

Introduction

In Pursuit of Powerful Pedagogy

In January 2006, National Public Radio's Scott Simon interviewed Roseanne Cash about her latest album, *Black Cadillac*, a tribute to Cash's mother, father, and stepmother, all of whom died between 2003 and 2005. Explaining the genesis of one particular track, Ms. Cash recalled listening to Christmas carols in church. As the choir intoned "We Three Kings of Orient Are," a familiar line—"Westward leading, still proceeding"—stuck in Cash's mind. She jotted it down and, returning home, wove those four words into the chorus of "The World Unseen," an homage to her late father, the Man in Black himself, Johnny Cash.

Upon hearing this, Mr. Simon cautiously opined, "Well, great artists 'borrow.'" To which Ms. Cash replied, warmly but insistently, "No, great artists 'steal.'"

Got ideas?

The "Got milk?" campaign swept across America in 1994 and has recently been revived. White mustaches appeared on the faces of sports heroes, movie stars, famous authors, and current celebrities; middle school kids posted favorites inside their lockers.

Three years later driving north on Interstate 91 through Massachusetts, I noticed a billboard advertising a local classic rock FM station. Next to a silhouette of Jumpin' Jack Flash was the caption, printed in that curved, now-familiar lower-case font, "Got Mick?"

A few years later at the Farmers' Market in San Francisco's refurbished Ferry Building, I spotted an entrepreneurial cheese merchant sporting a sweatshirt that inquired, again in that distinctive font, "Goat Milk?"

In spite of a Biblical admonition to the contrary, we all "steal" all the time. We take good ideas, reshape, and then embellish them by inventing new twists for old concepts.

About this book

The subtitle *Share... 'Steal'... Revise... Own* tersely describes a recurring practice among teachers. Someone shares an idea, a teacher steals it, then refashions it so that it is now his or her own. Such behavior goes on all the time, and this book is a collection of the excellent results of such burglarious behavior. Good teachers are lifelong learners who relentlessly seek out new ideas with which to enhance their classroom curricula. They pursue powerful pedagogy.

To be sure, the phenomenon of *share... 'steal'... revise... own* is not limited to teaching. Lawyers draw upon each other's arguments as they hone legal briefs. Architects study innovative buildings to discover new ways of designing interior space. Artists are influenced by the creative output of their peers. "Mi casino, su casino," proclaimed a billboard in Albuquerque, employing a familiar Spanish saying to advertise a local Native American gambling emporium. Even the Beatles promoted the *share... 'steal'... revise... own* notion. In "Hey Jude" they argue that if you let something into your heart—an idea, a strategy, an activity—you can begin to make it better.

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A Professional Paradigm

Neither a borrower nor a lender be . . .

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act I, scene iii, 1600

I beg to differ, Will. . . .

A teacher ought to be both lender and borrower—one who shares knowledge, strategies, and attitudes as well as one who gathers information, materials, and concepts from multiple sources. And most teachers are.

Why do teachers “steal” ideas? What kinds of ideas do they “borrow”? How do they adapt them? What difference does such pedagogical pilfering make in their teaching? These are among the questions that inform this book.

Simply put, good teachers are inveterate thieves. They “steal” good ideas whenever and wherever they can and adapt them to their particular classroom settings, students, and personal styles of teaching. Middle level educators are always on the lookout for new strategies with which to invigorate their classrooms and excite their students.

Years ago I noticed a recurring behavior among attendees at conferences. Invariably a teacher would come up to me and say, “I heard you speak last year and I liked your ideas, so I tried one in my class. It worked wonderfully—let me tell you what I did.” The teacher would then describe an activity that, frequently, bore little resemblance to what I had shared. More often than not, the teacher had embellished the activity with new bells and whistles, taking the original concept significantly further than I had. I call this the *share... ‘steal’...revise...own* syndrome, a professional paradigm that has existed for years in education.

The middle school movement itself depended heavily on this process, for in the 1960s and into the 1970s there was almost no professional literature available for pioneering middle school educators to study. Readily sharing purple ditto schedules or amateurishly put-together advisory activities or interdisciplinary units became a way of life. The National Resource Center, established by Bob Malinka under a grant, played a key role as a clearinghouse for receiving and then sending out for free whatever was available. Ownership was never a concern as middle level educators shared and “stole” from one another.

