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Overview

Inside-Out Education

What if . . .

- schools showed students how to turn the inside academic content of their education into an immediate and powerful resource for enriching their outside lives — for helping them solve problems creatively, enjoy using their minds, replace boredom with interest, develop empathy and open-mindedness, turn even troubles into opportunities, and live more cooperatively?

Moreover, what if . . .

- students more often took on the role of teacher, collaborated to explore creative ways to apply what they learn, and expressed their ideas and new knowledge through art, drama, music, and creative writing?
- teachers more often took on the role of learner, team taught, visited each other's classes, generally shared and built ideas together, and had more say in educational planning, design, and management?
- students routinely applied their learning and ideas not only for their own benefit but also to assist friends, family members, and others?

Collectively, these “what ifs” form the core of our vision for turning learning inside out—for enabling students to use the inside academic content of the curriculum to enrich their lives outside school (as well as within), and for empowering both students and teachers by broadening their roles and interlacing these roles in new ways.

Our primary innovation is a strategy for using academic content to enrich creative thinking in everyday life. This strategy involves the active use of “meta-thinking”—thinking about thinking and choosing how to use one’s mind. It also includes a set of specific thinking tools for enriching both the learning experience and the enjoyment and creativity of everyday life. This approach enables education to transcend its traditional focus on knowledge acquisition as an end in itself in favor of an emphasis on *using* knowledge as it is acquired. (See figures O-1 and O-2.) Moreover, students can use new learning in any field to help boost their creativity in dealing with issues that lie outside that subject area.

In support of these innovations in meta-thinking and in applying academic content in everyday life, we also propose turning many of the social processes of teaching and learning inside out. For example, students can function productively as teachers for each other in many ways—cooperative learning groups, peer tutoring and partner learning, collaboration with teachers in designing lessons. Teachers, in turn, can learn from each other, from their students’ creative ideas, and from their own educational and life experiments. No doubt educational administrators could also benefit from similar broadening of roles. Finally, involving school and community members more pointedly with each other can help infuse schools with real life as well as spread new ideas into the outside world.

There are a number of significant benefits this approach can bring to education:

- Students find academic content to be more interesting and relevant to their lives when they use it to enrich their creativity and experience outside (as well as within) the classroom. Teaching and learning both become more intrinsically motivating, more fun.
- Students also gain metacognitive skills that can extend beyond using academic content. In addition to figuring out and actively using the underlying thought patterns embedded in academic disciplines, students learn and generate new life-enriching ways to think, as well as develop facility with various guidelines for creative thinking. Such skills contribute to increased self-direction, self-esteem, effective problem solving, and overall coping abilities.
- The overall strategy invites a multifaceted, active, and cooperative approach to learning. This includes a wide range of collaborative classroom activities, a mix of artistic and other modes of expression, and a far-reaching expansion of the roles of teacher and

Turning Learning Loose on Life

What are different ways students use what they learn? What might pave the way to more creative applications of knowledge? How can students get at the underlying patterns of thinking required in a subject—and then use those thought patterns to enrich their own thinking? What general purposes would help to turn learning outward to enhance everyday life?

“Learn It to Use It!”

Even though traditional education tends to treat learning as an end in itself, it is an interesting and informative exercise to keep track for a few days of just how you actually use things you learned in school. You might consider asking your students to do so as well.

What might you find? Certainly, basic skills such as reading, writing, and simple calculating get a workout just about every day. Knowledge in areas such as geography or history comes into play for interpreting and evaluating both fiction and news. Facts and concepts gleaned in science classes may help out in sports or in do-it-yourself projects around the house. Of course, as a teacher you also use many things you learned in school as you do your job.