Teaching Like the Terminator

5 Steps to Overcoming Obstacles of Learning and Becoming the Edunator

“Don’t tell me you believe all students can learn. Tell me what you do when they don’t.”

~Rick DuFour

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“Teaching Like the Terminator”

This collection of essays and anecdotes from www.Edunators.com is designed to help you and your colleagues ensure that in your classroom “NOT learning is NOT an option”.

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I hope you will read through the information provided here and consider how adopting the “Edunator” mindset could help ensure that in your classroom, “NOT learning is NOT an option!” If you have any questions about pricing, references, or would like to learn more about helping your struggling Professional Learning Community “focus on learning” please do not hesitate to call or email me. Hope to hear from you soon!

Regards,
Mark Clements

Goals and Description for this Program

Many teachers believe their classroom is focused on learning but their administrators, students, gradebooks and community may disagree. Unfortunately, the pressures and difficulties of a mixed ability classroom lead teachers to focus on overcoming obstacles, instead of genuine learning of course material. The session is intended to show teachers how to accept responsibility for all students learning, grade for learning, create a positive classroom environment, create clear learning targets and encourage reflection in students to ensure content moves from short-term memorization to genuine learning!

Be entertained and inspired as you participate in numerous learning structures designed to model classroom practices replicable in any classroom including those used for initial instruction, differentiation, re-teaching and enrichment.

What does it mean to “Teach Like the Terminator?”

This is a phrase designed to be humorous and empowering, one which later gives way to the word “Edu-Nator” defined as “one for whom NOT learning is NOT an option.” I have found this to be a powerful mantra for teachers looking to develop a sense of confidence in how they approach classroom learning, in particular those who tend to be overwhelmed by classroom disruptions or those who seem plagued by low-quality instruction or assessments. “Edunators” recognize that many things we tend to focus on as teachers (such as coming to class prepared, turning in work on time, etc) are not the actual purposes of our classrooms but are rather “obstacles of learning” as opposed to “objectives of learning”. I have developed a five step process to help teachers overcome these obstacles, focus on learning and “Become the Edunator”. These steps – along with a description of each – are listed below.
1) **Accepting Responsibility for Learning** – Due to the enormous demands placed on classroom teachers, combined with insufficient skills to meet the diverse needs of all the students in mixed ability classrooms, many teachers develop a series of defense mechanisms that allow them to abdicate responsibility for student learning. As teachers, we blame parents, we blame each other, we blame previous teachers (“well if they’d have learned this last year…”) and we accuse kids of being lazy or talk about how much “times have changed”. As long as we use the “blame game” to shield us from the difficulties of our profession, we can never grow and ensure ALL students are educated to the highest level! For this reason, part one of this workshop will be dedicated to helping teachers break down these walls in a humorous, low risk manner that leaves teachers feeling inspired and empowered to take responsibility for student learning. Teachers are shown how they already have within them everything they need to “Become the Edu-Nator” and ensure that in their classroom “Not learning is NOT an option!”

2) **Grading for Learning** – Once we have accepted that student learning is our responsibility, we must reflect upon our grades. Otherwise, how will we know if students are learning? Our grades must be accurate and reflective of genuine learning of course content. In this section we will discuss some of the work of Ken ‘O Connor regarding his “15 Fixes for Broken Grades” as well as Dr. Kathie Nunley’s “Layered Curriculum” model. We will also discuss Dr. Robert Marzano’s Standards Referenced Grading – all in an effort to expose participants to new methods of grading more accurately and allow them to choose what works best for them and their students.

3) **Developing a Culture of Learning** – Relationship building is in effect the manner in which we “pack our supplies” before making a long trip. Too often this aspect of classroom instruction is lost in the interest of time, but what many teachers fail to realize is it’s this piece that allows them to work much faster later! By developing genuine, effective and professional relationships with students, coupled with sound rules and procedures, teachers prepare their students for the freedom they’ll receive in a differentiated classroom and ensure student behavior is not an obstacle to their being focused on learning.