Repackaging ideas

The concept of *share... ‘steal’...revise...own* began for me at an African-Asian curriculum workshop in Yorktown Heights, New York, in the fall of 1970. Then in my ninth year of working with young adolescents, I encountered attentive teachers who listened carefully to the lessons my students and I were sharing about Japanese tea ceremonies, African folk tales, and Middle Eastern cuisine. In subsequent years, colleagues would tell me how they developed an idea that I had shared with them a year or two earlier, usually describing something much more textured than what I originally proposed. When I saw that other teachers were taking and improving my ideas, I realized how much more I had to learn about pedagogy; they could see next steps that were not apparent to me.

I revised and added to this program annually. In 1980 I composed a poem titled “The First Day.”

The First Day

It's the first day.
In they come,
Some pausing hesitantly
At the door,
Wondering and waiting;
Others boldly asserting
Their presence
As they stride to seats.

Heads swivel,
Eyes contact the classroom:
Posters and pictures,
Multi-colored images
Meet curious glances.
Saving seats for friends,
Adjusting clean-cover notebooks
Filled with clean ruled sheets,
They sit, expectantly,
In crisp clothing.

For some, the boredom of August
Gone at last.
For some, the restraints of structure
Unwillingly accepted.
For most, an unexplored world awaiting.
New seats permit new perspectives,
New possibilities, new patterns.

The student asks:
“What does he expect of me?
What is this room all about?
Who is this teacher?”
The teacher asks:
“Who are these people?
What are they all about?
What do they expect of me?”

A simultaneously shared journey
Through days and months ahead
Beckons. But for now,
All is new and trembling
Because
It's the first day.

For the rest of my teaching career, even before I said “Hello,” these verses were the very first words out of my mouth right after kids entered the classroom. “The First Day” enabled me to introduce several elements during the opening moments of that initial class: a poem that spoke to the occasion, the teacher as poet, free verse poetry, the skills of memorizing and reciting, and the notion that teachers understand what kids go through on Day One.

Todd Williamson, an educator in North Carolina, recalled the impact of this poem when his teaching partner read it to their team on Day One:

I think it did a couple of things for the students. First, it threw them somewhat off balance; not many teachers begin their class with a poem. Second, it allowed them to realize that people do know what they're going through on the first day. That connection, as I experienced first hand, continued throughout activities the first day and then [was present in] team activities throughout the year.

A few eighth graders referenced a world beyond school:

I believe in equality, humanity and peace. I don't believe in religion, drugs, discrimination or violence. I am concerned about the environment and the recession and like to help people.

I enjoyed the John Lennon song "Imagine" [played on Day One] because of the lyrics. My dad once explained to me about all the controversy that this song caused. Although it did start some problems it was a song written from his heart.

Based on these examples, it could be argued that kids haven't changed much over the years—they continue to be idealistic, or self-centered, or afraid, or self-aware, or all of these and more. And in fact, today's young adolescents are concerned about many of the same issues that my students addressed in their letters of introduction excerpted above, all of which were composed by eighth graders in a heterogeneously grouped classroom at Shoreham-Wading River Middle School in September 1992.

After reading and responding to each student's letter, I initiated individual relationships and got to know each of them better—through what they chose to reveal—and built on that knowledge as the year advanced.

Gina Carter wanted "to establish a positive relationship" with her students at the beginning of the year. Then an eighth grade language arts teacher at St. Mary's School in Greenville, South Carolina, Gina knew "how tumultuous the middle school student's personality can be." Consequently, she tried the letter of introduction activity and was pleased with the results:

At first I thought it might not go over well with my eighth graders since I had already taught them the two previous years, but I was wrong. The most surprising part of this lesson was learning how many of my students enjoy writing—if they wrote about something they cared about. The majority of them disliked being told what to write and took ownership when the assignments were more personal.

Gina began by distributing a set of instructions.

