

Conquering the Crowded Curriculum

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Introduction: The Curriculum Dilemma

Longing to Teach in Ways That Make Sense

“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.”

— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Over the last decade, I have worked with elementary and secondary school teachers and school leaders as they come to terms with what is being asked of them by 21st century educational standards, theories, curriculum, and procedures. The pressures to *adapt* and *adopt* have been overwhelming for many of them: educators have been asked to be more accountable, more imaginative, more inclusive, and more flexible all at the same time. Teachers are now expected to *adopt* an inquiry-based, project-based approach in their teaching and to *adapt* various methodologies to include online and technological advances. They are being asked to *adapt* to new ways of assessing learning and are required to *adopt* culturally relevant approaches to meet the needs of increasingly diverse student populations. As I watch them work feverishly hard in an effort to “do it all,” my heart has gone out to them.

The work over the past 10 years has been pleasurable, but also intense with underlying feelings of inadequacy and worry. Teachers often ask me: “How can I do it all? I really want to teach this way, but I worry that students won’t be able to pass the tests that are coming their way. Should I teach this way for a little bit and then revert to the kind of teaching that is going to get the scores that our school badly needs?” I have felt the tensions that teachers experience in their practice. They want to do what is required by their districts, but they also long to have some autonomy as well as agency: to act on their own sense of what is right, good, and true for their students and for themselves in the various contexts in which they teach.

As I work with teachers of varying levels of experience, I am always moved by the efforts of all of them to gain new knowledge and skills, find resources that their students will connect to, and raise the experience of teaching to new heights. Crucial to the success of this work are a number of factors: a commitment to this new kind of collaborative, inquiry-based teaching; support of the classroom as a negotiated place, where students’ questions lead the discussion and inquiry; the permission (and encouragement) of the school administration for this kind of teaching to take place; adjustments in the school schedule/calendar; and the investment in the enterprise by teachers, students, parents, and the school community.

The Potential for Authentic Teaching Tapestries

I hope that the ideas represented here help teachers think about what is possible if we approach teaching from a collaborative, imaginative stance where learning among subjects and in relation to the real world is connected. I hope teachers will see that the links are not forced, but that the common narratives are blended together in ways that make sense. I encourage teachers to work collaboratively

and creatively — to tease out common ideas, themes, and approaches that are present in the curriculum — and then weave authentic teaching tapestries, where content knowledge and understanding are drawn from one subject discipline and used to enrich and apply to others.

This book will help teachers work together to create and teach curriculum that is imaginative, integrated, inquiry based, and innovative. Precise and proven ways of teaching and assessing are introduced, and teachers are encouraged to look at the curriculum expectations of the subjects they are responsible for and then work with each other to develop inquiry projects that meet the needs and interests of their students. I provide ways for teachers to sift out what is important from the mass of material in front of them so that they can seamlessly “connect the curriculum dots.”

How to Address the Challenges

This book is intended to be a practical resource that explores innovative ways for teachers to “conquer” the many curricular challenges they face in diverse, contemporary classrooms. It describes worthwhile projects that they can co-create with their colleagues and students so that learning about something of significance is done in innovative ways from a variety of perspectives.

Here, I describe ways that elementary and secondary school teachers can set up integrated webs of contextualized learning so that students are engaged in curricular material that matters to them.

- In Chapter 1, I outline what it means to teach in inclusive ways.
- In Chapter 2, I encourage all of us to stop, look, and listen to our students so that we can plan and implement culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy.
- In Chapter 3, I explore how teachers can learn to take risks in their teaching so that their students see different perspectives, think critically and imaginatively about ideas, work with others to explore material in various contexts, and represent new knowledge in precise, artistic, and profound ways.
- In Chapter 4, I present and use as models several comprehensive planned projects that carefully and skillfully integrate curriculum areas.
- In Chapter 5, I call out for this kind of work to be supported by educators who want to work in new ways, take risks in their teaching, and challenge their colleagues to come on the journey with them. Advocacy for innovative thinking is reinforced by a range of effective ways to teach.

I hope that *Conquering the Crowded Curriculum* will inspire teachers to teach in new ways and never look back.

1

The Classroom Context — Inclusiveness

Teaching towards the Ideal

“Teaching as an ethical enterprise goes beyond presenting what already is; it is teaching towards what ought to be.”

— William Ayers, *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*, page 141

Many years ago, I came across a powerful image on the front of *The New Yorker* magazine. I bought the magazine, cut out the image, and used it for a long time, projecting it on overhead projectors in gymnasias, conference workshop areas, classrooms, and staff rooms.

I have since lost the picture, but I remember it clearly. The drawing was of a beautiful, magical subway car in which “Silence, Please” was displayed in a few prominent places. People of all ages were sitting around a large, rectangular, wooden table, reading various things — newspapers, comics, and books. (I am sure that if the artist were drawing a similar piece today, many at the table would be reading their phones or tablets.) A few people were holding books, but you could tell that they had stopped for a moment to think. Down the center of the table were a number of those wonderful brass reading lamps with the green shades that lend such a lovely, intimate glow. There were also signs on the billboards above people’s heads, including one about writer’s block, if I remember correctly. The sign encouraged people to keep going.

Education: Putting the Destination within Everyone’s Reach

I loved this subway car image and introduced it in workshops with teachers because it made me think of schools and learning. As I projected the image, I would say to my audience: “If only schools and classrooms could be like this. Everyone would be warm and have a seat. Everyone would be assured of their destination. Everyone would be given equal opportunities. The choices displayed in the advertisements and billboards would represent constant reminders of the future that awaits. The environment would be aesthetically pleasing as well as utilitarian. People would be given an array of genres and ways to learn and read. There would be time to think. There would be a coziness, a collectivity, and a beauty that would encourage us to be together to learn.”