4) **Lesson Planning for Learning** – During this phase, we will look at the “Four Critical Questions” used by Professional Learning Communities all over the world, but reimagining them from the student’s perspective. In effect, this gives us a road map for lesson planning!
   1) “What do you want me to know?” – Teachers will receive numerous methods for “unwrapping” objectives with students to ensure that students understand what exactly it is that they’re trying to learn. This “learning with a purpose” is a central element to engaging students, improving performance and eliminating classroom disruptions.
   2) “How can I prove to you I know this?” - Here we will discuss some easy ways in which teachers can begin differentiating their instruction. We will once again draw on the efforts of Dr. Kathie Nunley as well as the work of Rick Wormeli and Pat Quinn to provide teachers simple methods for providing students options in their work and
assessing much more accurately what their students know – by assessing the students level of understanding and NOT assigning points for the task completed.

3) “What can I do if I struggle to learn this?” – Many teachers are being asked to improve their “Tier 1” instruction as a part of a comprehensive school Response to Intervention (RTI) program. Here, we will discuss ways in which teachers can “re-teach” students who have struggled to learn material by providing it in different ways than was originally provided.

4) “What can I do if I already know this?” – Finally, as a part of our lesson planning and unit design, we will help teachers develop a plan for providing enrichment opportunities for students who deserve them, while other students continue their learning on course objectives.

5) **Using Reflection to Improve Student Learning** - Consider John Dewey’s famous quote “We don’t learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.” For this reason, we will discuss how teaching and modeling reflection can not only improve our teaching practices, but can help students form connections and develop deeper understanding of course material. This often neglected element of the learning process is essential to improving student learning.

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Audit Your Gradebook

As I’ve discussed elsewhere, poor grading is an epidemic plaguing our schools. It kills the joy of learning for students and sucks the life blood from the souls of teachers. But it doesn’t have to be this way. While Ken O’Connor and others suggest a variety of “fixes” for broken grades, might we suggest a more simplified approach to grading?

If it doesn’t reflect actual content knowledge, it doesn’t go in the gradebook. Period.

Student “doing” as opposed to student learning is one of the two things teachers focus on most often instead of learning. So before you enter ANYTHING into your gradebook ask yourself “Does this reflect student learning, or does this simply reflect student doing?”

Why does this matter?

If you as a classroom teacher are going to become focused on learning, an Edunator if you will, then you can’t be left guessing as to whether or not your students learned material. You’re going to need evidence of student learning.

For the purposes of this discussion, we need to consider two types of students: Those who are motivated by grades and those who are not. Students who are not motivated by grades are no more motivated by the above system then they would be a much more simplified one. Need evidence of this? How many teachers do you know that grade in the manner described above, yet still have students who fail? They don’t care about their grades…if they did, they likely wouldn’t be failing. Meanwhile, students who ARE motivated by grades quickly learn what it takes to be successful in a classroom like this. They fulfill what is required and concentrate their efforts on that. So when they learn that showing up early will score them five bonus points, they’re early. When they find out that turning in work late drops their grade by 20% they make sure to never do that again. Meanwhile, they’ve still not necessarily learned anything.

Suppose in your classroom the ONLY things in your gradebook were well-written tests or other forms of assessment in which students were required to demonstrate precise knowledge of the skills covered in class. What would happen to students? The ones unmotivated by grades would remain unmotivated by the change in grading so we’ll have to reach them a different way. The students highly motivated by grades? They would now be LEARNING FRANTICALLY in an effort to pass the tests. Assuming the tests were written in a manner that required actual learning to succeed, your motivated students would instantly become 100% focused on learning course content, nothing else.

Now if we all graded in this manner, wouldn’t grades naturally fall? Yes, but one could argue that grade inflation is part of the problem. How are we preparing kids for future careers (or standardized tests for that matter) if they receive A’s in our classes for jumping through hoops but can’t perform the skills we’re saying that they can? The road to better test scores, and more importantly more educated
adults, begins with ensuring students are capable of doing what their grade says they are when they leave the room.

