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**Meeting Students Where They Are** Pages 12-16

## One Kid at a Time

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"I used to have four theories about raising children. Now I have four children, and no theories." That's a line Bill Moyers once used to introduce a video series. I still recall it years later because it says something important about teaching. Like parents, most teachers enter the classroom full of theories and then find themselves jettisoning many of their theories and adjusting others as they confront the real world.

It's important, of course, to be grounded in theory, research, and an understanding of effective classroom practice. But it's equally important to remember that those things are heuristic rather than algorithmic in nature. Heuristics say, "In general, this idea has merit." Algorithms are recipes; they say, "Follow these steps and you'll achieve a guaranteed outcome."

It would be comforting to suggest that great teaching is algorithmic. If that were the case, all it would take to be a superior teacher would be finding and following recipes. But teaching involves the most variable element in the universe—young lives. A particular theory about teaching is a lovely thing, until it runs headlong into a 5-year-old or an adolescent for whom it simply doesn't work. When that happens, instead of getting testy, great teachers say, "This seems to be working for some students, but it's clearly not working for others. What's Plan B?"

Great teachers approach their craft with humility. They know there is no instructional strategy, textbook, lesson plan, classroom management approach, motivational method, or timetable that will work for every individual in the kaleidoscopic mix of learners they encounter daily. They know enough about theory and research to chart a course for learning, but they also know that the journey will almost never go as planned.

## The Journey Toward Personalized Instruction

In truth, I had few theories about teaching when I started out. Even what I thought I knew had actually been derived more from watching teachers than from a serious study of education. For example, I had a sense that good teachers had plans that everyone followed and that they kept students quiet and working. I had observed that teachers who could breathe life into learning seemed to be happier and to have happier students. Those were the primitive yardsticks against which I measured my work in the earliest days of my career.

In time, I became more grounded in education as a discipline of study. I had the opportunity to study the theory and research that constitute the science of teaching and the privilege of observing colleagues who practiced the art of teaching. I became a stronger teacher because of what I learned and continue to learn through those channels.

Nonetheless, I have learned the most about teaching by studying the students I teach. They've taught me a simple lesson: Learning has to be about individual learners. And given the chance, those learners will challenge our

"certainties" about instruction.

The combination of theory, research, and learner-focused practice has led me to what we now call *differentiated instruction*. A subset of differentiation is what I have come to think of as *personalized instruction*. It happens when an individual student signals an opportunity for enhanced learning and the teacher seizes that opportunity. Personalized instruction often provides important lessons that alternately affirm and challenge what we think we know about effective teaching. It improves the quality of our teaching as it improves the quality of learning for the student who, at least for a time, does not fit the mold.

## Connecting Content with Students' Interests

Scott was born to be a cartoonist. His parents were born to raise lawyers or doctors or accountants. At 13, Scott posed more of a challenge to his parents than they did to him. He had figured out how to earn low Cs in his classes. *Ds* would have resulted in his being more or less permanently grounded; *Cs* merely resulted in a steady stream of lectures about his future that were easy for Scott to ignore. He smiled, nodded, and continued to think about the storyline in his latest cartoon.

In school, Scott sketched frames of comics while his peers took a daily vocabulary test. He had time to draw because he seldom knew the answers. He meant to study the vocabulary lesson each night, but the words often fueled his storylines and he inevitably got distracted.

Scott's classmates leaned over their desks to see the drawings on the paper he passed in at the end of the vocabulary quiz each day. I looked forward to seeing the cartoons too, although I wished they had been accompanied by the required vocabulary words.

One day Scott asked me, "Do you think the principal would let me run off a comic book in the office?"

"I think she would," I replied, "but I think she'd charge you for supplies."

That was the beginning of Scott's public career as an artist. He couldn't run off enough comics to fill the demand of his schoolmates. Realizing he was on to something, Scott told me he was going to go to the local newspaper office to see about having them print his work in a more professional-looking format.

Not even mildly deterred by my caution that his plan would be expensive, Scott talked to the printer and assured him that he could pay the \$500 cost of printing each issue. Then he sold ads to local merchants to raise the money he needed.

He was giddy with success as he told me about the ads he'd sold. Then, brow knitted, he asked me, "So how do you make an ad?"

Seeing Scott's unleashed joy was fun, but it was his question that captured my imagination. Somewhere in the comics and the ads it would take to support them were opportunities for Scott to learn all of the elements of literature, endless vocabulary, and uses of grammar.

I didn't abandon any of the class learning goals. Instead, I co-opted his enthusiasm and transferred the goals to a new context for Scott. The comic books became the venue in which the kid with the big smile would explore and master most of the language arts requirements that year.

Throughout the year, Scott investigated the history of comics, established and maintained correspondence with some leading comic illustrators, acquired an impressive comic book collection, and began creating a weekly comic strip for the local paper. He also became an engaged participant and a high achiever in class. He used our wickedly difficult vocabulary words in his cartoons when appropriate and added others to his personal vocabulary list as he began to see the purpose of finding precisely the right words for what he needed to say. Although he was never really engaged by the daily vocabulary tests, his scores on them improved markedly.

Scott sharpened his editing skills in creating the ads and the comics themselves. He included figurative language in his cartoon-related work, and he and I often discussed literary elements in his comics. In class, we used language from Scott's cartoon balloons to name parts of speech and to debate grammatical constructions.

Years later, Scott wrote that there were only two times in all his years of schooling, kindergarten through college, when he felt like he belonged in school. The year of the comics was one of those. What I learned from Scott about connecting students with "my" content has almost never led me astray.