Letter of Introduction

Write a letter of introduction telling me about yourself and how you feel about writing. Please include your view on the following points:

- Important information about you.
- How you feel about writing.
- Anything that's difficult for you about writing.
- Things about the writing you did last year that were successful for you or that you liked.
- Things about the writing you did last year that you didn't like or that weren't successful for you.
- Goals you have for yourself in writing this year.
- What you expect of me as your English teacher.
- Anything else you want to share with me.

Your letter is due in class tomorrow. I will respond next week.

Through the candid responses she received, Gina formed initial impressions of her students and gained insights into their abilities with and attitudes about writing. (Note: The following excerpts have not been corrected for spelling or punctuation.)

Camille began her letter of introduction by declaring, "I am a very studious person who really cares about their future especially this eighth grade year." She expressed a love of writing, adding that she found it "exciting because I paint the picture for myself." As a goal, Camille said, "I hope to rid myself of rambling." She let Ms. Carter know that "I expect you to teach us how to get rid of a bunch of nasty habits or mistakes commonly found in writing." Camille ended on a positive note: "Thank you for giving us the opportunity to write our opinions down. This year will be so amazing."

Mikel let Mrs. Carter know that he did not appreciate being assigned a topic: "Writing to me is fun but sometimes I just don't have anything to write about. Even though I have nothing to write sometimes I don't like writing on a given topic because I like to write what I feel."

She also brought parents into the equation:

We publish a classroom anthology. I get parent volunteers to come in to bind, to edit. They love this activity. At times in the year I have given parents a brief gift of writing lesson, a letter home, and I've asked them, as a gift of writing to their son or daughter, to look over their child's writing portfolio and write a letter back to their child about his or her progress. I kept a copy of one—it was for Jeremy, who tried his hardest, who could never pass my tests, who struggled and just worked his tail end off all year long writing poems and memoirs and short stories. In her letter, which made me tear up because it was so positive, his mom wrote, "Looking at your writing, I could see how much you've grown, Jeremy." I thought, What a gift of writing to him. And to me.

To recap: Melinda heard about a good writing strategy, brought it back to her school and infused it into all aspects of her writing program. And then she passed it on to others—something that good teachers do, all the time.

Take a Moment to Reflect

There is something special about a gift of a personal letter, especially in this era of e-mails and text messages.

How and when might you implement such a project?

Could it involve parents? Other teachers or teams?

A gift of color poems

Meg Reddick, a middle school language arts teacher in Knoxville, Tennessee, was so taken by the Gift of Writing activity and Barbara M. Joosee's *I Love You the Purplest* (1991) that she invented a poetry writing activity and then shared her ideas at an NCTE conference in Nashville. Meg explained:

After reading *I Love You the Purplest* out loud, I had students make a list of five people who were important to them, people that they care about. I stressed that it would be best if the person were still living, and that this person must definitely be a person (not a pet). While students were making their lists, I made my own list of important people on the overhead.

Students circled one person on the list. Meg then instructed her kids to choose a color that reminded them of the person they had selected or a color that that person loved. Meg noted:

I reminded students at this point that they were going to create a gift of writing to give to the person they selected as well as contribute to a class anthology of color poems. Some students wanted to write to all five people on the list; I explained that they could do that, but that they needed to complete one letter first for our class anthology.

From her list, Meg selected her youngest daughter, Lucy, and the color yellow; then she modeled what she wanted her students to do. Using the overhead, Meg demonstrated how to brainstorm objects and images that were yellow (i.e., the sun, a flower). Her students made suggestions as well. Soon Meg had a long list from which to draw ideas for her color poem.

Next, Meg placed her students in writing groups and had them repeat the exercise that she just demonstrated—brainstorming as many images and objects as they could for each color selected by a student. Meg reminded students to consider objects and images that their intended recipient might enjoy.

Following the brainstorming exercise, Meg projected a blank template of a color poem from *I Love You the Purplest*. She filled in the blanks with objects and images taken from her original list. Next, she distributed blank color poem templates and asked students to complete a color poem for a special person.



Writing groups brainstorm ideas before individual students prepare a first draft. Then drafts are critiqued by the group.