"Won’t students refuse to do classwork if it’s not for a grade?" Not if you explain to them that the classwork will help prepare them to pass the test they won’t, as long as your classwork does in fact help prepare them to pass the test. If it’s mindless busy work, then yes, students will complain and refuse. But the problem in this case isn’t the student’s refusal to do work, it’s your mindless busy work. Every assignment MUST be easily understood as to HOW it helps students learn the course objective. If they don’t understand how it relates, they won’t do it. Show students that classwork is like practice before the big game. When they fail, reflect with them on their classwork. Help them make the connections between the quality of classwork and the performance on the test.

"Don’t we need to reward students for working hard and coming prepared?" Sure, go ahead if you like. Just don’t reward them by distorting your achievement data (i.e., grades). Some teachers will argue that students need to learn the importance of hard work and being prepared to be successful in the "real world." Hard work and being prepared by themselves do not guarantee success in life, being proficient in a skill or knowledgeable in an area of high demand does.

So what of those students who are NOT motivated by grades? Again, they’re certainly not going to be hurt by this more demanding grading structure. After all, if they weren’t doing much before, not doing much now won’t matter. Except the strangest thing often happens when teachers make this shift….the kids unmotivated by grades suddenly take an interest in learning.

Students who hate school REALLY hate busy work. Tell them “Look, you don’t care about your grade and I don’t either. It’s a letter. You know what I care about? You LEARNING this material. And completing this work will help you learn this material because blah blah blah…” Suddenly now, the conversation has changed. You’re no longer asking an at-risk student with a million problems to jump through a hundred hoops. You’re asking them to simply learn this one objective. Of course, there’s another one waiting for them, you both know that. But it’s broken down into a much more manageable size now. It’s not about DOING a hundred things to achieve a grade, it’s about LEARNING ONE THING because it’s important and they can gain the approval of the teacher – something all kids want whether they show it or not.

Take a good long, hard look at your gradebook fellow Edunators. Is that late work policy REALLY getting kids to turn in work on time? What’s REALLY the purpose of those bonus points – could that be accomplished without distorting how much students know? Does that word search REALLY show your students learned ANYTHING at all?

By cleaning everything out of your gradebook that doesn’t reflect learning, you can ensure that your most motivated students are actually learning course content, not simply jumping through hoops. You provide yourself with more meaningful data that you can use to make decisions about what your students need from you next. You can hold yourself accountable to ensure that your coursework is focused on helping students learn course objectives and you certainly aren’t going to harm students who already aren’t motivated to do anything. Hell, you might even reach one or two more than you already had.
I'm Sorry...They DO Have to Like You

Here’s an interesting question…if somebody created a Facebook page dedicated to you as a classroom teacher, would your students click “Like”? Stupidly trivial? Yes. Representative of the simplistic nature of teacher/student relationships? Absolutely.

I once overheard a frustrated colleague say to another teacher “I know they don't like me, and that’s fine, I don't care if they like me.” I couldn’t help myself from interjecting and saying “Suppose you did. What would you do differently to make them like you? More importantly, what would THEY do differently if they DID like you?”

You don’t make a lot of friends with comments like that at work by the way.

But it's true though, isn't it? You show me a teacher who says “Don’t smile until Christmas” and I’ll show you a teacher who’s miserable before Thanksgiving. It’s the secret great teachers already know and average teachers refuse to acknowledge…the students DO have to like you.

Now, I recognize that this is a professional slippery slope. Obviously I’m not advocating any sort of inappropriate relationship with students and I’m certainly not suggesting that teachers and students sit around in class and do nothing all day, everyday in the interest of getting students to “like” their teachers. Most of us can think of a teacher from our past that we loved to have in class, but looking back we realize we really didn’t learn much from them. As professionals we’ve all seen the teacher who is so rock-star-popular that you’re convinced the students must not be doing anything in their class.

