17,000 CLASSROOM VISITS CAN'T BE WRONG

Strategies That Engage Students, Promote Active Learning, and Boost Achievement

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BLANK

September 5

Okay, so I GET to write whatever I want. What if I don't want to write anything, because I don't. She says it doesn't matter what I write and that she won't get mad at anything I write. As long as I write MY thoughts. Its supposed to be about thinking.

Okay, so Daniella just asked how long it has to be. Mrs. Garcia said length is not a trait. What does that mean? Long or short? I can't believe I'm in the same class with Daniella for English and Social Studies. Double block. yuck!!!!! two hole hours together.

So for eight minutes every day we're going to write whatever we are thinking about. What I'm thinking about is how come seventh graders have to write a diary anyway?

Curtis says his English class doesn't have to do this. Who gets to decide this stuff anyway? If Mrs. Garcia says we have to but Ms. Miller's kids don't have to, it's not fair. Nobody asked me!

Nobody ever asks kids about how to run school and we're the only ones who have to come every day. It's not fair.

1 more minute to write. Right? Right! Write. write writewritewritewritewrite.

Mrs. Garcia, if you read this, you have to say I did it RIGHT, cuz I wrote about what I was thinking.

1

Focus on Learning

These frustrated ramblings in a 7th grader's journal are all too familiar to most educators. Teachers spend time planning lessons, basing them on standards and guided by curricula and instructional materials, only to be met with resistance and apathy. We try to keep up with developments in instruction—you wouldn't be reading this book if you didn't—but the pieces often seem to remain disparate and not come together. Perhaps it's a matter of changing our focus. Have we considered what our lessons might look like from the other side of the desk?

As the authors of this book, we have looked at instruction in more than 17,000 elementary and secondary classrooms. During this experience, we have come to recognize the power of shifting the focus from teaching to learning. This realization has come both over time and in a few blinding moments of clarity.

A few years ago, we hosted our first annual Engagement Conference in Las Vegas. On the eve of that conference, like expectant parents, we carefully reviewed our plans for the following days, ensuring that every detail was covered. Finally, at about 10:30 p.m., John said, "I think we're ready, but you don't seem very happy."

"What's the 'big idea' for our conference?" Jim asked.

"That kids need to be more engaged . . . actively involved in learning activities."

"And how are we starting?"

"With your 90 minute keynote speech . . ."

And at that point, we both realized that wouldn't work. So, we set about designing a new conference opening—one in which participants would be

physically and cognitively involved in the work. We were nervous, because we had never seen this kind of thing done in a large general session, but it gave rise to one of our favorite sayings: "Trust the learners."

A major purpose of this book is to help educators understand and develop this trust. Whether you are serving as a classroom teacher, site administrator, district leader, school board member, or parent, this idea can have powerful implications. In the following pages, we will share:

- What's really going on in classrooms around the country.
- Benchmarks to determine where your school is on the continuum of effective instruction.
- Good classroom practices for implementation and professional development.
- Tools and techniques to improve academic scores.
- Qualities that will result in students being more engaged.
- Strategies that develop higher-level thinking.
- Techniques to lead professional learning communities (PLCs) in a new, more thoughtful direction.
- A vision of what your school could be.

For many reasons—the movement to standards and accountability being chief among them—one might think that a shift toward learning-focused instruction should have already happened. Unfortunately, testing elevated the importance of results but not the learning process.

In a traditional classroom model, time is the constant and learning is the variable. That is, all students receive the same instruction for roughly the same amount of time. The results—not surprisingly—are a bell curve. Some students learn the content deeply and well, most have a moderate level of comprehension, and a few don't learn it at all. With the advent of standards, learning has become the desired constant, yet one of the most important variables—time—was never adjusted. Another element of the learning process resistant to change has been the traditional role of the teacher.

For more than 20 years, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement has provided educators around the world with statistics regarding math and science achievement. In 1999, the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) analyzed math classes in seven nations to examine the relationship between the cognitive demands of mathematical tasks and student achievement. In this study, a random sample

of 100 8th grade math classes from each of the countries (Australia, the Czech Republic, Hong Kong [China], Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United States) was videotaped during the school year. The six other countries were selected because each performed significantly higher than the United States on the TIMSS 1995 mathematics achievement test for 8th grade (Stigler & Hiebert, 2004).

In the 1999 video study, the classroom math tasks were categorized as either *using procedures* (i.e., requiring basic computational skills and procedures) or *making connections* (i.e., focusing on concepts and connections among mathematical ideas). The problems were coded twice—once to characterize the type of math problem and once to describe its implementation in the classroom.

