).

Organize!

Arrange the desks or tables in your classroom in sets of four if possible. Groups of four students function best; groups of three or five are workable but not as beneficial to individual students. If desks are arranged in groups to start with and remain that way daily, rather than requiring adjustment of the room or seats, students become part of those groups and respond naturally and willingly to any group activity you choose to do. This allows for spontaneous group discussions when they happen, rather than having to defer a discussion until groups are arranged.

Experiment!

The traditional use of groups is to have them complete projects or assignments together. I prefer to make groups an integral part of each day's time in the classroom. Here are some ideas:

- - During reading out loud with students, I pause and ask students to discuss an issue question with their groups--this works well if the question requires analysis of the text--it is boring for everyone if used to discuss what is directly stated in the text.
- - This type of group discussion can be adapted and used during the course of any whole-class instruction, regardless of content area. It can be adjusted to pairs, also, and definitely produces better results than whole-class drill of phonics or math concepts, etc. because it guarantees more individuals are actively involved.
- - At the end of class, as a closure activity ask groups to discuss and create a "Headline" for the day's class session based on what they learned. Then allow time for the spokesperson of each group to share the headline with the whole class. This could be adapted to an "end of the week" or "end of the unit" activity. This also works at the

beginning of the period to help students remember what they did the day before so that you can easily continue the lesson.

- - Peer response groups help writers and speakers--use the groups to provide feedback and a real audience for the students. Students who fear sharing their ideas with large groups develop confidence as they share with a well-chosen small group.

*These are just a few ways you can integrate groups into daily activity, rather than thinking of them as only useful for completing whole projects or assignments--experiment!

Monitor!

You get to have much more "one-on-one" teaching time with groups. As groups discuss, even just one question, walk around the room and listen to the conversations. Students will get used to your "visits" and will use them as opportunities to ask questions which they might not have asked in front of the whole class. This also allows you to give spontaneous and prompt praise when individuals show understanding or competence--you're right there next to them as they achieve. You can also more easily and quickly assess which individuals need more help because you can hear their individual voices...or silences; whole-class drill or instruction can obscure this assessment.

Trust!

Believe that pairs or groups will do what you ask them to do. If they don't lunge into the activity, look critically at what you've asked of them. I've found that if my students don't participate eagerly, then I've probably given them an activity that requires little analytical thought (an "answer the questions at the end of the chapter" type of activity) or I have not given them a clear understanding of why I'm asking them to do the activity.

Present!

One of the hazards of group work is grades. Grading group activities often creates more problems than the activity is worth--and what gets thrown out is the activity. Instead, throw out the grades and have groups present or publish their work for the class. Grades often skew the focus of the activity and are very difficult to fairly assess. On the other hand, when groups know that they will be sharing their conclusions or products with the class, they hold themselves accountable and participate.

Change!

I form new groups at the beginning of every quarter. I also try to give students varying roles through the year. These changes develop individuals'








social and academic skills as they work with others whom they might not have chosen.

 *Enjoy!*

This is the most important aspect of using groups--you get to enjoy your students because you're not dealing with as many behavior problems. Students who disrupt class, often do so because they desire attention; with groups, every individual gets a chance to talk at least once during the class time. Just that one opportunity alleviates the pressure for some kids--they know they won't have to "sit still" for a long period of time so they relax and participate more positively in all activities.

All of the above written by Laurie Hagberg, 1999
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For More Information About Using Groups:

-  [Learning Styles](#) - This site offers an excellent overview!**
-  [Tests, Tests, Tests...Personality Assessment, etc.](#)**
-  [Project Zero: Harvard Projects & Multiple Intelligences: Gardner's Theory](#)**
-  [Spencer Kagan Cooperative Learning Methods](#)**
-  [Cooperative Learning Center](#)**
-  [Cooperative Learning - Teamwork](#)**
-  [Reading List for Cooperative Learning](#)**

Coming activities:

School Board Meeting is tonight in the high school cafeteria.

Wednesday is Mid-Terms already!

Quote of the Week:

“All excellent schools incorporate rigor, relevance, and relationships.” –Wendy Kopp