That's why it's important to acknowledge a sort of “sweet spot” for teacher/student relationships. They key is that as a teacher you want to be viewed as “cool…for a teacher.” That's the key that true Edunators strive for. Middle School and High School students especially LOVE to complain to their teachers about other teachers, so consider this: If you’ve NEVER heard a student complain about a colleague whom most of your students seem to love, you may have reason to be nervous. If you’ve NEVER heard a student say anything positive about a colleague that all students seem to hate, then again, you may have reason to be suspicious of that teacher’s performance. However, if you hear a reasonable amount of both positive and complaining from students about the teacher next door, or if you’ve ever heard your neighbor described as “Cool…for a teacher” than chances are he or she has figured it out.

Now tell your students to stop complaining about your colleagues in your classroom and that it’s not very appropriate to talk about other teachers in your presence.

The best teachers understand the importance of being liked by their students. The occasional downtime spent talking to your class about last night’s game or the latest Hollywood Blockbuster can go a LONG way when it’s time to get down to work. The old adage “They don’t care what you know until they know that you care” is most certainly still applicable. By showing students you care about their success, being genuine and showing them that you’re human, students will not only work hard in your classroom, they’ll work hard FOR YOU. That sort of relationship comes in handy when you’re hounding them about incomplete work or asking them to re-do a test for the third time because you know they can do better. The best teachers not only know how to keep their distance and not take student relationships personally, but for professional reasons, they sure act like they do.
Stop Playing the Victim: Teachers and the Blame Game

“Victim playing (also known as playing the victim or self-victimization) is the fabrication of victimhood for a variety of reasons such as to justify abuse of others, to manipulate others, a coping strategy or attention seeking.” ~The Honorable and Trustworthy Wikipedia.

You can’t blame teachers, really. Poor folk. We’ve been told by everybody from our friends and colleagues to the President of the United States that we’re not doing a very good job and we need to improve. So while Bill Gates attempts to throw money at the problem and politicians try to act like they have any idea what goes on in our classrooms, we the teachers are left feeling like the whole world hates us.

The only problem is we’ve started to believe them.

Teachers have been told by so many for so long that they’re no good, we’ve gotten far too comfortable playing the victim. We’ve sat back and allowed everybody to take their shots, even giving up control of our own education reform, content to just say “You’re right, please fix us.”

Education Professionals around the world have forgotten what they knew their first day on the job….that they have the power to change the world. This power doesn’t come from a foundation or any piece of legislation, but from teachers reclaiming control over learning. The first step to taking control over education, and our own classrooms, is to stop playing the victim and looking for somebody else to blame.

“Well last year they didn’t even….”
STOP BLAMING THE PREVIOUS TEACHER! Their job wasn’t to prepare students for your classroom. And I’m sure they gave it their best effort. Show some professional courtesy and give them the benefit of the doubt. Beyond that you can whine to your principal, or just shut up about it. It’s an easy game to play. We blame the previous teachers because students didn’t come to us with the skills necessary to succeed in our classrooms. Problem is, every teacher can make that claim right on down to the Kindergarten teacher who blames parents because the he or she lacks “school readiness”.

Blaming the previous teacher might help us feel better, but how does it help the student? It doesn’t. In continues a vicious cycle in which professionals degrade one another and neglect to do what is necessary to help kids. Trust that the previous teacher did their best, and pick up where they left off to the best of your abilities. You’ll be happier.

“Kids today are different…”
Really? Every year I get another year older but the kids I’m teaching are still thirteen. Yes, there is some validity to the research that shows children’s Central Nervous System’s are speeding up as a result of constant exposure to back-lit screens. While this maybe true however, it only applies to learning styles and attention span, not some abstract sense of responsibility. While stories from elders about the way schools used to be may be true, more likely they’re just fondly remembering “the good old days”. Plus, remember that in the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s many students who would have been “at-risk” or “troublemakers” were either never enrolled in school or dropped out at a much younger age and took jobs that no longer exist.