Figure 1.1 captures the percentage of each type of math problem presented in six of the seven countries.

Approximately 17 percent of the problem statements in the United States suggested a focus on mathematical connections or relationships. This percentage is within the range of several high-achieving countries (i.e., Hong Kong, Czech Republic, Australia).

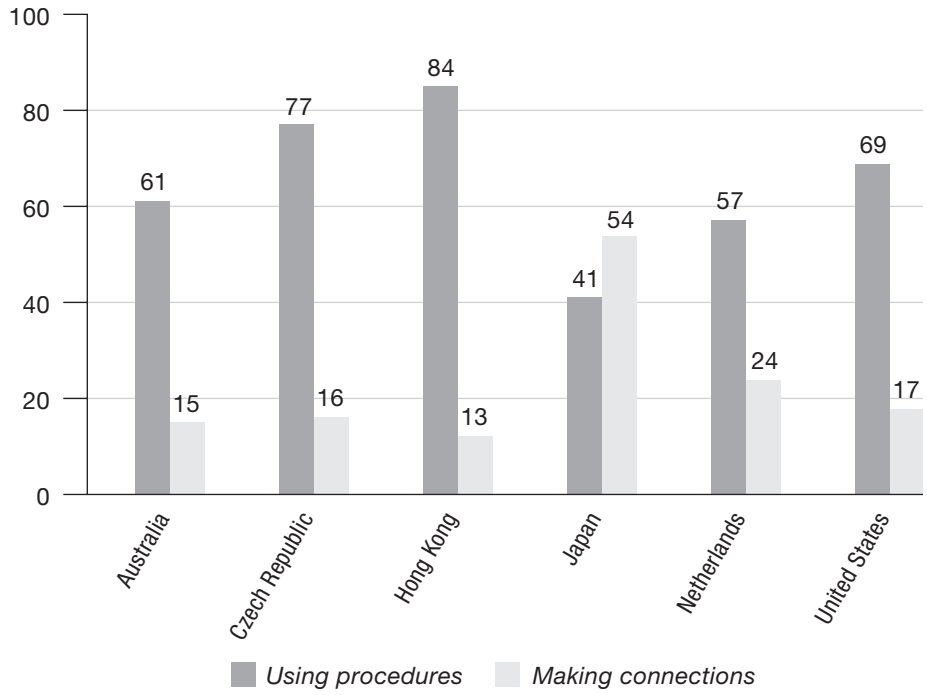
As students worked through the math problems, the video study analyzed teacher-student interactions and the mathematical approach taken to solve the problems. Figure 1.2 shows the coding of the student work as it was actually performed by students.

Though the curriculum may have involved a balance in the types of problems proposed, virtually none of the *making connections* problems observed in the United States were implemented in a way that guaranteed conceptualization or demanded mathematical connections be made by students. There are a number of issues highlighted by the study, but the most troubling finding of all is that teachers in the United States reduced most problems to procedural exercises or simply gave students the answers—efficient teaching perhaps, but ineffectual learning.

If the TIMMS video study had only looked at instructional delivery or the resulting achievement measures, these issues might not have been as obvious. Focusing on students during academic activities provided the greatest clarity into the achievement results.

Why does this disconnect between curriculum and implementation occur in the United States? Math teachers across the country have shared with us many valid reasons when we ask this very question:

Figure 1.1 » **Types of Math Problems Presented**



The percentage of math problems that focused on *making connections* varied greatly among high-scoring TIMSS countries.

Note: Switzerland was not included in this analysis because this feature of teaching was coded only by English speakers and English transcripts of the Swiss lessons were not available.

