

The Collected Writings

(so far) of Rick Wormeli

Crazy Good Stuff I've Learned about
Teaching Along the Way



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The Professional Side

Building Teachers' Capacity for Creative Thinking

For most of the grading period, one of Mrs. Weaver's students does not do his homework. In her third phone call to his parents about the problem, they say that there's nothing they can do about the issue. They claim that she's not doing enough to teach their son responsibility. Mrs. Weaver finishes the call in frustration. She rubs her temples and declares, "There's nothing more that I can do here. He doesn't do his homework, and there's no parent support. I can't teach him."

Translated, Mrs. Weaver is really saying, "I've exhausted my imagination." She thinks she's tried everything she knows, and she precludes everything she might generate. Is this burnout or just someone in need of a creativity boost?

It's not overtly taught in many teacher-prep programs, but learning how to think creatively is key to not only student success, but teacher longevity as well. Teachers encounter situations every day that require creative thinking. Consider their internal monologues:

- My whole lesson today is based on accessing those three websites, but the school's Internet is down, so what can we do instead?
- Small groups are not working in my class, yet I know they're important for many students' learning. How do I get these students to stay focused on their group tasks?
- I've backed myself into a corner explaining an advanced science concept, and it's not making sense to me, let alone to my students. What should I do?

- Angelica doesn't understand the concept after my explanation, but I don't know any other way to teach it. What will I do?
- I'm supposed to differentiate for some of my students, but I don't see any time to do it.
- My school's electronic gradebook system doesn't allow me to post anything but norm-referenced scores, and I want to be more criterion-referenced in my grades. What can I do?
- Because I'm a veteran teacher, I've been asked to be the rotating teacher using a cart and moving from classroom to classroom each period, so the new teacher can have his own room and not have so much to deal with his first year. How will I handle this?

Given that teaching requires so much creativity and problem solving, it's amazing that we don't spend more time building capacity for such thinking, nor do we require demonstrations of it in our teacher evaluation system.

Consider, too, that teachers are told in multiple ways each year not to think for themselves. In many schools, they are handed the curriculum rather than invited to participate in its creation. They are told of new policies that dramatically change current practices without time or structure to make the transitions carefully. Their opinions on controversial education issues are not often sought by policymakers.

Some schools make the mistake of mandating a scripted program in certain subjects with no option to adjust it according to students' needs. Some administrators spend the majority of their building "walk-throughs" with pacing mandates in hand, making sure everyone in the same subject at the same grade level is on the same page on the same day of the week. Teachers are warned to plan accordingly because: the paper supply will run out in January; the master schedule cannot be changed to accommodate a compelling guest speaker; they can't incorporate a new "app" in their lessons because it promotes the use of personal technology that school hasn't sanctioned; new students are

three grade levels below grade-level proficiencies, but they have to do well on the final exam anyway; no, they can't take that field trip with the class because they only get one per year; and besides, that would take too much time away from preparing for the annual state or provincial exam.

Such declarations come across as teachers can't be trusted to make professional decisions. As offensive as this sentiment is to teachers, it's actually a wise caution if teachers have never developed their capacity to reason and think divergently. We all want the pilot who thinks "outside the box" when the plane's navigational system fails at 35,000 feet, and we want teachers to think in unusual ways if the regular curriculum or lesson plan isn't working. Inducting, deducting, revealing logical fallacy/consistency, making connections, and analyzing situations: We want those trusted to create the future via today's students to perform these tasks well. School reformers do better to train teachers to think and act creatively than they do spending time and money teacher-proofing instruction.

Ironically, some teachers who want more autonomy to be creative are often suspicious of colleagues who achieve it. Teachers providing imaginative lessons with students are annoying to some teachers who don't, and unhealthy comparisons follow: "Stop being so creative," a coworker comments. "You're making me look bad."

Creativity in teaching falls flat in schools with complacent and intellectually entrenched staff. It thrives in schools with staff who regularly revise their thinking in light of new evidence. In creative schools, teachers frequently access professional development opportunities. We affirm their professional inquiry via personal action research projects, PLCs, subscriptions to professional journals, and participation in listervs, webinars, Ning, and wikis.