Consider this quote:
"Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers."

That line is usually attributed to Socrates, in or around 450 B.C. Now, that’s probably not entirely accurate as Socrates never wrote anything down and the word “tyrant” had a very different connotation back in ancient Greece, but you get the idea.

Still not convinced? Check out this video. Pay special attention to the behavior of the kids, the manner in which the teacher is portrayed, and even the actions of the parent at the end. That movie is entitled “Teachers Are People Too” and was released by Disney in 1952.

“Ok, well maybe the kids haven’t changed. But the parents certainly have!”
Probably, but that’s more of a dramatic shift in American culture and one that we probably can't do much about as teachers.

STOP BLAMING THE PARENTS! In the unfortunate event that you have a disillusioned, unsupportive parent more interested in blaming the teacher than disciplining the child, remember that this is a parent who was probably let down by the education system a LONG time ago. Every difficult parent you have to deal with is just another reason to try and break the cycle by making a difference with your students. Remember, parents want their children to be safe, to be happy and to learn something – but they want them in that order. The vast majority of parents are supportive of teachers, you just don’t hear from them because they’re busy at home being parents! And the not so great ones? They’re probably more frustrated by their child’s behavior than you and simply lashing out because they’d hoped you could help, and instead, you’re seemingly blaming them. Imagine if you’re pediatrician said “How could you let this kid get this sick!” That’d be tough to handle. Parents and students alike count on us for an education.

Yes, there are some parents who enable their child’s awful behavior. However, that’s always been the case too. Take a look at this clip from "It’s a Wonderful Life" starring James Stewart. In one of the world’s most revered, up-lifting Christmas movies, the main character has some not-so-nice words for the teacher…all the way back in 1946. The biggest difference between then and now is the way in which the teacher’s husband handles the parent later in the movie.

Teachers hold within them the power to change the world one child at a time. To allow a mis-guided sense of self-pity to prevent us from doing that is to rob from each of our students the opportunity to fulfill their dreams. A teacher once believed in us and because this is true we owe it to our students to stop blaming other people and take responsibility for ensuring their learning. We as teachers can always offer up a litany of excuses for why this child is not succeeding, or we could shut up about them and show the child how to overcome the obstacles he or she was born with.
30 Questions For Teacher Reflection

A lot of college level teacher training programs talk about the importance of developing a “reflective practitioner” but what exactly does this mean for the classroom teacher? If you believe that all students can learn at a high level and that your performance as a teacher has a direct impact on student learning, than reflection should be an integral part of what you do. Below you will find a list of 30 Questions Teachers should be regularly asking themselves to ensure they’re classroom is as focused on learning as they would like it to be. Feel free to beg, borrow, steal and share however you see fit.

Modeling Reflection – Questions to Ask With Students
1. Was this activity successful….why or why not?
2. If we do this again, what can I do differently to help you learn more?
3. Did this activity help you learn more than others we’ve done? Why?

Classroom Culture – Questions to Ask About Your Rules & Relationships
4. Are the relationships that I have with my students helping or hindering their ability to learn?
5. Could the problems I have in my classroom be solved by pre-teaching my expectations or developing rules/procedures to deal with these issues?
6. Was my demeanor and attitude towards my class today effective for student learning?
7. Am I excited to go to work today?
8. Are my students excited to come to my class today? (How much does #6 impact #7?)
9. What choices have I given my students lately?
10. Can I explain at least SOMETHING about each of my student’s personal lives?