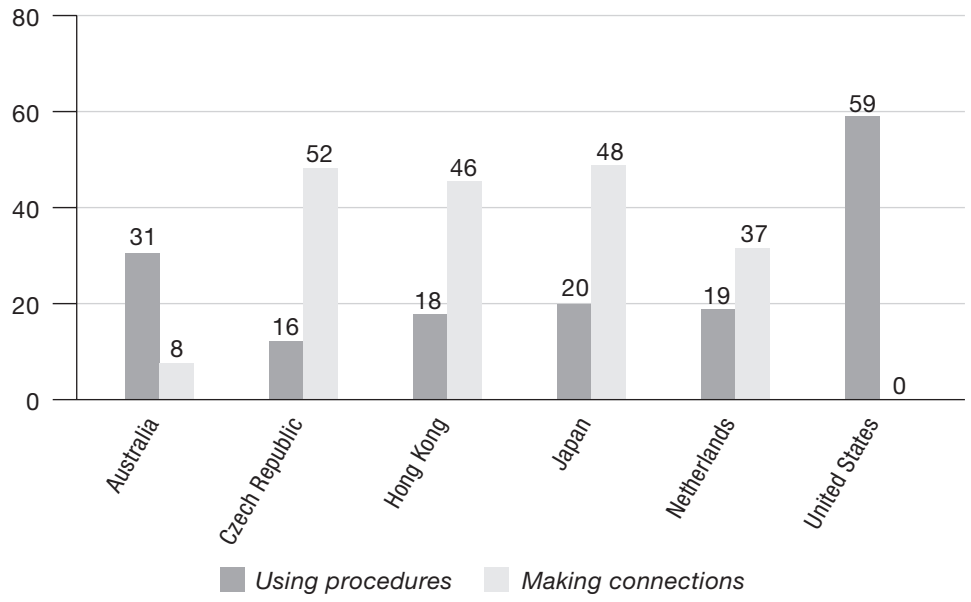
Source: From "Improving Mathematics Teaching," by J. W. Stigler and J. Hiebert, 2004, *Educational Leadership 61*(15), p. 14. Copyright 2004 by ASCD. Reprinted with permission.

- "Our curriculum is too full, inviting coverage and speed over deep mathematical understanding."
- "The discomfort of letting our students struggle; the need to rescue our students and then move on."
- "The pressure of the ever-present high-stakes testing."
- "The fear that a visiting administrator who walks in during a moment of student struggle might not see the teacher 'teaching.'"

- "It takes too long for them to figure it out."

This challenge remains today. Math teacher Dan Meyer put it into perspective when he said that we are "taking a compelling question, a compelling answer… but we are paving a smooth, straight path between the two and congratulating our students for how well they can step over the cracks on the way" (Meyer, 2013).

Figure 1.2 » **How Teachers Implemented *Making Connections* Math Problems**



High-scoring TIMSS countries implemented a higher percentage of *making connections* problems as *making connections* problems. U.S. teachers tended to turn these problems into procedural exercises.

Note: Switzerland was not included in this analysis because this feature of teaching was coded only by English speakers and English transcripts of the Swiss lessons were not available.

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> *Task predicts performance.*—Richard Elmore

The idea of a teaching-learning shift didn't spring into our minds fully formed. As you may have already gleaned, we had the opportunity to examine teaching and learning in variety of classroom situations—more than 17,000 and counting. We conducted the vast majority of those visits through the classroom walkthrough process. It was in that environment that we first worked together and where our ideas about the teaching-learning shift became concrete.

In 2001, we were asked by a professional development company to help create one of the first classroom walkthough models. It became very popular, and we helped train thousands of educators across North America. In 2005, we decided to form our own organization, Colleagues on Call. To begin this new venture, we asked ourselves what we learned about classroom walkthroughs.

The answer, unsurprisingly, came from the teachers with whom we worked. They said, "We know your visits aren't supposed to be evaluative, but sometimes it still feels like evaluation." It didn't take long to figure out why teachers felt that way: we were looking in the wrong place. Most of the data gathered and feedback provided were based on teachers' behaviors. When the focus of the visits was shifted to students, the differences were dramatic. Suddenly, we had a data set that could be gathered in no other way. Instead of monitoring whether an objective was posted on the board, students were asked to explain what they were learning and why it was relevant. In this way, thinking levels could be viewed across content areas and grade levels. Whereas formal assessments provided post-instructional data, observations made during these walkthroughs provided teachers with real-time data they could use to make instructional decisions.

We call this process Look 2 Learning (L2L), and if you glance at the contents for this book, you will get a fairly accurate picture of what we look for—from the students' point of view—during our classroom visits.

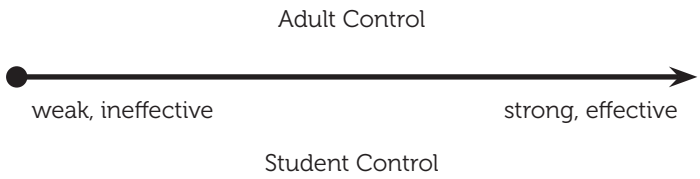
Here's how it works: After two days of training, L2L team members (alone or in pairs) visit classrooms in their respective schools for two to four minutes. While there, they listen to conversations and interactions, look at student

work, and talk to students. Information is collected on an electronic device or on paper. Over time, the data are aggregated so trends and patterns can be observed. This information is then shared with classroom teachers, who—through reflective conversations—determine which professional practices they might like to refine. L2L data can then be used to monitor progress. Adjustments can be made and celebrations scheduled—all based, of course, on the learning and not the teaching.

