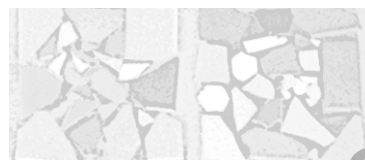
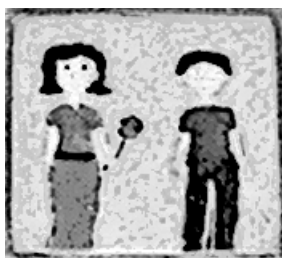


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PROLOGUE



Who Do We Think We Are?

So, this book is called *Teaching the Best Practice Way*? Now that's a pretty ambitious topic. Those two authors must be pretty fabulous teachers themselves, or maybe they just think they are the best. Come to think of it, who are these guys to define how other people—students in certification programs, new teachers just starting out, journeyman educators at midcareer, even the savvy veterans—ought to teach? Who do they think they are?

Good questions, we admit.

When we decided on the title for this book, our publisher, with characteristic British understatement, advised: “Well, I suppose you’ll have to deal with the hubris factor rather early on.” That’s for sure, Philippa, so here goes.

No, we do not think we are the “best” teachers in the world. We have plenty of former students running around who’d probably be delighted to tell you about our lessons that bombed, units that flopped, and every classroom crash and burn along the way. No, we certainly don’t know everything about the incredibly complex art, craft, science, journey, and roller coaster called teaching young people. And yes, we’re acutely aware that our title may convey more expertise than anyone can fairly claim.

But we're not just aw shucks folks, either. Between us, we have taught for seventy-four years, from elementary grades through high school and college. We've worked in city schools with poor, underserved kids, and in elite suburban schools with every conceivable resource. We've guest-taught in classrooms across the country, where curious colleagues have invited us to trade practices with them. We've helped start a brand-new public school on Chicago's West Side and guided it through nine years of development. For the past year, we have been regularly teaching in a small school in southeastern Ohio, which has opened up a new perspective on the joys and challenges of rural education. Between us, we've also written sixteen previous books, each one focused on some aspect of literacy, learning, or school reform. These days, we mostly earn our keep as teacher-educators at National-Louis University in Chicago, where we are working with adult students who are leaving careers in nursing, technology, public relations, dentistry, social work, advertising, and law to become teachers. So, while there's plenty we still don't know about teaching, we have done a lot of it, watched a lot of it, and have been studying this mysterious craft for quite a while.

This Stuff Works

This book began its life in 1998 as *Methods that Matter: Six Structures for Best Practice Classrooms*. Since that time, the practices described in our first edition have grown and spread in American classrooms. The book club model we described can fairly be said to have swept the schools, with millions of students from kindergarten through high school now engaging in peer-led literature circles patterned after adult reading groups. Collaborative activities, broadly endorsed by curriculum and subject-matter organizations, such as the National Council of Teachers of English and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, continue to grow in use and in refinement. Thematic, integrative units are the hallmark of the country's highest-achieving schools; visit award-winning public or private schools in any American city and you'll see students engaged in extended, interdisciplinary studies of fairy tales, global warming, the future, and more. Strategic reading, or reading-as-thinking, has become a major focus in today's schools, one of the highest priorities for staff development and a key theme of accreditation visits. Thousands of teachers across the curriculum are implementing the new reading-as-thinking strategies to make sure students understand and remember what they read, especially nonfiction text in math, science, and history. And reflective, student-driven forms of assessment are replacing traditional tests and quizzes, while conferences, rubrics, and portfolios are becoming new standard forms of evaluation.

While it is gratifying to see the spread of Best Practices among working teachers, not everything has been sunshine and lollipops since this book first appeared. First, the term *educational standards* has taken on some new and worrisome meanings. Back in the early 1990s, the two of us were happy to be part of the standards movement, which at that time involved educational organizations (like the International Reading Association and the American Association for the Advancement of Science) defining what good teaching and learning looked like in each school subject field. The documents these groups developed, many with federal funding, focused on “opportunity to learn” standards—defining what kind of instruction, experiences, and materials kids should be offered. In other words, we were working on the “inputs,” making sure there would be equity and excellence for all.