## Finding the Right Starting Point

Golden was 15 and entering a 7th grade class full of 12-year-olds for the first time when he whispered something to me in the hall outside our room. I didn't know who he was, but I assumed the fear in his face meant he was a student new to the school who, like most entering students, couldn't open his locker and was seeking help from the nearest available teacher.

He was a small boy with soft, dark curls and big eyes. He spoke quietly and put his hand over his mouth as he talked. After several unsuccessful attempts to hear what he said, I asked him to try one more time—and I pulled his hand away from his mouth as he repeated what he had now tried four times to tell me.

What he was saying was, "I can't read."

In a moment that seemed everlasting, I knew several things. I knew he was about to become *my* student. I knew I had no idea how to teach reading. I knew our recently completed and nicely bound curriculum guide was a prison that offered no escape for Golden. And most of all, I knew that the act of whispering that three-word sentence to a tall stranger was an act of courage, desperation, and faith.

I couldn't let Golden down. If it meant learning how to teach reading, I'd do that. If it meant beginning to think about teaching more flexibly, I'd figure that out. And if it meant abandoning prescribed learning goals for other goals that made sense for Golden, I'd risk that, too.

It made no sense to require this 15-year-old who did not yet know how to write the entire alphabet to write an original short story. It would be a form of cruelty to judge this boy on his facility at distinguishing prepositions from conjunctions. Reading Jack London was out of reach.

And so Golden and I turned our backs on the grade-level requirements and began at his beginning point. I found time to talk to him about events in his daily life, which we turned into stories that became the basis for word study, writing, and reading aloud. I recorded—and later had other students record—books on tape that were worth the time and attention of a 15-year-old boy. We discussed the elements of literature in those books. He developed his own word bank, from which we took his weekly spelling words. We both collected silly words that we shared with one another. He often read comic books during free reading time because the pictures supported his understanding of the storylines.

It was a long road, and the year suddenly seemed short. I tried to learn from him. He was a better teacher for me most days than I was for him. When I said good-bye to him at the end of the year, he looked me in the eye and whispered, "Thank you." He was still a man of few words. He was reading on a solid 3rd grade level.

In terms of the required curriculum, Golden was a failure. In terms of where he needed to be as a reader, he had a long way to go. In terms of where he began, no other student I taught that year grew as much, as eagerly, or as courageously.

Golden was my first lesson in planning for and teaching more than one thing at a time in the classroom. He was my first lesson in finding materials that didn't seem to exist in the school for kids whose needs were very much present. He was my first attempt at understanding what it means to help someone connect the spoken word to written print.

In some schools today, I could probably be fired for my unilateral decision to abandon prescribed curriculum requirements. But beginning where the learner is continues to be the best decision I make as a teacher.

## Giving Permission

"More than anything in the world, I want to learn about theories of extinction of the dinosaurs," Geoff, an 8th grader, told me one day with a look that seemed suspended between sadness and desperation.

"Really?" I asked. "And aside from the fact that you know I'm interested in you, why are you telling your English teacher that?"

As though he had rehearsed an answer—and perhaps he had—he said straightforwardly, "Because there's no place in school for me to do that for at least six or seven more years. I need someone to give me permission to learn about that as part of class, or there will never be time for me to learn about it." He looked away and said to no one in particular, "I have so many questions."

"It's obvious that you've thought about this, Geoff," I said. "Tell me how you see this working into English."

Perhaps he knew he was treading on sacred territory, because what he said was spoken as a question even though the words were declarative. "You could tell me at the beginning of each week what's really important and I could do that at my own pace. Then I'd have the rest of the time for my work."

Once I got past the urge to say to him, "You know, of course, that *everything* we do is really important," that's what we did. He came to me each Monday before school. We talked about what mattered most and why (an excellent exercise for me) and determined what I would expect him to know, understand, and be able to do related to what we were studying that week. He never missed completing the work we agreed on at a stunning level of quality. And he spent hours and hours of homework and weekend time reading about theories of dinosaur extinction and creating a computer program to test the theories by plotting trajectories of meteors that might have caused the extinction.

Geoff presented his findings to the class near the end of the year. It was a near religious experience for his classmates and me. We understood the immensity of what he had accomplished despite the fact that we understood little of what he said. The paper he turned in as a final product was like a dissertation. I couldn't find anyone in our school district or town who had the expertise to give Geoff meaningful feedback.

Turned out that didn't matter—he never came to get the paper. He hadn't done it for feedback. He had learned what he needed to learn. He was driven and rewarded by the purest kind of intrinsic motivation. He just needed permission. Permission, it turns out, isn't so hard to give.

## A Laboratory for Differentiation

Personalizing instruction has, for me, been a laboratory for differentiation. If I can figure out how to make learning work for one student, I'm better prepared to understand and address the needs of all of the students who come my way.

I'd have lost Scott if I hadn't understood the need to connect what he cared about with what I needed him to care about. I'd have failed Golden if I hadn't understood the futility of insisting that he begin where the prescribed curriculum began. I'd have put a ceiling on Geoff's aspirations if I hadn't given him permission to work at his own pace in pursuit of his own dreams. Those are among the fundamentals of effective differentiation.

In each case, carefully watching and responding to one learner forced me to question the invisible rule book that tells teachers how to "do" school—and thus prepared me to be a better teacher for a broader population of learners. In each case, starting where the student was resulted in a student with higher aspirations, a teacher with more self-efficacy—and some great memories.

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