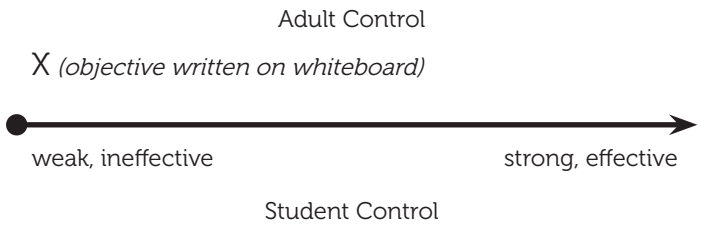
Several times in this book, we will mention the use of continua. We think they can be powerful organizers for graphically representing complex relationships and relative magnitudes. For the present discussion, a continuum can help depict the teaching-learning shift and the change in focus that happens with Look 2 Learning walkthroughs.

In general, a continuum shows a relationship of degree that is indicated by position from left to right. It might look something like this:

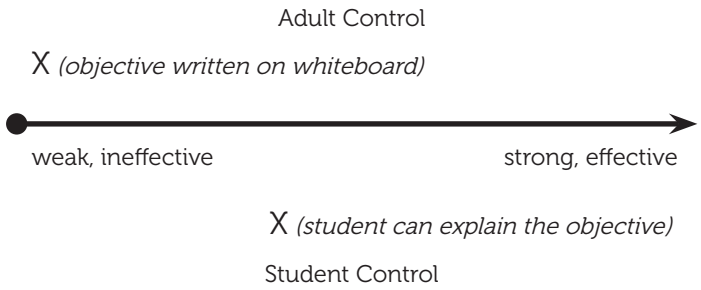
We can also make use of the vertical dimension. For instance, a point high above the line could indicate a behavior solidly in adult control, whereas one below the line could denote a significant level of student control.



Earlier, when we discussed the shift in focus brought about by Look 2 Learning walkthroughs, we mentioned learning objectives. Where on this continuum might we locate "The objective was written on the whiteboard"? First, think vertically; we can identify this as a behavior under the control of the adult, so it should appear above the line. Now we need to determine our position horizontally. Simply posting the objective isn't very effective in improving learning by itself. Therefore, the placement of this task on the continuum might look like this:



In an L2L context, we would contrast looking for the written objective in the classroom with determining whether students understood it well enough to explain it. Where might we place that student behavior on the continuum? Vertically, we're fully in the realm of student control, so that would indicate a placement below the line. In terms of effectiveness for learning, having students be able to articulate the objective is fairly high, locating it toward the right end of the line. Therefore, the continuum might look something like this:



As you might imagine, this teaching-learning continuum is very useful in helping walkthrough observers understand that they should focus on behaviors that are "below the line." It also provides classroom teachers with a map for shifting the focus in their own classrooms. This shift in thinking (and the concomitant shifts in classroom practice) has the capacity to initiate powerful and fundamental schoolwide changes. Indeed, we have seen it replicated across the country. The following is but one example.

In 2008, a team of three site-level administrators from Boise, Idaho—Dr. Betty Olson, Liz Croy, and Dr. Kelly Cross—attended our first Engagement Conference. They wanted to know more about our work with student engagement and were especially interested in Look 2 Learning. They left the conference excited, seeing potential for L2L not only in their own schools but also for the entire district. They presented what they learned to a district leadership

team, which quickly championed the program. Since then, L2L was implemented in every school in the district, became part of the district's strategic plan, and served as a common vocabulary for school improvement. Each school has a Look 2 Learning coordinator who assists the principal with data collection, scheduling, and reflection.

Dr. Olson, in particular, has used Look 2 Learning as the foundation for transforming her school. In 2010, she became principal at South Jr. High School and was determined to help the school become more learner-focused. The transformation has been transparent, incremental, and—frankly—amazing. Engagement and thinking levels have risen, lectures are rare, and discipline has improved. We recognize that Look 2 Learning didn't singlehandedly cause this change. The principal and staff still had much heavy lifting to do, but L2L provided a guide and monitoring tool for the school's evolution. It has become so much a part of the school's culture that if you sit down beside a student in class, he or she is likely to turn to you and whisper, "OK, here's what we're working on today…"

For us, talking to students has made all of the difference. Our walks (17,124 and counting) encapsulate more than a decade of insights gained from classroom visits. They have occurred in all kinds of schools: preschool through high school, urban and rural, large and small, needy and affluent. No matter where you work, the data presented in this book invariably include schools very much like yours and are gleaned from kids very much like yours. (We have found that, overall, there is a larger discrepancy between classrooms within a school than there is between schools. In fact, we have had to begin disaggregating data for schools and districts with which we work extensively.) Our conversations are usually informative, often insightful, sometimes funny, and occasionally moving. Here are a couple of them.