But a second, and increasingly contrary, standards movement arose, focused not on supporting the development of individual learners, but on testing and comparing numerical outputs, under the banner of “accountability.” Backed with the political muscle of state legislatures, governors, business groups, Washington think tanks, and presidents from both parties, the accountability branch of the standards movement pretty much hijacked the school reform conversation. Resources were shifted away from providing instruction to children and toward ranking students with standardized tests and dealing out punishments to kids, teachers, and schools deemed to have failed. States developed thousands of new outcome-based standards, and backed them with batteries of high-stakes tests that could land noncompliant schools or teachers in trouble fast.

How do all these politics affect you, as a reader of *Teaching the Best Practice Way*? Not much, we hope. It depends on how the accountability movement impinges upon your teaching life. The main thing you need to know is that the seven methods featured in this book have a long record of validation, in both qualitative and quantitative studies of rigorous design. We have abundant proof that, for example, well-structured small-group projects, or strategic reading activities, or authentic experiences, or thematic teaching units are linked to improved achievement on valid measures of student performance.

In other words, students taught with these methods typically score very well on high-stakes tests, even though the methods aren’t intentionally aligned to such measures. Best Practice kids, if we can call them that, do better on the customary measures of educational achievement as a natural consequence of good teaching—or as a side effect of it. They become powerful learners, proficient readers and writers and thinkers; they are accustomed to taking responsibility for themselves, experienced at solving problems, full of confidence, and sensitive to situations in which they are being evaluated. Now, that doesn’t mean we take high scores for granted. In schools where we work, we also do some very focused coaching when

the standardized testing season comes along. It's vital that the students know the format, the rules, and best angles of attack when they sit down in front of that test booklet. Hey, we don't like all this testing, but we're not going to let our kids get busted while we bask in our own orthodoxy. We have a motto for our forty-week school calendar in Chicago: "thirty-six weeks of pure Best Practice teaching and four weeks of savvy, well-timed test-prep."

A recurrent theme of the accountability movement is to demand "scientific proof"—evidence, usually in statistical form, showing that certain educational practices really do work. Seems reasonable to us. After all, if we are going to devote millions of dollars and zillions of classroom hours to a particular activity, it certainly ought to be worthwhile. That's why we're happy to report that the seven key practices described in this book, sometimes under different names, have bodies of research going back sixty years or more, some of which we have documented in our own previous work (Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde 1998; Zemelman, Daniels, and Bizar 1999).

But there's much more research that validates progressive practices, enough to fill a whole book, leaving little room for the practical instructions, classroom vignettes, and materials we really want to share. So, at the end of each chapter, we will direct you to further readings where you can learn about the heritage, theory, and research base behind each of these important methods. But before we move on, we want to introduce you to one line of research that's especially illuminating.

Fred Newmann and a number of his colleagues at the University of Wisconsin have been working for twenty years on the idea of "authentic instruction." This is their name for a model of teaching that diverges from the traditional paradigm in a number of ways. In authentic lessons:

Students draw conclusions, elaborate on their understanding, or make and support arguments.

Students construct knowledge, by interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating, and not merely reciting information.

Students connect topics to their own lives or similar situations in daily life outside school.

For many years, Newmann (1996) has documented that students taught "the authentic way" score far better on challenging subject-matter tests than kids taught through standard lectures and solitary seatwork.

But the lingering question has been: What about high-stakes state or national standardized tests that are not necessarily aligned with the curriculum being

taught? How would kids score on these increasingly prevalent exams? Using a large sample of Chicago public school students, Newmann's group looked at the quality of assignments given by teachers, as measured by their embodiment of these three elements of authenticity (Newmann, Bryk, and Nagaoka 2001). The study found that

- classrooms with high-quality assignments make gains that are 20 percent greater than the average, on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in reading, over one year;
- classrooms with low-quality assignments make gains that are only 70 percent of the average, on the ITBS in reading, over one year.

