

Leading Their Learning: Let's Have Faith in Our Students

By Nancy Doda

Several weeks ago, I was listening to professor Sugata Mitra discuss his intriguing Hole in the Wall research (www.TED.org) in which he set out to demonstrate, among other things, that children and young adolescents will seek to learn with very little adult intervention when in fact they are trusted to do so.

He placed an active computer in a wall on a street in the poorest regions of New Delhi, India, and then watched to see what happened. Not surprising, children quickly became students and teachers, finding ways to use this tool to understand, to communicate, and to teach each other.

This research project is ongoing, but one of its preliminary findings offers wisdom to those of us seeking to better engage young adolescents: children are inherently curious and eager to learn, and will be more so when adults can find ways to step aside and give children's natural inclinations some room to stretch.

Mitra is not alone in his faith in children's untapped capacities to lead their own learning. Early progressives like John Dewey and A. S. Neill believed in honoring the child's voice in the learning process. Similarly, innovative teachers have long sought to honor the curiosities that rest in the hearts and minds of the learners rather than with prepackaged lessons.

Empowering students more fully, however, does not mean abandoning clear and purposeful plans for the day. Nor does attending to students' questions, concerns, and interests mean we ignore the core standards our young people are expected to master. But too often we become locked into plans that when too tightly constructed, close doors to student motivation, interest, and engagement.

Further, our plans are far too frequently constructed in ways that place us predominantly in the role of a "sage on the stage" rather than a "guide by the side."

Tools and Suggested Practices

So what can we do to advance student empowerment for learning?

1. Create our classroom community

Ownership fosters investment and accountability, but are students invited to invest in their classroom? Imagine beginning the school year with a plan to engage students in substantive conversations about their dream classroom or team. All children have some notion of their dream classroom, and by asking them about it first, we start the year with a critical message: This is not solely your classroom, nor my classroom, but *our* classroom where all voices matter.

Chris Opitz, a teacher in Anchorage, Alaska, asks his students to develop "working agreements" that delineate the class norms. He then fashions opportunities for his students to reflect on how they are behaving in relation to the standards they helped establish.

Many teaching teams create community by crafting team agreements. The seventh grade team at Great Neck North Middle School in New York relies on the social studies curriculum to help students write a team constitution. They begin by saying, "Let's think together about how we hope to live and learn together in the days ahead." The final constitution is posted and consulted as needed throughout the year.

Mark Springer's eighth grade students in the renowned Soundings program at Radnor Middle School in Wayne, Pennsylvania, spend the early weeks of the every school year developing "affirmations" that will guide the team's community life. Students reflect weekly on how well they

have honored the team's affirmations. For those schools seeking to advance social literacy, this is as authentic as it gets.

Language arts teacher Janie Fitzgerald at Scarsdale Middle School in New York supports all her group work with student-generated guidelines. When she begins literature circles or book clubs in her classroom, for instance, she invites students to fashion a working contract to guide the quality of their book talk and then asks them to regularly assess how well these discussions are abiding by the contract.

2. Think about our learning

When I visit schools, I spend time talking with students. One of my standard requests is rarely answered as I might hope: "Tell me about what you have been learning this quarter and what makes it so important."

Not surprising, students—often those with very good grades—stumble and falter with this inquiry. Why? Perhaps it is because as one student told me, "We were in the accelerated program and we did it so fast we don't remember much." Perhaps it is because we neglect the time needed to let students think big and to look back. They need our help to practice what is a critical skill: rethinking what we have learned and considering its worth.

One powerful metacognitive strategy that can help us on this path is called "back-mapping." Back-mapping is a process whereby we ask students to reconsider what they have learned and how they have learned it.

In one example of back-mapping for a unit entitled Diseases and Dysfunctions of the Human Body, students were asked to identify the ways they had attempted to answer one of their essential questions: What can human beings do to avoid illness? Students cited 13 activities they had done, such as research reports, interviews, films, and family disease charts, and what each activity had contributed to their understanding.

