The Workshop Way to Student Success

Nurturing dignity and intelligence is paramount in classrooms based on Grace Pilon's innovative design, where students learn in a healthy climate of routine and freedom.

Our vision of success is too small. We can achieve far more than we imagined. Furthermore, the means to do so are now available.

Those are the conclusions I reached after a long hard look at a classroom approach that has been long developing although still is little known.

I started my studies with a visit to Danneel School, a school that had just begun using that approach. Danneel is in New Orleans, stuck in one of those classically depressing slums. As I approached the school, I see many boarded up taverns. I guess the young men slouching around are peddling drugs.

But then I walk about the building and see the students, apparently all poor and black, remarkably busy at learning tasks. I see diligent work in classrooms after classroom, from kindergarten to grade eight, even in classrooms led by teachers who seem close to burnout.

"Last year at this time," Principal Rudolf Detiege tells me, "the scene was very different. Not very much serious study. The halls full of running and yelling. Suspensions ran about 10 a month, with lots of vicious acting out. Now we suspend none or one a month, and then only because we have to, for legal reasons. Our lowest attendance rate, in kindergarten, is now 96 percent. Seventh and eighth grade classes average 98 percent."

To explain the change, we go to Grace Pilon, the person behind the transformation. It is her classroom design that the teachers are using. "That change is not surprising," she says, "We get it whenever teachers begin showing students how to live as fully dignified, intelligent human beings."
And Pilon is ready to tell us precisely how a teacher, any teacher, can do that, with almost any kind of student, using what she calls the Workshop Way. It’s a way for a teacher to organize time, content, and materials so human growth is not left to chance. It’s a way all teachers can give all students the conditions that release their remarkable human potentials. And it works with all students because it does not depend on where students start. Neither does it depend on the prior learning of students or on the background of teachers.

A Menu of Activities
Walk into a typical Workshop Way classroom, and you see one wall covered with task signs—like a menu. The students know each day they have to work their way through those tasks, doing them in order, one at a time, working alone or with a self-selected partner. Students begin their tasks when they first enter the room. They continue until the teacher hits the “dinger bell” twice, the signal for all students to clear their desks and get ready for a whole class lesson, or until the teacher calls individuals together for a small group lesson.

An elementary classroom wall might have 20 task signs posted. Here are some samples from a 2nd grade room:

- Tracing. Students trace an outline of one hand on scrap paper and then shade in the space with parallel lines. They are told that to draw straight lines without a ruler takes brain power, concentration, and eye-hand coordination.

- Partner Reading. Students pair up and take turns reading to each other from any storybook they choose, proceeding in any way they choose.

- Study Cards. Each student gets a stack of flash cards to sort into two piles, “I know these” and “I don’t know these.” The student then asks a friend for help in practicing the I-don’t-know cards.

- Ten Pages. Students open a text to the assigned page and then flip ahead 10 pages, getting whatever they get, sometimes nothing much, sometimes an idea, curiosity, or bit of text information, yet always with a chance to learn something new and handle that opportunity on their own.

While the students are busy at such tasks, I see the teacher calling one or another small group together. In some classes I see reading groups, although in the Workshop Way design reading groups are formed by learning style, not reading ability. I also see homework reporting groups, in which every student gets a personal moment to tell the teacher what has been accomplished (or not accomplished) from the prior day’s homework assignment. And I see special groups containing the five or six students most lacking in self-discipline, the kind of students most likely to drive a teacher nutty. Pilon offers specific guidelines for meeting with these students. Ask them to bring the tasks they are working on to your table, she says, and to keep working just as they were doing, while you simply observe. Occasionally offer a comment to one of the students, aiming to heighten the student’s awareness or refine his or her consciousness. Here are some sample comments I heard during my visit:

To a girl filling in lines on her hand’s outline: “What was the first thing you thought about after you traced your hand?”

“I don’t know,” says she.

“OK,” replies the teacher, noncommittally, as the girl keeps working.

To a student working on a puzzle: “Did you have a reason for putting these two pieces side by side?”