Newmann's team also looked at whether classroom instruction was more teacher-centered, featuring extensive lecturing and relatively passive student roles, or more interactive, featuring more social and exploratory activities for students. Studying another selection of Chicago schools, the researchers found that

- with high didactic instruction, students gain 3.4 percent *less* than the city average on reading achievement tests, over one year;
- with low didactic instruction, students gain 3.7 percent *more* than the city average on reading, over one year.

Finally, Newmann looked at interaction levels, comparing outcomes in classrooms that feature extensive collaborative, small-group work with those of students who mostly worked quietly and alone. Their findings showed that

- with *high* use of interactive instruction, students gain 5.2 percent *more* than the city average on reading, over one year;
- with *low* use of interactive instruction, students gain 4.5 percent *less* than the city average on reading, over one year.

While some of these effects may seem modest, Newmann points out that the difference in achievement is cumulative, multiplying over the years.

What Newmann calls "authentic instruction" is what many educators, including us, call Best Practice. And the seven "methods that matter" in this book are the tools teachers need to create classrooms that are thoughtful, authentic, interactive, rooted in real life, and engaged in exploration.

The Design of This Book

Each of the next seven chapters gives a detailed and practical picture of one good teaching structure. We start each section with a descriptive essay, outlining the method, tracing its history and roots, acknowledging its pioneers, and listing the structure's vital features. Next, several teachers representing different grade levels and school communities will explain how they adopted the basic model, adapted it to their students, and made it their own. That means you'll be getting the inside story from working teachers—professionals who are bringing Best Practice to life in their classrooms every day and now sharing their best ideas with you. Because we are lucky enough to visit a variety of regions and schools every year, we can be matchmakers, introducing you to thirty-four wonderful colleagues, people who face the same challenges that you do every day. There's no more credible source of expertise and advice.

We've asked each teacher-author to share a story of good teaching in their own style and voice. These master teachers take you behind the scenes of their practice, explaining how they got started, planned their innovations, equipped their classrooms, prepared students, managed their activities, solved problems, sustained their energy when things got tough, and found colleagues for sharing and support. We've asked the writers to be practical and specific, not just inspirational. While it is always fun to hear how someone else succeeded—it's even more useful to learn how to replicate their success in your own classroom.

In each chapter, you'll find teacher stories for every grade range—primary, elementary, middle, and high school; these stories come from a variety of school types in six different states. (OK, there are rather a lot of Chicagoans—please forgive our hometown boosterism.) While many of these reports come to us from skillful veteran teachers, the oldsters haven't cornered the market on excellence; there are plenty of younger educators here, even some first- and second-year teachers. And while the reports differ in style and language, you'll notice the shared underlying assumptions about student-centered, progressive, Best Practice teaching.

Many of the stories are detailed enough that other teachers can use them as the basis for their own classroom experiments. But no one here is bragging or trying to make it sound easy. Nobody thinks they have perfected themselves as teachers. Indeed, many of this book's contributors describe themselves as being in process, on the road, partway there, or even taking baby steps. All these teacher-authors know firsthand that change is hard, and many have written about their frustrations as well as their triumphs. For most of us who teach, change comes in small, hard-earned increments, not in one sudden, dramatic transformation.

Taken together, these sets of descriptions and stories provide a basic understanding of the seven Best Practice classroom structures, but they probably won't answer every question that a teacher contemplating a classroom implementation might raise. This book occupies a kind of middle level in the pyramid of resources about any one of these activities. For example, many books and standards reports endorse the workshop model, but without explaining it. In this book, we explain the basic structure of workshop and offer four stories of teacher variations. Readers who want even more detail about workshop can then turn to whole books that focus closely on this single structure. That's one reason we provide reading suggestions at the end of each chapter.

