

Building a student-centered school

BY AMY DUJON

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(Image credit: Pixabay)

This is an exciting era in education. We're all starting to realize that the most effective way to prepare learners for the uncertain sands of the new economy is to take a bold step: to move from teacher-centered to student-centered classrooms with rigor.

This isn't just another fad that will come and go; this work requires each teacher to unlearn and relearn deeply ingrained pedagogical techniques that have placed the responsibility for all learning in the teacher's hands. In turn, students are now encouraged to struggle productively so they can build the resilience and self-reliance they'll need for success in college and the global workplace.

To bring about this second-order change, we need to equip kids with soft interpersonal and critical-thinking skills. Through partnerships with schools throughout the US, we're seeing the results of these instructional shifts and gaining a clear picture of teachers' challenges. Specifically, we've identified two things that teachers tend to do to help students that actually hinder learning.

Rescuing

A struggling child's first instinct is to rely on adults to tell him what to do. Kids know that if they keep waiting or ask enough questions, someone will eventually help them. Far too many teachers encourage this pattern, asking leading or loaded questions until they arrive at the answer for the students. It's human nature to assist others who are struggling — especially children — but to get students using higher-order thinking skills, we need to break this habit.

When I was the principal of Acreage Pines Elementary in Florida, my teachers had a lot of difficulty changing this behavior. Some would physically step away from kids when they caught themselves rescuing. Some even wore rubber bands that they could pop as a reminder. I'm certainly not advocating self-abuse, but visual or physical cues are definitely helpful. Once students accept that they need to rely more on peers and less on teachers, they unlearn the habit of waiting for answers.

This pattern is also prevalent among teachers and leaders. When teachers aren't sure which strategies to use or how to execute specific techniques, they're inclined to wait until a principal, coach or other observer tells them what to do. As with students, it's critical to create an environment that helps teachers engage in the productive struggle and rely on their peers to find solutions.

Robbing

Traditional instruction is full of robbed moments. It may seem kind to spoon-feed information to students, tell them what to think and provide experiences that require right and wrong answers, but in the long run, the lecture-focused format robs them of valuable opportunities to think critically, assimilate information and draw conclusions.

Children are fully capable of determining what's important — and they need to get even better at doing so. It's our duty to structure lessons around discovery rather than rob them of high-level learning by telling. I can't stress this enough: It's our duty.

New-economy skills

In *Who Moved My Standards? Joyful Teaching in an Age of Change*, Michael Toth describes the shifts that teachers need to make to help students develop "new-economy skills." He strongly emphasizes the notions that:

- Students can't be directly instructed into becoming critical thinkers and problem solvers.
- Too much support can prevent students from developing critical-thinking skills.

At Acreage Pines, our teachers worked diligently in their PLCs to plan lessons to move students toward effective team-centered problem solving. Little by little, students also became increasingly comfortable with engaging in their own interactive teams. There, they practiced academic language, improved their verbal and social skills and provided emotional and academic support for team members — fellow students.

Believe me: It's worth the effort.

What surprised us the most was how all students flourished in the learner-centered setting. With the support of their peers, disadvantaged children and those with disabilities learning in inclusion classrooms became skilled at using academic vocabulary and honing their own thinking skills. At the same time, higher-achieving students deepened their understanding as they mentored their classmates.

The shift from teacher-centered to student-centered classrooms made our entire school an exciting place to be. That kind of enthusiasm is contagious, and it makes me so happy to know that other administrators have toured Acreage Pines and resolved to replicate the work in their own buildings.

There's nothing more rewarding than being at the forefront of such an influential and important transformation — one that will change the trajectory of the future for countless children in classrooms throughout the country.

Amy Dujon led one of the nation's first Schools for Rigor initiatives as an elementary school principal and director of leadership development in partnership with Learning Sciences International, bringing in a powerful new vision for strengthening core instruction. This work ignited her passion for student-centered, standards-based instruction, and she remains relentless in her focus to grow professionally and personally. Amy is currently a practice leader for LSI, working with districts and leaders across the country to support their transformation and implementation, and she has written the forthcoming book, The Gritty Truth: Eight Phases of Growth to Instructional Rigor.

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