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Best Practices for the Learner-Centered Classroom

Educational change depends on what teachers do and think. It's as simple and as complex as that.—Sarason

What teachers do is what works. In fact, over time, they develop what are called “best practices.” These innovations may come from books and workshops, classroom experiences, trial and error, sharing and mentoring, or pure teacher intuition. But the one thing that they all have in common, first and foremost, is a practical focus. Best practices help teachers do what teachers do best. Best practices help teachers teach; they help teachers teach kids; they help teachers teach kids well!

As innovations dot the educational scene, teachers are expected to embrace the newest notions, often funneled from the top down. Yet, history has shown that the educational innovations that survive, that truly become institutionalized in the schools and evolve as best practices, are the ones that work in the classroom.

Best practices are strategies embraced at the classroom level because they make sense. If an innovation is to happen, if it is to

become part of the schooling process, it's because teachers are making it happen. Without the support of staff, change doesn't happen—at least not in any significant, long-term way.

Consider this anecdote as an illustration of Sarason's statement about teachers and change. In the early 1970s, metrics came down the educational pike and teachers were expected to teach the metric system as part of the new curriculum. There was the usual resistance to the innovation, as people tried to come to terms with this foreign way of measuring things. Teachers were uncomfortable with it. They did not understand it or internalize it in any meaningful way. Teachers used metrics as a comparative measurement rather than a functional measuring system. They never learned to think in metric.

Looking back on the metric movement, it seems obvious, in hindsight, what really occurred. A quiet revolution swept across the schools throughout the United States. Teachers paid homage to the two or three pages of metric measurement that gratuitously appeared in the textbooks, but they did not really teach metrics.

In fact, they still don't. In schools across the United States, the metric system still remains a skeleton in the schools' closets. Teachers stubbornly hang on to the traditional and familiar, their preferred measuring system. Only in the high school science classes, where metric measurements are relevant to scientific investigations, does the metric system reign supreme.

While this anecdote represents a minor educational innovation in context, it also tells the story of how change does or does not occur in schools. Knowing that change depends on what teachers do and think, the concept of best practices takes on an even more substantive meaning. For best practices imply that teachers must not only perform the practice, they must also think about it within the context of their own content and grade level. They must be reflective about tailoring it to their discipline.

In other words, best practices are grounded in the reflective practices of our nation's teachers. They carry the honored endorsement of seasoned staff. Best practices rank high on the list of teacher favorites.

With that perspective in mind, this collection presents a teacher-tested, tried-and-true "parade of practices." It consists

of a decade of articles, essays, and chapters by Robin Fogarty that have been published or submitted for publication in other sources. Practical strategies from the staff room to the classroom make this an invaluable resource for any educator.

The strategies in *Best Practices for the Learner-Centered Classroom* fall into five educational arenas: integrated curricula, thoughtful instruction, active learning, reflective transfer, and authentic assessment.

Section one presents a panoramic view of natural, holistic, *integrated curricula* created through the use of ten different structures or frames. It includes a discussion of thematic instruction and the critical role of teacher teams. Ending with vignettes of three schools with an integrated curricula mission, the section offers practical insights and real-world examples.

Moving beyond the big picture of curriculum integration, section two focuses on the concept of *thoughtful instruction*. The first essay offers a rationale supported by the research espousing higher-order thinking, problem solving, and decision making. Other essays feature the three-story intellect and a survey on the multiple intelligences. Culminating with vignettes of five teachers who exhibit varying levels of the three-story intellect, this section offers best practices of rigor in thinking.

Inseparable from section two, the third section corrals the ideas, or best practices, that drive *active learning*. Undergirding the thinking in this section is an essay on the research behind cooperative learning, followed by a presentation of the Bellanca/Fogarty BUILD model of cooperative learning. Complementing this cognitive model, the next piece targets ways that high school and college teachers can make their lectures more interactive. Section three closes with three teaching scenarios that exemplify active learning classrooms.

Section four focuses on the ultimate goal of schooling—*reflective transfer* for lifelong use. This section profiles metacognitive approaches to learning, where the target is learning for a lifetime, not for a test. Articles include strategies for teaching for transfer and a six-level prototype for assessing student transfer. The section concludes with six short teacher profiles that illustrate the levels of reflective transfer.

The final section on *authentic assessment* discusses learning logs and portfolios, as well as ways to use Gardner's theory of