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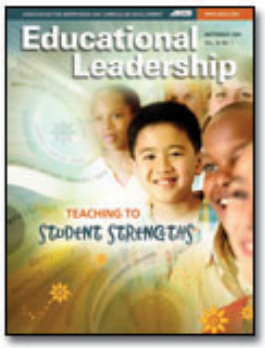

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Teaching Beyond the Book

When the manual doesn't fit the learner, stop studying the how-to list and start studying your students.

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There was a time when good mothers raised their babies with the infant in one arm and a copy of Dr. Spock's guidebook in the other. It was comforting to know that someone who really understood children had taken the guesswork out of tending the young.

Trouble is, of course, that not all babies had read the manual. Those who entered the world on the hefty end of the scale, for instance, found being nurtured "by the book" anything but satisfying. We know of at least one mother who systematically starved her child for months because the food portions printed in the manual were calculated for babies of average size and length. Exhausted by her baby, who never stopped crying, the new mother sobbed to a friend as she desperately clutched the baby book, "What am I doing wrong? I'm following the book to the letter, and she hasn't stopped crying for months!" The more experienced mother looked at the baby, who had arrived home from the hospital already too long for her bassinet, and peeled the new mother's fingers from the manual. "Put the book on a shelf and a bottle in that baby's mouth," she said. "She's hungry! You're feeding a sparrow, but you've got an osprey there!" The manual, it turns out, is a wonderful thing, just as long as the infant in your arms is standard issue.

In classrooms that are invariably overpopulated—and in which standards dictate that every student must develop along a predetermined timeline of learning goals and testing dates—it can feel reassuring to clutch the teaching guide and forge ahead. Teaching is exhausting, and it's easy to forget to ask ourselves whether we are teaching sparrows, ospreys, ducks, or flamingos. Likely we're teaching all of them.

One of the great joys of teaching is that we can learn as much from our students as they can learn from us. When we lift our eyes from the pacing guide long enough to observe the individuals in our classroom, they will often teach us exactly what nourishment they need to thrive. It's not a matter of *either* teaching the curriculum *or* teaching students. Good teaching is inevitably the fine art of connecting content and kids—of doing what it takes to adapt *how* we teach so that *what* we teach takes hold in the lives and minds of students. We know from both classroom experience and scholarly research that the same formula won't work for every

student. By definition, *typical* is not a synonym for *all*.

The principles that follow reflect the power of teaching to student strengths—of tapping into students' areas of greatest comfort, confidence, and passion when we find that teaching to the "typical" student doesn't work. The principles are illustrated by stories of teachers who learned to watch for and teach to their students' strengths, and they are illuminated by the work of researchers and expert practitioners.

Principle 1: Teachers who see the strengths in students teach positively.

Before we can nourish student strengths, we must learn to recognize them. In one large school district in the southeastern region of the United States, researchers worked with teachers to screen primary grade students using assessments based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Tomlinson, Callahan, & Lelli, 1997). Teachers identified strengths in students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in five intelligence areas: verbal/ linguistic, logical/mathematical, bodily/kinesthetic, visual/spatial, and interpersonal. As they discovered strengths that traditional, prescriptive approaches to curriculum and assessment had masked, the researchers and teachers worked together to find ways of engaging students with content by teaching to these strengths. For example, a student who built unusually complex structures with blocks and other building materials found writing difficult. Teachers were able to encourage him to write by having him talk and write about his hand-built structures and their uses.

This research yielded three positive outcomes. First, teachers involved in the study learned to teach more flexibly in response to student strengths, while they continued to address prescribed curricular goals. For example, teachers set up learning stations in their classrooms and guided students' work in those areas. They also taught in multiple modes, by reading a story to students, for example, and then asking students to act out key parts. The more flexible approach to teaching benefited not only the students targeted by the study, but also all students in the teachers' classes.

Second, the teachers almost instantly began to regard the targeted students as capable and to teach them as though they were. Students were more engaged in tasks and more in charge of their own learning. As a result, they experienced greater academic success. A self-fulfilling prophecy was indubitably at work.

This positive outcome was pervasive, even though students did not possess the literacy and numeracy skills that traditionally signal academic success. Said one teacher, "We used to see these students as different, and therefore problematic. Now we see them as different and promising."

Third, as teachers began to focus on the students' abilities rather than on their deficits and to teach the students as they would teach very capable learners, student achievement levels climbed. Parents' attitudes toward school also improved (Tomlinson, Callahan, & Lelli, 1997).

Principle 2: Teaching to student strengths helps students see

themselves positively.

Ellie was a natural leader who entertained her classmates with tales about her eccentric family and their frequent trips to Puerto Rico. She often played the lead in school plays and was known as a talented and fearless public speaker. When she arrived in 9th grade geometry, however, her confidence faded. No matter how many hours she spent staring at triangles, lines, and axes, she could not make sense of them. "I can't do math," she told a friend, "and that's just a fact."