“They seem to go together, don’t they?” he replies.

“In what way?” probes the teacher.

“I just put these pieces side by side,” he repeats.

“Why didn’t you put this piece over there?” the teacher gently probes again.

“Because there is no piece over there,” is his answer.

“I see,” says the teacher, “just wanted to know.”

And so it might go, the teacher gently, acceptingly, yet persistently challenging students to become more aware of what they are doing, to be more conscious of the choices they are making, so they might advance their ability to control their impulses and, more generally, use their intelligence to manage their lives.

Guidelines for Better Classrooms
The Workshop Way is outlined in stunning detail in a set of guidebooks Pilon authored for each grade level, pre-kindergarten to high school. She offers teachers guidance on how to run a classroom so they cover all the subject matter that must be covered and, remarkably, respect all the students all the time.

I can’t scan any of her books without marveling at the ingenuity and range of activities and tasks, the thoughtfulness and care given to each moment of the day, the ways in which students are encouraged to be curious, to think, to work, to learn in ways that are meaningful and personally relevant.

As teacher Jackie von Casimirski and student Sabrina Earn of the Daniel School discuss Sabrina’s homework, they share a special moment. In Workshop Way classrooms, encouraging students and nurturing their human dignity are foremost on teachers’ agendas.
of Grace Pilon. Included are suggestions for inspiring the disinterested, making lectures highly involving, getting students actually to do their homework, handling those rascals who flout the procedures, getting parents to play constructive roles in the process, arranging subgroups so students can learn in styles right for them, getting students to practice memorizing facts effortlessly, and just about anything else a teacher would need to know.

For example, do you have an elementary class that sometimes gets overexcited? Try announcing that all students are to take out their texts and read along with you. Promptly begin reading aloud. After a sentence or two, stop and tell students to write the next two words. Then say, “The answer is so-and-so,” and promptly begin reading again, fully expecting the class to tune in and settle down.

Or do some of your students fear failing? Frequently remind the class that we learn more when we are willing to risk being wrong. When a student raises a hand, perhaps say, “Tim, are you willing to be wrong?” Or, “Tim, you don’t have to know this perfectly, of course. Remember it’s intelligent to ask for help.” And often tell all students, “Don’t worry if you don’t understand. We get it whenever the time is right for us. We each have our own time clocks for growing. Besides, no one has to understand everything. We all end up knowing some things, but no one knows everything.”

Want your students to do good work? Don’t say, “Do your best.” Some students will hear that as a command and, to maintain their own integrity, will then resent doing good work. Don’t try to motivate them. Just involve them. Catch them up in activity. Show them what good work looks like. Show examples, but remove them quickly so students do not merely copy. Inspire a desire for excellence. And then let students alone. Stay off their backs. Trust that, when they are ready, students will do as all humans do: feel an itch to make progress, reach out in a direction that feels right to them, perhaps even seek the beauty of perfection.

Teacher Claire Smith and student Nyela Shaw, also of the Danneel School, discuss Nyela’s individualized vocabulary-homework project in a small-group structure. Workshop Way guidelines offer teachers many techniques for keeping students engaged in their work.

Inner Security and Freedom to Learn
Pilon says her design for running a class works because, first, it communicates inner security to students. They know what to expect. The structures and daily routines are clear. More critically, they can discover that they can always succeed. No humiliation, no sarcasm, no teasing, no one ignored, not one negative judgment in a whole class day.

“Who can say how many electrons are in a hydrogen atom?” asks a high school Workshop Way teacher. Students know to raise hands, for the teacher never picks out a student to answer, never wanting to risk embarrassing someone. The teacher calls on Billy, who says, “Two.”

“Two? There is only one electron in a hydrogen atom,” says the teacher, matter-of-factly, deliberately avoiding asking another student for the correct answer. Why? It will be easier, claims Pilon, for Billy to hear the correct answer from the teacher, who is expected to know, than from another student, whom Billy might then consider smarter or quicker than he, a comparison that might generate a feeling of inferiority.