At the end of the year, we asked this same group the same question. Unlike hundreds of middle grades students who would have forgotten most of the information, this group recalled it all with considerable ownership and enthusiasm.

This stop-and-think processing can be accomplished in smaller ways, but ultimately our goal is to invite students to think like teachers in considering the learning they've gained. This is motivating for students who have until now simply gone along for the ride.

3. Tell less. Ask more.

Reading and comprehension guru Stephanie Harvey often advises that we've got to "let kids do the thinking." She suggests that we strive to move from "worksheets to think sheets."

What she means, of course, is that students must be faced with blank sheets of paper often enough that they know what to do with them. For example, take the idea of using an open-ended learning log for daily thinking, note taking, and reflections. Teachers provide a prompt, or at least frame the daily entry with some structure (big ideas and details), but ultimately students are called upon to do some real thinking. Exit slips or tickets out the door replace designated questions often enough to shift students' approach from providing answers to creating answers.

This fundamental principle of creating space for thinking is supported by methods in which students are called to make judgments and then provide evidence to defend those judgments.

The Four Corners strategy is one such method. The classroom is divided into four corners marked Agree, Strongly Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. The teacher poses provocative, clearly debatable statements that reflect some of the big ideas of a recent study, such as global warming or John Brown as a hero. Students write a response to the given statement, including evidence to support their response; join with like-minded others in a small group to consolidate their best

thinking; then send a representative to a chosen corner to present their oral argument. It is lively way to help students begin to frame their thinking and clearly defend it.

Most important, this tool and others like it put students in charge of their own ideas, their own arguments, and their own learning.

4. Offer choices

I ask middle school students to describe the choices they have in their learning. Too many report that their great moments of choice happen in the lunchroom.

Perhaps choice, while hugely empowering and motivating, is undervalued. When students can choose where they sit, the books they read, the topics they investigate, the ideas they write about, or the project formats they find appealing, they become more invested in their own learning. They can even make choices, with teacher help, about which learning activities best serve the whole class during a unit of study.

In all cases, through choice, we demonstrate faith in our students who in turn begin to act worthy of that faith.

Working Wisdom

Although there is nothing quite as motivating as empowerment, structuring it appropriately is important to success.

First, know that when you invite students to take more responsibility for their own learning you are advancing their intellectual and social capacities. Decision-making involves critical thinking skills, engages empathy and related social skills, and engenders dignity and self-respect in learners.

Second, keep in mind this is not something that will develop overnight. Literacy experts know this and circulate the phrase, “gradual release of responsibility” to help us keep that growth goal in mind.

Finally, wise teachers know that inviting students into collaborative decision making is challenging social work that demands trustful and respectful relationships. We must devote time at the start and throughout the year to creating social skills that support a learning community. When students come to know each other beyond superficial impressions, cliques, or stereotypes, their relationships enhance their accountability.

Take Charge Now

Helping young adolescents take charge of their own learning is not only a powerful way to motivate them, it is also a powerful way to develop young people who can become vital members of their classrooms, teams, schools, and communities.

Students often tell me they wish teachers knew how really capable they are. Perhaps we underestimate them. Perhaps we underestimate ourselves.

The world calls for us to educate individuals who can take charge, so why wait. As Constance Kami wrote in her 1991 *School Psychology Review* article, "Toward Autonomy: The Importance of Critical Thinking and Choice Making":

“We cannot expect children to accept ready-made values and truths all the way through school, and then suddenly make choices in adulthood. Likewise, we cannot expect them to be manipulated with reward and punishment in school, and to have the courage of a Martin Luther King.”

Nancy M. Doda, a former middle grades educator, is a workshop leader, author, and keynote speaker specializing in middle and high school education. She is a frequent presenter at AMLE’s annual conference. E-mail: ndoda@teacher-to-teacher.com