Curriculum and Instruction – Reflection on Assessment and Grading Practices
11. Does my gradebook accurately reflect student learning?
12. Do my assessments really reflect learning, or merely task completion or memorization skills?
13. Why did I REALLY choose this particular lesson to cover this objective?
14. What evidence do I have my students are learning?
15. What new strategies have I tried lately that might benefit a student I am struggling with?
16. In what ways am I challenging students who are clearly being successful in my classroom?
17. What do I do when students aren’t learning in my classroom?
18. Which students benefited from this activity?
19. Which students did not benefit from this activity?

Collaboration – Questions to Ask Ourselves About Our Place in a Professional Learning Community
20. In what areas can I still improve professionally?
21. What’s stopping me from improving in these areas?
22. In what ways can I support my colleagues in their student’s learning?
23. Do my actions as a teacher show my belief that all students can learn at a high level?
24. Do my actions as a teacher show that I take pride in my work?
25. Are the relationships I have with my colleagues conducive to creating a collaborative culture focused on learning?
26. Are the relationships I have with my student’s parents conducive to improving learning?

Mental Health – Questions to Help Teachers Maintain a Healthy Outlook
27. What new ideas have I tried in my classroom lately to keep myself energized about teaching?
28. What have I done lately to relieve stress and focus on my own mental health, to ensure I remain an effective teacher?
29. What things am I currently doing that I could realistically make less of a priority in my profession?
30. How much time have I spent with my friends and family in the last two weeks?
35 Questions for Student Reflection

**Relationships and Collaboration**
1. What are some ways you could share this learning with your parents or family?
2. Could you say something positive about each of your classmates?
3. What could you do today to help you develop better relationships with your peers?
4. Why is it important for students in a school to have positive relationships with each other?
5. What are some ways in which the adults in the school could help you improve the relationships you have with your classmates?
6. What, if anything, have you done or said lately that may have been considered bullying towards other students?
7. What are some things your classmates do that help you learn?
8. What are some things your classmates do that prevent you from learning?
9. What are some things you do in the classroom that you worry might prevent others from learning?
10. What are some things you do in the classroom that you believe can help other people learn?

**Community and Citizenship**
11. What are some problems you see in the school that you believe the adults should be working to solve?
12. What are some of the solutions to those problems?
13. What are some positive ways you could talk to adults about these problems and solutions?

**Academic Performance**
14. What did you learn (today, this week, this year, etc)?
15. Why do you believe we’re studying this objective?
16. Did you give your best effort on this most recent assignment?
17. Did this activity help you learn more than others we’ve done? Why?
18. Did you come to class today prepared to learn (in both your attitude and with all your supplies)?
19. What are some things you did really well on this assignment?
20. What mistakes did you make on my last assignment that you did not make on today’s assignment?
21. What resources do you have that can help you learn new material?
22. If you could do this assignment over, what would you do differently?
23. What class activities or assignments help you learn the most?
24. What do you believe the teacher could have done differently to help you learn this objective easier?
25. What’s one thing the teacher did for this objective that you really liked?
26. How can you prove to the teacher you know the objective?
27. What evidence do you have to support your answer?

**Future and Goal Setting**
28. What would you like to learn more about (today, this week, this year, etc)?
29. What problems do you hope to solve (today, this week, this school year, in your lifetime, etc)?
30. What will you need to learn to solve those problems?
31. How can you take what you have learned and apply it to your own life?
32. What are your dreams?
33. What are some of the potential obstacles you may face in chasing those dreams?
34. What are some things you can do to overcome those obstacles?
35. What actions are you taking today to help you reach your goals in the future?
The Two Things Teachers Focus on Most....Instead of Learning

It’s accidental really. You start off with every intention of making your classroom entirely focused on learning. You’re not going to let the small stuff bother you, you’re a patient person. You know every kid is different and not everybody learns the same way, much less the way you learned.

In fact, chances are you even believe with all your heart that your classroom is in fact, 100% focused on learning. Trouble is there are two things teachers frequently “focus” on by accident. Despite our best efforts, we do them based on habit – years of just trying to survive the workday massively outnumbered, overworked and underappreciated. While we weren’t looking, we ended up focusing on student behavior and task completion, rather than actual learning.