Then there is freedom, freedom to live and learn. Pilon is adamant about freedom. Students need the security of order and routines, but they also need enough freedom to learn to manage their own time and energy. Students are offered guidance but are left to manage themselves, to notice what happens as they do so, and to grow from that experience. They are expected steadily to advance their self-management powers.

So in large group lessons, for example, students know they may not disturb others. Why not? Not because it's a class rule. Not because they will get a bad mark. But because it's just not intelligent for one person to mess things up for another person. That is the kind of a statement you hear from a Workshop Way teacher, who clearly assumes all students will understand the advantages of using intelligence—which they apparently do, if not immediately, eventually.

Pilon claims that the Workshop Way creates an inner environment in students. It engages students with academic content in ways that establish within them the inner environment people need if they are to achieve their human potentials. Developing intelligence and practicing intelligent behavior is what schooling is all about in the Workshop Way.
Promoting Intelligent Self-Control

Whenever disruptive behavior comes up, Pilon recommends that teachers see it simply as evidence of a student's stage of development. Teachers are not to scold, punish, even stare disapprovingly. They are to stop dangerous acts but never to hint that a student is dumb or bad. One Workshop Way teacher came upon two students fighting in the hall. She pulled them apart, saying to one, "Count backwards from 100 by 2's. Go!" Then to the other, "Count by 3's from 10. Go!" Soon enough, both students forgot what they were fighting about.

When it comes to disciplining language, says Pilon, it's best to be silent. Just step in and stop it, or start some tease. We can all use our brain power, says Pilon, it's best to be silent. When, as all humans do, we lose control of our impulses and do not use our brains, we can regain control simply by pausing and calling on our native good sense.

During the first few days of school, students are reminded that some common behaviors make sense. It makes sense, for example, to take turns, help one another, remind someone who has forgotten. It does not make sense to push, use offensive language, or tease. "We can all use our brain power," a Workshop Way teacher might say, "and when, as all humans do, we lose control of our impulses and do not use our brains, we can regain control simply by pausing and calling on our native good sense."

Early on, students are also taught some emergency procedures. They practice, for example, pausing whenever the teacher hits the dinner bell once. That's the signal to stop individual activities and silently watch the second hand make one, two, or three full turns (each student decides how many), and then resume activities. "We use that whenever the noise level gets high. It helps us settle our insides and regain our awareness."

Or the class might practice the visitor activity. For this, the teacher silently walks over to one girl, for example, who is in danger of hurting others, and escorts her to the group the teacher is working with. That student is then a visitor in the group, working along with it until she is ready to say to herself, "Now I know what to do" or "I now have my power to handle things." Whenever the student concludes she has reached that point, she simply returns to her own work.

A Workshop Way teacher once snapped at a 7-year-old boy. She soon returned and said to the boy, "I'm sorry I spoke that way before."

"Why are you telling me you're sorry?" asked the student. "Because," she said, "we are all human beings and human beings should not talk to each other that way."

A group of 6-year-olds brought Shirley to the principal's office.

She was stepping on our feet hard," the students complained.

"I see. said the principal. "Well, Shirley, would you like to apologize to these boys and girls?"

"No," insists Shirley.

"Well, boys and girls, Shirley is not ready to apologize now. Maybe another day. Are you willing to wait?"

"No scolding. No. You should know better."

Pilon explains:

See, students do have common sense. They do know what's right. And they know what's wrong. That's the key message to get across. Scolding, even frowning, gives them a very different message. It tells them I do not believe they know what's right. I never want to get students to doubt themselves.

Creating an Inner Environment in Students

Teachers who opt for the Workshop Way are told to assume that at any time even the most resistant learner or the slowest thinker can turn on his or her full intelligence and sprint off in ways never imagined. Teachers are advised to continue offering all students...
chances to learn whatever academic content the grade level expects from them. "None of us can ever know when someone else can suddenly come to life," says Pilon. "We never can know the full potentials of others."

