Questioning Conventional Wisdom

As the end-of-school frenzy was waning, a friend and I stopped to invite a colleague to go to lunch. He declared he had no time and asked us impatiently, holding up a batch of papers, "Do I have to fill these out, too?" "No," we answered, "but those are the administrator evaluations. You ought to do them." Our colleague threw the forms into the trash can, and we went on to lunch.

Later, thinking about his action, I got upset. This teacher is bright, hard-working, and creative; he cares about his students and brings tremendous enthusiasm for his subject into his classroom. Yet he has accepted one of the myths of teaching: "Administrators and fads come and go, but my classroom is my kingdom."

The conventional wisdom of teaching consists of many of these old sayings, which are handed down from veterans to novices and repeated like a liturgy, year after year. Such common attitudes may be comforting at times, but unless we begin to question these assumptions, teaching will not be a true profession.

Much has been written lately about the growing knowledge base for teaching. However, practitioners need to find access to this information; and perhaps we first need to exercise the kind of critical thinking that distinguishes mere workers from genuine professionals. Workers can concern themselves only with their own place on the assembly line, following management instructions as they must. Professionals concern themselves with the whole workplace and ask questions about practice and purpose. They seek greater understanding and responsibility, not less. In the spirit of professionalism, therefore, we must continually gather new information and challenge conventional wisdom.

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My responsibility, then, (exhausting as it is) does not end at my classroom door. When I have the chance to fill out a survey from the district or am invited to give feedback to our building administrators, I need to do so. If I assume no one in power cares, then surely my input won't count. What happens "out there" does affect me in my own classroom and vice versa. In addition, if I want to be more effective, I need to find out what other teachers are doing and thinking.

There are many other areas in which the conventional wisdom must be questioned so that professional growth and empowerment can occur. For instance, most teachers assume that ability grouping is a good thing; it seems to make sense and makes the job more manageable. Yet, in a survey of the literature, Passow (1988) shows that the benefits of ability grouping for the student are far from clear. Passow notes that an appropriate curriculum and flexibility of movement for students are important; ability grouping, in and of itself, may accomplish nothing or may even be harmful. Teachers also need to question new buzzwords—the conventional wisdom of the future—like "time-on-task" or "focus." Doesn't it matter if the task is worth doing? What if we want students to create their own expectations or tasks?

In short, professionals act for themselves and their profession; they are not merely acted upon. They seek greater understanding and responsibility, not less. In the spirit of professionalism, therefore, we must continually gather new information and challenge conventional wisdom.

Reference


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New Voices: Immigrant Students in U.S. Public Schools
NCAS Research and Policy Report
Boston:
The National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1988
Reviewed by K. Paul Kasambira, Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois.

Science in Cinema: Teaching Science Fact Through Science Fiction Films
LeRoy W. Dubock, Suzanne E. Mosher, and Judith E. Boss
New York:
Teachers College Press, 1988
Reviewed by Sidney Besvinick, University of Miami, Florida.
Good science fiction has always been based on sound scientific principles. The thesis of Science in Cinema is that the 34 sci-fi films the authors have chosen provide opportunities for teachers and students to identify the scientific principles on which the stories are based and to challenge the validity of the inferences that go beyond reasonable data. The authors provide a plot summary and scientific commentary for each film and list distributors of 16 mm and videocassette copies. Ten films are given more detailed presentations, including classroom activities, additional discussion topics, literary commentary, and a bibliography. Unfortunately, several of the films (The Fly, Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan, Close Encounters) are not true science fiction but fantasy films with little scientific credibility. Teachers and students, therefore, will have to be selective in the films they choose to analyze.
Middle school and high school teachers who work with science clubs or with any students willing to accept a challenge will find this book useful. Available from Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1234 Amsterdam Ave., New York, NY 10027.

Planning Educational Systems: A Results-Based Approach
Roger Kaufman
Lancaster, Pa.: Technomic Publishing Co., Inc., 1988
Reviewed by Gerald D. Bailey, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas.
This detailed guide to building and managing educational systems takes the reader through the stages of planning, analyzing information, and implementing the results. The book’s organization proceeds from simple to complex. The easy-to-read narrative incorporates ideas from education as well as from business and industry. The most important section deals with needs assessment; this section is mandatory reading for educators responsible for school planning.
While the generic nature of school planning is the strength of the book, it also becomes a weakness. Those readers wishing to apply this information to site-based management or whose schools are small/rural as opposed to large/urban will see limitations in the general nature of the information. In the main, however, this is a valuable book for superintendents, staff development directors, and curriculum directors interested in school planning or improvement. Available from Technomic Publishing Company, Inc., 851 New Holland Ave., Box 3535, Lancaster, PA 17604.

Classroom Teaching Skills: A Primer
Kenneth D. Moore
New York: Random House, 1988
Excellence in Teaching with Seven Laws
Carl Shaefer
Reviewed by Sbeila Rezaik, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.
Both Classroom Teaching Skills and Excellence in Teaching will help teachers at elementary, secondary, and adult levels. Because the books take different approaches in expressing the ideas, however, individual readers may prefer one book over the other.
Generally, Classroom Teaching Skills is more detailed. It teaches pre-instructional skills such as writing objectives and planning the presentation and instructional skills such as reinforcement, questioning, and classroom management. The book provides bibliographies, an index, a glossary, and review questions with answer keys. This work could easily be used as a supplementary textbook in methods and educational psychology classes.
Excellence in Teaching is an abridgment of John Milton Gregory’s 1884 publication, The Seven Laws of Teaching. Readers are introduced to laws regarding the teacher and the teaching process, the learner and the learning process, the lesson, the language, and review and application. Although the principles presented by Gregory apply to any kind of teaching, occasional references to teachers in Christian education reflect Gregory’s background as a Baptist minister. Carl Shaefer’s ver-
Excellence in Teaching with Seven
work to find specific ways to accom-
scribe ways to create that interest.
greater extent. Both publications are
both a theoretical and a practical guide
laws and then referring to Moore's
accomplish the law. For instance, Shafer's
inn a lesson, and Moore s work de-
Moore discusses body language to a
of ideas and actions that allows them to
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Giamatti adds his voice to
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The author advises us to transcend
between education and schooling, Gia-
and research. Giamatti adds his voice to
to those who have warned against turning
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and research. Giamatti adds his voice to
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job' if they acquire a diploma.

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Simon J Bronner
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