1) To focus on learning, avoid focusing on student behavior.

Most teachers would cite “student behavior” as the biggest obstacle to being focused on learning. In reality, the biggest reason why teacher’s aren’t focused on learning is because they’re focused on student behavior. Yes, there’s a difference.

If you’re one of the many teachers who believes that kids need to learn more in schools than just “The Three R’s” (That’s Readin’, Writin' and Rithmatic’ to those of you not from Missouri) you’re not alone. We here at Edunators agree with you. The problem is some of those things just can’t be taught.

Many teachers spend an exuberant amount of time stressing and punishing kids in the name of “teaching responsibility”. Consider that late work (or no work), tardiness and bringing supplies to class are all issues that frustrate teachers. We ridicule, we punish, we take off points, etc., yet all of these are examples of “executive functions” of the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain that many researchers now believe is not fully developed until the late teens to early twenties. [1], [2],[3]

Anybody else make any really bad decisions in college they wouldn’t dare dream of making now?

Teachers love to throw out the “we’re preparing them for the real world” argument. Yes, the real world is cold and dark. It’s an awful place full of parasites and predators. Students will be FORCED to work for ruthless bosses who will fire you for showing up late or forgetting supplies! </sarcasm>

Give me a break. If that’s the world you live in, find a new world. Nobody really believes that and anybody who does shouldn’t be in education. You know what will help kids avoid THAT world? An education, so if they find themselves working for such a person they can tell them to take the stick out of their butt and go find a new job. Even if the “real world” is that difficult, and the lessons do need to be learned, do they have to be learned by 14 years old?

Consider the work Rick Wormeli, who points out in his sensational video that "LSATs, MCATS, Praxis exams...all allowed to be re-done over and over again for FULL CREDIT....it’s a weak teacher who doesn’t allow re-do’s and do-overs cause your not teaching to make sure he learns it, you’re teaching to make sure he learns it on the conveyer belt."
There are a lot of very successful people in this world that were jerks, the United States Congress runs late on a regular basis and there are plenty of adults that can’t sit still in a chair (look around at your next faulty meeting). Regardless of your words, if your actions are such that correcting these behaviors is the purpose of your existence as a teacher, you’re in for a very long and frustrating career. And you’re not focused on learning.

2) To focus on learning, avoid focusing on just “doing stuff” instead of “learning stuff”.

Behavioral expectations on steroids aren’t the only thing that can cause a classroom teacher to lose focus either. Before you ask your students to do something, consider why you’re asking them. Will completing those questions in the book REALLY help them learn the material? Will copying those notes off the board EXACTLY as you wrote them REALLY increase their knowledge? Or would teaching them to summarize information and compile their own notes not only teach them important learning strategies but help them learn the content as well?

One final point about work that doesn’t reflect learning. In the history of global education, no child has ever learned anything from a freaking “Word Search.” Yet, teachers at every level continue to hand out this moronic piece of busy work. Can they be fun? I suppose. Are they teaching anything? I doubt it – and keep your arguments about how they “teach” spelling. We’ll pass.

Over reliance on worksheets or rote memorization can stand in the way of actual learning too.

If your students are “learning” things for the test, passing the test, and then flushing them to never be seen or heard from again, then the material was never really “learned” in the first place. If the knowledge can’t be taught to somebody else, or applied in a useful manner, what was the point? There is no cooler moment in a classroom than when a student quits worrying about their grade and starts trying to learn the material because they feel like they “need to know this” and take ownership of their learning. It’s not magic, it’s a classroom culture that must be conveyed, encouraged and required by the teacher.