Pilon herself once had a student, call her Kay, a Down©s syndrome child who was repeating the 1st grade. She could not say words, go up or down stairs alone, or put on her own sweater. By the end of that year, Kay could put on sweaters. She could also dash up and down stairs, read from any simple primer, spell dozens of words, and use common sense in everyday creative ways. "Know why? Because," says Pilon, "I believed that child could learn. The doctor's letter identified her IQ as 52. But I always believed if a child was not learning, it was not the fault of low intelligence. By its very nature, intelligence can never be that low. It had to be that the 52 meant something else."

Does Grace Pilon sound like Maria Montessori? They both honor the dignity of children and trust children's innate desires to learn. And they both recognize that each child must learn on his or her own, that all a teacher can ever do is structure external experiences. However, Pilon gives students many more chances to learn from and with others. She does more to catch students up in learning, to entice them into active participation, to invite their inner motivations to come alive. And she offers students broader realms of self-responsibility, so students can step ahead not only in academic learning, but in their abilities to feel important, to use their intelligence, and to manage their own powers.

What About the Evidence?

Pilon tells me her design, used by hundreds of teachers in hundreds of schools over 25 years, does what it's supposed to do. Students effectively learn their subject matter. More valuably, they learn how to use their intelligence to continue to live and learn. After studying her model, I cannot disagree. Yet I propose we look at it not as a final model but as evidence that something better is now possible.

For those who like statistics, there is that evidence also. In 1988, an independent evaluator, Douglas Rose of Tulane University, studied the Stanford Achievement Test scores of 759 midwestern students who had one, two, or three years in Workshop Way elementary classrooms. The students were followed up for 11 years. In all subject areas the Workshop Way students outperformed their peers. More startling, they continued to gain on students who were in ordinary classrooms, even years after they left Workshop Way teachers. And the more years they were in Workshop Way classrooms, the greater their learning gains.

If students are successful, it is not because academics hold first priority. Clearly, nurturing dignity and intelligent living habits is the teacher's first concern. Is it a paradox that students do better at academics when academics do not hold first priority? I don't think so. When academic learning occupies the front of our consciousness, we push students to learn, generally using rewards and punishments. And we miss chances to strengthen the attitudes and skills that generate self-motivation for learning. For many students, that's bad news. The Workshop Way takes care first to build the foundations for learning, the attitudes and skills that serve academic learning and, not incidentally, everyday living. But the approach does not neglect academics. Academics is what students do deal with day after day. Students seem to learn their stuff much the way they learn to get around their neighborhoods, simply by traveling through them every day in a healthful, human-nurturing climate.

In traditional classrooms, says Pilon, it is very difficult for 100 percent of the students to feel worthy, for almost never are 100 percent of the students ready to learn what is being taught; therefore, they cannot avoid feeling inadequate. But in a classroom in which human growth is clearly primary, all students can learn all the time, if not the subject matter being presented or something about managing oneself. At least they can learn that someone as responsible as a teacher is absolutely certain that each one of them is a worthy human being and that each one of them can learn when he or she is ready to do so.

A Winning Combination

For students, says Pilon, the combination of living each day with security and with enough freedom to manage their lives inevitably cultivates a sense of personal worth, of being able to live life intelligently, of being intelligent, and of having even more potential than is now realized. The result is that whenever students get discouraged, they know there is hope for the future. Once that self-realization is ignited, Pilon claims, students are never again the same. They know something that can never be taken away—and know it for sure. Once students know their essential selves, they are ready to continue living and learning, through all the years, through the bumps and pains and rewards and triumphs ahead.

"Workshop Way" is a registered trademark of the nonprofit Workshop Way corporation.

"The basic book to read is Workshop Way by Grace Pilon (1988). (New Orleans: The Workshop Way, Inc.). For that and a list of curriculum materials for different grade levels and subject areas, contact The Workshop Way, Xavier University, P.O. Box 850170, New Orleans, LA 70118-0710. Phone: (504) 515-0170. Consider, too, visiting Danneel School in New Orleans or other Workshop Way classrooms. The New Orleans office may help you locate Workshop Way teachers in your area.


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