In early December, we walked into a 2nd grade classroom in South Carolina with the school's principal and assistant principal. A little boy looked up at Jim, made a terrible face, looked to the assistant principal, and then put his head down on his desk, sobbing. We all looked at one another and weren't sure quite what was going on. The assistant principal leaned down to whisper to the little guy, but the boy loudly said "I can't believe you really did it!" before putting his head back down. The assistant principal first looked puzzled but then started to laugh. She called us into the hall.

"That young man is one of my 'frequent flyers,'" she told us. "Yesterday, he was in my office for the third time this week. Out of frustration, I told him that

if he didn't begin behaving himself, I was going to call Santa Claus. Well, Dr. Garver, when he saw you, I guess he thought I did!"

On another occasion, we were in a school somewhere west of the Mississippi. Again, it was close to the holiday season. In almost every classroom, we saw students engaged in a task with red and green construction paper. Finally, in one classroom, we saw something different: 2nd grade students coloring a calendar. The numbers stopped on the day in December that was the beginning of the school's holiday break. We tried to determine whether one of the students understood that she was working on a calendar activity.

"What do you think those numbers stand for?"

"They're just numbers. We have to count them."

"Do you do anything with this after you're done coloring?"

"We stick cotton balls on it and cover up the numbers."

"That sounds like fun."

"It *was* fun when we did it in kindergarten. In 2nd grade, not so much."

Several of the schools with whom we work are implementing Document-Based Questioning, a process that allows students to explore complex social studies questions by examining authentic historical documents. We recently visited a 4th grade classroom where students were really buzzing. Original sources had been distributed, and groups of four were considering the question "Why did so many people die at Jamestown?"

We stopped by one group to listen in on their conversation. The students were carefully poring over the documents when one of them spoke up.

"I think I have a reason." He had been looking at the ship's manifest—a list of the passengers and the cargo. "There aren't any women on this list. When women aren't around, men are like pigs. They don't even wash their hands. I think the men all got dirty, sick, and died."

Actually, that's a pretty powerful insight.

Those are a few of our experiences listening to the learners. What would your kids say?

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About the Authors

In 2006, John Antonetti and Jim Garver formed Colleagues on Call, an educational services company that provides training and consulting to schools and districts across North America. They have worked in 38 U.S. states and five Canadian provinces and territories. Together, they have created Look 2 Learning, a learner-focused walkthough protocol; Lessons 4 Learning, an online program for designing instruction; and PLC 4 Real, a framework for effective collaboration. John and Jim are coauthors of *Focus on Learning*, which provides a process for personal and shared reflection.

John and Jim can be reached at info@411oncall.com.

John Antonetti

John Antonetti is the former director of K–12 curriculum in the Sheridan School District, Arkansas. Once described by Larry Lezotte as a "teacher's teacher," John has had the great fortune to teach at all grade levels. He has taught kindergarten, AP Chemistry, and most grades in between. He has worked with three districts that won the nationally recognized Broad Prize for Urban Education. He works with schools and districts throughout North America on student engagement, writing, rigor and relevance, and high-yield best practices. Though hands-on work in schools is his passion, John is also a highly sought keynote speaker. His humor and parables are recognized by teachers, administrators, and parents as relevant examples of the power of teachers.

John is the author of the book *Writing as a Measure and Model of Thinking*, which provides practical tools to increase student thinking in all subject areas.

Dr. Jim Garver

Dr. Jim Garver has experience at all levels of public education—from teacher to associate superintendent, kindergarten through high school, small schools to large. Student achievement has increased in every school and district in which Jim has held a leadership position.

Jim works with schools across the country, sharing expertise on classroom walkthroughs, student engagement, instructional leadership, and professional learning communities. One of these schools was recently named a National Title I Distinguished School. At the district level, he provides assistance with strategic planning, community relations, team building, and executive coaching.

Jim's book *The 10 Secrets of Higher Student Achievement* serves as a blueprint for school improvement in several states. He is also the author of *Coaching for Achievement*, a coaching model to provide practical tools for teachers and their leaders.