As you read along, you'll also notice that these teacher stories aren't just about strategies and practices, but also about theories and ideas: the articles mention developmental stage models, cognitive processes, thinking taxonomies, process-writing research, reader-response theory, and other large concepts about learning. That's because teaching is idea-driven work; educators who are in charge of their own professional growth want to know where innovative strategies come from, how activities can be translated up and down the grades, and what research supports them. Teachers want to know how their own daily experiences and experiments fit in with those of colleagues around the country; they are eager to become part of the wider professional conversation that constantly bounces between the concrete and the conceptual. Teachers want activities that will work with real kids on Monday, but they also want to understand *why* things work so they can answer their own questions and make their own choices down the line.

Though these contributors range from kindergarten through high school, we think that every single story has value for all teachers, not only for people who happen to teach at the same grade level. The seven Best Practice methods are truly generic, meaning that vital tips or translatable stories about management, organization, materials, scheduling, evaluation, or record keeping can come from colleagues at any grade level.

We like the fact that this book speaks to all teachers. In both editions, we've violated the conventional wisdom that says you must aim professional books at the same grade-level spans we use for school buildings: K–5, 6–8, 9–12, etc. For some topics that may be a sensible segregation. But for the biggest ideas, the ones that genuinely apply to all grade levels, we need everyone to join the conversation. Indeed, while we think this book will be helpful to individual readers, our dream audience is a whole school faculty, a whole *district* faculty, coming together to talk about the really big ideas in teaching, from kindergarten through senior year, from beginning reading to AP physics.

What's New in This Edition?

The big news is, we have “discovered” a seventh method that matters. Can you imagine? The missing method was a true case of something being right under our noses, something so fundamental and pervasive that we forgot to mention it: reading. But we don't mean same-old school reading lessons or activities. We are talking about something distinct and special here. Teachers who nurture strategic readers have a repertoire of activities that help kids deeply understand not just typical school print (textbooks, novels, math problems) but also art, film, dance—they learn to “read” the world. And this special kind of reading goes far beyond merely decoding letters or comprehending facts. Strategic readers deploy a sophisticated repertoire of cognitive strategies that allow them to understand, remember, and even challenge the material and experiences in the curriculum. We'll talk much more about this in Chapter 2.

We also discovered, or at least decided, that in the previous edition we got the order of things wrong. Last time, we opened the book by talking about integrative units, which may be the most challenging of the seven methods to implement. Indeed, there is a sense in which these big, extended, often interdisciplinary inquiries are the culmination, the “payoff” of all Best Practice teaching, since they tend to include all six of the other methods as they unfold over a period of days. So this time, we've put our seven structures into a more stepwise sequence, culminating rather than commencing with the most ambitious one.

Of course, we've done everything else you'd expect for a new edition: we have revised everything; plugged in new stories, examples, and handouts; and brought the references up to date with some exciting new research and teacher accounts. But the main change is the addition of thirteen wonderful new teacher voices to the book, and the practical classroom stories they are sharing here for the first time. From these expert educators, and from the nineteen “old-timers” held over from the first edition, *Teaching the Best Practice Way* gets its life.

We've created a little community while writing this book, which has brought joy as well as knowledge. Sadly, that feeling of fellowship is rare in this field. For too long, teaching has been an isolating profession where colleagues can work just a few steps apart but feel miles away. Today, progressive reform is opening up the old, cellular organization of schools, bringing groups of teachers together to plan, share, reflect, and build the kind of vibrant professional community that teaching has never quite enjoyed. Teachers are helping each other grow, whether in official peer-led workshops, by passing along classroom materials, through casual faculty-lounge dialogue, or by discussing professional publications. Just as we are rediscovering the power of peer tutoring—of kids teaching kids—so, too, are we rediscovering the professional energy that is unleashed when teachers teach teachers.

That's what we are trying to do here, in book form. So join the thirty-four of us, your newfound colleagues, as we explore the meaning of Best Practice, the nature of good teaching, and the methods that really matter.