Ellie's teacher, Mrs. Nelson, saw her mounting frustration but held a firm belief that math was accessible to all students. It was her job, she believed, to find what *would* work for her students when what *wasn't* working bogged them down. If spatial tasks and problem solving were weak areas for Ellie, then perhaps capitalizing on strengths could provide ways around the roadblocks. Because she was a keen observer of her students, Mrs. Nelson appreciated Ellie's verbal strengths and her leadership abilities and believed that they could become conduits to help Ellie understand geometry.

Mrs. Nelson put Ellie in a group of successful students to solve a set of applied problems and assigned her the job of talking through the steps that her group members used as they worked toward solutions. She was to report on the procedures that led to success. Ellie found that when she talked through the problems aloud instead of relying on her spatial abilities, the concepts were easier to understand. After class, Mrs. Nelson took Ellie aside and suggested that she try the same strategy with her homework. Despite her weaknesses, Ellie learned to succeed in geometry by putting her strengths to work. "You taught me to believe in myself," she wrote to her teacher. "Now when something stumps me, I know I can find a way to solve the problem."

Researchers like Robert Sternberg (1997) and practitioners like Mel Levine (2002) counsel us that different brains are wired differently—but all brains are wired to learn. We are most effective as teachers when we help our students discover the power of their own minds to work in their own ways to achieve success. Few students develop a sense of academic self-efficacy by becoming mired in what they cannot do. Like most of us, Ellie began to see herself as capable when a teacher helped her understand that her strengths could trump her weaknesses.

Principle 3: Teaching to student strengths helps students see strengths in one another.

Henry was a 7th grader wrapped in a veil of hopelessness. His father worked in a low-wage job. His mother had to stay home to care for Henry's chronically ill sister. Their low-rent apartment was crumbling around them. Henry was a weak reader, and his spirit fluctuated daily between weak and broken. Despite his teacher's efforts to engage Henry in class, he sat detached and trancelike on most days. As nearly as the teacher could tell, Henry was invisible to his classmates.

One day when the other students were reading novels of their choice, Henry pulled a loop of string from his pocket and absently began making a complex finger weaving—a Jacob's Ladder contraption with dozens of steps and permutations. Just as the teacher noticed what Henry was

doing, so did several of his classmates, who stood up to get a closer look. By the time Henry looked up from his work, he was the center of attention. He looked afraid at first, then puzzled —and then for a flicker of an instant, he understood that he was doing something others could not do.

"It's not hard," he whispered. "I could show you."

"We'd like that, Henry," said his teacher. "I'll bring string for everyone tomorrow." The following day, Henry was puzzled that his peers could not make their fingers do what his did with ease.

Later, Henry demonstrated his string art as classmates attempted to write directions for his procedures. He read and critiqued their directions. He wrote directions of his own, worked with the teacher to edit them, and gave them to his classmates so they could work with their loops of string at home.

Later in the year, students explored different forms of folk art indigenous to a region that served as the setting for a novel that they were reading in class. Henry's grandmother lived in that region, and he found himself answering his classmates' questions about the region's music and crafts, which were familiar to him because of his visits there.

The steps for Henry were small ones. His life remained difficult. Nonetheless, he began to find a voice, to be seen and heard by his peers. At the end of the year, when students completed final evaluations of the English class, several students mentioned Henry's contributions as memorable and important to them. One student wrote, "Before this year, we didn't know Henry knew so much, and now we do."

Elizabeth Cohen (1990) writes about "attribution of status" in her work on complex instruction. She counsels teachers to watch their students working, find them doing things well, and take the time to say—honestly and straightforwardly—what they saw and why it is important. In this way, teachers discover student strengths in academic contexts and sharpen their own awareness of the rich variety of these talents. By sharing their observations with the whole class or in small groups, teachers can make explicit to students the range of strengths in their midst. This is particularly significant, says Cohen, for students like Henry whose peers have rarely seen him as academically capable. Ultimately, teachers can apply this principle by developing academic tasks for small groups that require a range of intellectual skills, and they can help their students understand the importance of each group member in contributing to the larger goal.

A high school student in Vermont recently paid a great compliment to her teacher when she said,

> For most of my school years, I preferred to work by myself in my classes. I felt like I would always do better alone. This year, my teacher has given us complicated work to do that requires a lot of different abilities, and she's taught us to look for all those abilities in our classmates. I've learned to really appreciate kids I always saw as people to avoid working with. I guess I'd have to say I've learned a lesson in

humility this year.

Principle 4: Teaching to student strengths helps students see learning positively.

Mrs. Lupold dearly loved the U.S. History unit on the Civil War. She told her students that she was inspired by the way this period provides a window into "who we've been as a nation—and who we might become." She was not surprised to learn that few of her 12-year-old students shared her enthusiasm. "I'm not really upset that you don't want to run home and read about the Civil War every night like I do," she told her students. "But I *would* be sad if there weren't *something* you wanted to learn about at home." Mrs. Lupold asked each class to list things that the class members were interested in enough to want to learn more about in their spare time. The lists included such topics as sports, medicine, music, humor, teenagers, and religion.