I would point out as well that, although the conductor was missing from the image, the subway train was clearly conceived by someone who knew what he or she was doing. When the analogy is extended to the classroom again, we can say that teachers conceptualize an inclusive classroom. They work hard to make sure that everyone is welcome and honored for who they are and where they are from. They help children on their education journey. They also give students hope for the future. They ensure that the destination is within reach for everyone.

Inclusive classrooms are places where students feel they belong, where they are safe to express themselves, accepted for who they are and where they are from, and challenged to learn in new ways about themselves, others, and the complex world in which they live. Students enter these rooms knowing that people (both

You may find it interesting to read *Engaging Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Possibility: From Blind to Transformative Optimism*, by César Augusto Rossatto (published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2004).

their teachers and their peers) will support, accept, and encourage them. Inclusive classrooms have a constant, silent beat of acceptance to them.

As Paulo Freire writes, inclusive classrooms provide a “pedagogy of possibility” to all who are in them. So, what does it mean to teach inclusively, or provide a pedagogy of possibility? In my opinion, four conditions need to be in place:

1. The teacher has a strong sense of the students.
2. The teacher encourages students’ positive sense of self.
3. The teacher has an evolving sense of self.
4. The teacher has a sense of place — he or she knows the families and the local communities, and understands the cultural and environmental geography that surrounds the school.

These four frames — a teacher’s sense of student, a student’s sense of self, a teacher’s sense of self, and a teacher’s sense of the “place” in which he or she teaches — are key to effective and inclusive teaching. They allow for the emergence of a culture of critical consciousness and care.

They are elaborated in the next four sections.

The Teacher Has a Strong Sense of the Students

First of all, teachers in inclusive classrooms have a sense of their students. They find out, by various means, who is in the room and plan accordingly. “Location, location, location” is not only a real-estate mantra. From the first encounter, teachers take stock of students’ locations, or who they are in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and more. They acknowledge where they are from, how they see themselves as learners, what their personal stories are, and so on. They rely upon this information to plan lessons that will empower everyone to find their voices and challenge them to learn. They affirm the life experiences of the students they encounter in their classrooms so that they can connect that personal information to the themes, issues, ideas, images, relationships, technologies, and languages found in the material they are studying. They know who has access to technology, who has difficulty reading and writing, and who needs more space and support to finish assignments. They know how their students learn best and who needs to be encouraged to do something out of their comfort zone. They know when to push, when to wait, when to challenge, when to comfort, when to create more complex tasks, when to lay off, when to smile, when to cajole, when to walk away, and when to come back. They know their students well.

Recognize students’ unique contexts

When I was a teacher in an urban secondary school, I knew it was important to understand the locations of my students at the very beginning of the school year. From there, I could build communities of learning in which diverse voices were valued and heard.

This work was connected to what I have come to understand about “community-based education.” This kind of education begins with teachers recognizing the realities of their students’ locations and knowing more about their parents and families as creators of their lives, histories, and futures. I also wanted my

students to become aware of the varied backgrounds and cultures of all those in the room so that we could draw on each other's strengths, knowledge, and experiences.

The Teacher Encourages Students' Positive Sense of Self

A second condition of providing a pedagogy of possibility is for teachers to encourage a positive sense of self in each of their students. This positive sense of self can support the students as they encounter difficult situations within the turmoil of their changing and challenging worlds.

Students who feel disconnected from the school experience for whatever reasons present teachers with all kinds of individual challenges. These students might have learning difficulties or find it challenging to connect with other students in the class. It takes a while to determine the best teaching approach. Often, when consulted about these kinds of students, I suggest that the best thing to do is to help students see themselves as learners — as people who have a shot at the prize — and to help them understand that the teacher is there to ensure their success.

It is important for teachers to help students gain a better sense of what they can do: to identify the gifts they bring to the classroom. Often, teachers have to re-teach students about their loveliness — to encourage, to cajole, and to make learning about their strengths and talents explicit until students find it within themselves to bloom again. Inclusive teachers are aware of how they speak to their students and consciously push against personal bias and judgment of students.

In inclusive classrooms, teachers work with teachers, parents, students, and others to co-create an environment in which all people model the qualities of respect, responsibility, and caring. Aware of their own privilege and power, they listen to what students tell them about who they are and how they learn best. Once they know that, they dig into their teaching repertoires and begin to use appropriate teaching techniques.

Part of helping students develop a positive sense of self is to choose curriculum materials that reflect back to the students, their cultural identities, and their experiences. Teachers creatively open up curriculum windows to let learning in.

Nurture student voices

Teachers in inclusive classrooms are on the lookout for who is learning and who is not. They know that the work they do with students has to matter. It has to be relevant to students' lives. Teachers cannot fake being interested. They have to really care about what makes their students tick and then find ways of connecting what they want to know with what they need to know.

Teachers listen for the silent or absent voices in their classrooms and find ways to help these students re-engage with school and with the curriculum. As they encourage them to invest personal interest and increased effort in their own learning, they nurture student voices. From my own experience, I know the benefits that teachers' sensibilities and awareness can have on students' self-esteem, academic motivation, and individual or collective successes. I know the value of addressing their emotional, physical, and intellectual needs and the importance of adults treating students with the care and respect they would extend to their own children (Grumet 1991).