Unfortunately, in some schools it comes across as "uncool" to be known as someone who contemplates cognitive neuroscience, pedagogy, assessment, instructional practice, critical analysis, learning theories, or

who promotes serious contemplation of ideas. This anti-intellectualism is understandable; it's survival: We don't like to do what we are not good at doing. This isn't a sign that teachers are intellectually bereft; it's a sign that they haven't been given the resources and autonomy to develop their intellectual side. They shoot down new ideas and research analysis because they aren't sure what to make of the new information, and it takes less energy to dismiss a new idea than it does to think carefully about it.

This is a real problem: Someone at a department or team meeting says, "Did anyone read Kovecses' research on cognitive linguistics in last month's *Middle School Journal*? There were three points he made that really changed my thinking about how students learn vocabulary." Already there are some faculty members who are rolling their eyes and hoping the curious reader will quiet down so they can move on to other business, like whether or not school is closing early on the last day before the holiday. Think of all the great concepts, tips, and skills that no one passes on to others because they are afraid to come across as too Joe or Jane Professional Know-It-All.

The problem is that these initially unwilling teachers are actually thoughtful people, and if they heard the ideas, they would enjoy the conversation. They would think seriously about trying the ideas in their own classes. Without administrative and collegial encouragement and a risk-taking, contemplative school culture, teachers don't have the skills or motivation to think intellectually about what they do, yet it's vital to student success and our evolving profession.

Intellectual explorations are positive things. Teachers who question policies, offer new research to consider, share compelling professional reading with others, post regularly on professional Listservs, and think critically about teaching practices should be affirmed and supported, not made to feel like the goody-goody at the front of the room keeping everyone from recess because they are excited about amphibians and have one more question to ask about tree frogs in the Amazon.

There are multiple ways principals can build teachers' capacities for creative and critical thinking in daily teaching. Principals can invite teachers to:

Learn content or a new skill outside of your subject discipline.

Ask teachers to take a course in logic, divergent thinking, mind-mapping, synthesis, reasoning, analysis, law, politics, or rhetoric. Perhaps they'd like to start a forensics or debate club at the school, or participate in an adult version of one. Maybe they want to learn to play a new musical instrument and participate in an adult orchestra or band. They can start their own blog, write feature stories for the local paper, or participate in a local writers' support group. They might wish to learn a foreign language or three, or finally make good on that promise to themselves to start sculpting or painting. They can participate in a small group studies at their church, synagogue, or mosque, and they can experience a ropes initiative course, similar to Project Adventure and Outward Bound. Doing something new and outside one's field of study is a great catalyst for personal creativity.

Build instructional versatility.

Teachers can't be creative with what they don't have. They improve creativity when they have a variety of skills and content on which to draw. Invite them to walk into their lessons with at least three ways to present content and to have more than an inkling of what they'll do for students who learn the material in the first ten minutes of class and do not need the rest of the lesson as planned. Ask them to invite students to submit alternative perspectives and procedures for the material they are presenting and to learn five new learning models or five more uses of an iPad before the end of the school year.

Of course, with all of these, helpful principals find ways to finance additional training and subscriptions to professional journals for faculty,

and they arrange the master schedule and provide substitute teachers, so teachers can study and work together to increase their instructional repertoire. Principals even read instructional articles and pass them along to teachers who may not have had the time to read them.

Reconsider what you have around you.

Sitting in an empty parking lot, could your math teacher teach students all they needed to know about Algebra? Dirt floor, wooden bench, thatched hut: If this were your history teacher's classroom, could she teach students the differences between Middle Ages and Renaissance artwork?

When I was a classroom teacher, one of the biggest liberators for my own thinking was to recognize that some of the greatest teaching tools are all around us. I didn't need to put all my hopes for effective teaching into getting the latest techno-toy from Carolina Biological Supply so much as I needed to think creatively about everyday objects as my teaching tools. Could I get the idea of homeostasis across to students using only elements found in the cafeteria or library? How about communicating the definition of "gestalt" when comparing different linoleum patterns on the floor and ceiling tiles of our building?

And how cool is it that an item seen every day will be there to remind students of the analogous concept every time they see it? It becomes a constant study guide and reinforcer. Someone who lives near the Mississippi River delta whose teacher compared that delta to the branching bronchial tubes leading to the alveoli in the lungs will see the Mississippi as one big trachea leading to the shipping ports (alveoli) where one good (product) is exchanged for another (carbon dioxide-oxygen exchange). Teachers offering lackluster lessons may need a principal's help in making connections between content and everyday objects and routines.