"I love learning about the Civil War," Mrs. Lupold shared with her students, "because it speaks to something inside me. Your job is to learn about something that speaks to you, too." She had the students each select a topic from their class list. "The only thing I ask," she added, "is that you study your chosen topic as it relates to the Civil War period."

Mrs. Lupold provided her young historians with clear guidelines and criteria for their investigations, and the Civil War unit moved ahead. Each morning in class, hands waved as students added their voices to discussion of the Civil War. "You know that song in the video we just saw?" one student asked his classmates. "It's actually a Civil War song. I heard it last night when I was learning about music from that time period. I can tell everybody the words if you want me to."

"You know how the textbook told about all those soldiers dying at Gettysburg?" asked another. "Well, a lot of that is because there were no antibiotics during the Civil War. A lot of those soldiers would have lived if the battle took place today because we could treat their infections."

At the end of the unit, many students commented that studying the Civil War was the highlight of the year because it taught about "who we've been as a nation—and who we might become." By using students' interests, curiosity, and points of confidence as a starting point for disciplinary inquiry, Mrs. Lupold gave her students a feeling of ownership of the unit.

Contemporary experts in curriculum design (such as Erickson, 2002; Levy, 1996; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998) remind us that by helping students discover the essential concepts and principles of the academic disciplines, we connect them with enduring understandings that speak to their interests, strengths, and life experiences. Linking what students are required to learn with what they already know, what they want to know, and what they have a passion for builds not only understanding of content, but also an affinity for disciplinary inquiry.

Another snapshot of helping students tap into positive feelings about a unit comes from an advanced placement English class. Four African American girls were among the only six non-Caucasian students in the class. This was their first AP class, and they were as uncertain as they were determined. They carried both a sense that they did not belong in the class and a sense that they had to prove that they did. Their teacher, Mrs. Aboud, chose *The Color Purple*

as the first in-common novel for the class. Each of the four girls felt a strong connection to the themes, style, and characters of the book. Each expressed a particular admiration for the character of Celie.

The second novel felt less comfortable to these girls, and as a group they had less to say in class. The third novel in the sequence—*The Scarlet Letter*—created more of a problem. Several of the girls stridently expressed their dislike for it. The text seemed inaccessible to them, and all four girls began to look discouraged. Mrs. Aboud understood the risks the four girls were taking as they entered an academic arena in which they felt like strangers, and she consistently provided them with support and encouragement.

One morning, Mrs. Aboud shared that she had heard a radio report offering a list of the 50 most powerful female characters in literature. "Some of you," she noted, "will be pleased to know that Celie from *The Color Purple* was very high on the list." From their desks at the back of the room, the four girls applauded.

"Because we have a fan club here," Mrs. Aboud continued, "let me ask its members to come up front and make any arguments you can about why you find Celie to be a more compelling character than Hester Prynn." The girls confidently presented an impressive list of points in support of Celie, and other class members pitched in with points of their own. By the end of the period, the girls had led a full-length class discussion that provoked deep reflection about the capacity for literature to tap into readers' lives as surely as it reflects the lives of its authors.

The four students who had felt tentative about their place in the class never felt quite that way again. By finding a place in the curriculum to which students could deeply connect, Mrs. Aboud helped the girls build a bridge between a place of comfort and a place of uncertainty. They came to see learning as a positive experience because they saw themselves reflected in the pursuit of academic ideas.

Principle 5: Teaching to student strengths helps students overcome weaknesses.

Mr. Meitzner's 3rd graders worked to complete a variety of tasks as their school week came to a close. A pair of boys worked in a back corner of the room to complete a complex structure they had built from small blocks. It was clear from their expressions and body language that the boys made a great team and were proud of their work.

As Mr. Meitzner talked with different students about their work, he made his way to the boys in the corner. He studied their structure carefully, asked the boys to explain a number of its features, and quizzed them on the procedure they had used to build it. "I know I say this to you often," he remarked, "but I'm always amazed at the designs you create. They're very original." Then he added, "I'm worried, though, that when the room is cleaned over the weekend, the structure might be damaged and your classmates won't have had a chance to see it. I wonder whether the two of you would mind sketching it for us and writing out how you went about building it. That way, other people can share what you were doing." The boys readily accepted the teacher's charge and worked diligently on their written explanation until the bell rang.

Although this sequence of events might not seem unusual, these two boys were known for being "writing refusers." They disliked writing so much that they would do virtually anything to avoid it. And yet they wrote without hesitation that afternoon.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1997) writes about the magnet-like attraction of working in a state of flow—that is, enjoying what we're doing so much that we feel consumed by it and find that time passes with astonishing speed. Howard Gardner (1991) talks about employing a specific strength to support an area of weakness. Each of these experts understands something that both Mr. Meitzner and the two boys knew: Work in service of something we love often doesn't feel like work.

Teaching to student strengths does not mean ignoring weaknesses. It simply means teaching in a way that takes advantage of student power to energize learning. When we look up from the guidebook and really study our students—when we genuinely recognize their strengths instead of seeing all the areas that still need work—we begin to see our students' possibilities. And as we discover and nourish their strengths, we generate student success.

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