The single best indicator if a teacher is focused on task completion rather than learning is to have a look at what their gradebook reflects. Some grading policies reward task completion, for example, grading for completion has NOTHING to do with student learning. “But if I don’t give them points for it, they won’t do it!” B.S. The student’s who care about the grade will do it, but they’d have done it anyway! The students you can’t get to complete work don’t care about their grades, otherwise they’d complete their work! Here’s a radical idea, consider explaining to students the purpose of the assignment. “This is summative, it’s to determine what you really know and will be for a grade. This is formative, it’s practice. I won’t be grading it, but we’ll be looking at it together to help us determine what you still need help on before the summative assessment.”

If you REALLY want to push the boundaries of this “Focus on Learning” thing, then consider you’re your grades actually reflect. Do they reflect student growth? Student knowledge? Or are they some conglomeration of responsibility, task completion, knowledge and skills. Do the zeros in your gradebook represent a lack of the student’s knowledge? Or do they merely represent non-compliance, a behavioral concern that should be reported in a different manner all-together? Do harsh late work penalties really encourage students to get work done on time? Or do they merely
punish students who can’t while encouraging students for “playing school”. Accurate grading is essential, as is developing a “growth mindset” where students are more interested in improving their knowledge and skills than in simply jumping through the teacher’s hoops.

These two problems represent an epidemic across classrooms of every grade level. Teachers believe they are forced to give busy work assignments, grade everything, take off points for late work and give completion points as a means of controlling students. Similarly, they struggle with forgotten supplies and incomplete assignments, and thus kid themselves into believing they’re teaching responsibility when in fact they’re punishing kids for behaviors they may not be developmentally able to correct.

Instead, teachers should lesson plan and be prepared every day to give quality assignments that only reflect student understanding of a content objective. Students should be taught that not every assignment will be graded, but every assignment will HELP THEM learn the content and skills they need to succeed on summative assessments later. Recognize student behavior for what it is, the manifestations of a developing brain creating obstacles to classroom learning. Find ways to overcome those obstacles individually, without damaging student relationships or distorting grades designed to report achievement. By making these two significant changes, teachers and students will be MUCH MORE prepared to focus on learning and be much happier in the classroom.


Miscellaneous Thoughts on Homework

- For most of my students, being home is work enough. I don’t want to “pile on” difficult family situations and do anything to create friction between parents and students. If students homework, it should pull families together, not create tension when “busy work” assignments aren’t completed.
- “If we sat around and deliberately tried to come up with a way to further enlarge the achievement gap, we might just invent homework.” ~Deborah Meier
- “To design in advance that homework in certain subjects will be assigned on certain days is to sacrifice thoughtful instruction on the altar of predictability.” ~Alfie Kohn
- If we’re going to give homework, let’s make it meaningful. Great time to use primary source websites. Have students find them and bring them in! Then, do the hard work in class.
- Consider the flipped classroom model. Have students watch videos, read or listen to podcasts of class material at home. Then, practice the assignments, discuss, write or build projects in the classroom.
- Don’t assign homework. Inspire homework. “Mr. Clements, can I take this home?”
- Practice doesn’t make perfect. Practice makes permanent. Make sure students are proficient in whatever it is they’re practicing. Don’t create bad habits!
- Give choices, it gets more student buy in. Students take more ownership over their work.
- Not every student always needs to practice the same skills….consider differentiating homework. Treating everybody the same is to treat everybody unjustly.

Tips for Improving Classroom Management

- If you don’t have an attention signal, you probably don’t have their attention.
- They don’t care what you know until they know that you care. Relationships matter.
- The brain doesn’t fully develop until the late teens to early twenties. Anybody else make any bad decisions in college?
- If students are refusing to do assignments, the first question should be “is the assignment worth doing?”
- Consider not allowing students who don’t complete a sufficient amount of work to leave class when the bell rings. Make arrangements with other teachers that defiant students won’t be allowed to leave for their next class until they complete a satisfactory amount of the assignment.
- Previewing is the perfect free and easy student intervention. You can easily identify which students are going to struggle BEFORE a unit begins. Find ways to give them a head start on the material. Students will be more likely to participate in class if they know the questions and answers in advance. Behavior improves and so does engagement!