

*Solutions for Professional Learning Communities*

# Creating Purpose-Driven Learning Experiences



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# Introduction

Let's start with an uncomfortable statistical truth: today's schools are failing our students. While graduation rates may be at historic highs (Layton, 2014), almost 60 percent of the students in our high schools are disengaged in school (Busteed, 2013). Boredom is the driving force behind the decision to drop out—and that boredom starts early: 71 percent of the students who leave our schools without a diploma lost interest in schooling by ninth and tenth grades. Worse yet, the majority of high school dropouts are convinced that they could have graduated if they had been motivated to work hard (Azzam, 2007). Even the students who *survive* our school systems are struggling. One in three high school graduates who move on to higher education must take remedial classes in order to be fully prepared to meet college expectations (Sparks & Malkus, 2013), and less than half of all employers believe that college graduates are prepared to meet the challenges of the modern workplace (Mourshed, Farrell, & Barton, 2012).

Critical adults stand ready to hold students responsible for these statistics. Take Mark Bauerlein, author of *The Dumbest Generation* (2008), for example. As an English professor at Emory University in Atlanta, Bauerlein has grown tired of the growing number of seemingly unprepared kids sitting in his classrooms:

Whatever their other virtues, these minds know far too little, and they read and write and calculate and reflect way too poorly. However many hours they pass at the screen from age 11 to 25, however many blog comments they compose, intricate games they play, videos they create, personal profiles they craft, and gadgets they master, the transfer doesn't happen. The Web grows, and the young adult mind stalls. (Bauerlein, 2008, Kindle locations 1683–1685)

Listen closely to students, however, and you hear dissatisfaction in their voices. “When we're born, until around age 5, most of our learning is delivered through our experiences,” explains student activist and author Nikhil Goyal. “We're just asking questions, we're curious about the world. Then formal education hits us and everything changes; we lose our curiosity and instead are trained to regurgitate information for the test” (quoted in Zmuda, 2012). Worse yet, argues fellow activist Zak Malamed, students feel like education is something that is done *to*—instead of

*with*—them. “Too often students are ignored in the conversation revolving around education policy,” he shared in testimony before the New NY Education Reform Commission. “Students are America’s most underrepresented population, and today we have no say in the policies that most affect our future” (New York City Regional Hearings on Education, 2012).

## A Necessary Change in Teacher Mindset

The contrast between the learning *done in schools*—where we stubbornly cling to the outdated notion that the content defined in our curricula matters most and that the best way to teach that content is in stand-alone, fifty-minute class periods led by teachers—and the learning that today’s students are *doing on their own* couldn’t be more stark. Popular examples like fifteen-year-old Jack Andraka, who used his free time to develop a test for pancreatic cancer that is 168 times faster than tests currently used by professionals in the medical industry (Danzico, 2012), eleven-year-old Sylvia Todd, whose passion for maker projects has drawn the attention of millions of YouTube viewers *and* the President of the United States (Bhanoo, 2013), or nine-year-old Martha Payne, whose efforts to raise awareness about the quality of school lunches have given her a platform to drive conversations about food security around the world (Somaiya, 2012) *prove* that our kids are more motivated, passionate, and capable than we give them credit for.

Sadly, schools do little to tap into these passions. The late rapper Tupac Shakur accurately described the tension that exists between what matters to students and what matters to schools in a prescient interview given in 1988.

School is really important: reading, writing, arithmetic . . . but what they tend to do is teach you reading, writing, arithmetic. Then teach you reading, writing and arithmetic again. Then again, then again, just making it harder and harder just to keep you busy. And that’s where I think they messed up.

There should be a class on drugs. There should be a class on sex education. No, a real sex education class, not just pictures of diaphragms and unlogical terms and stuff like that. There should be a class on scams, there should be a class on religious cults, there should be a class on police brutality, there should be a class on apartheid, there should be a class on racism in America, there should be a class on why people are hungry, but there’s not. Instead, there are classes on gym . . . there are classes like Algebra. Where I have yet to go to a store and said, “Can I have  $XY+2$  and give me my  $Y$  change back, thank you.”

This is what I mean by the basics are not the basics for me . . . . We are being taught to deal with this fairyland which we’re not even living in anymore. And it’s sad. (Spirer, 2002)

What Shakur recognized so long ago is that meaning drives motivation for any learner. Why are students disinterested and dropping out? Because the schools that they enter every day are fairylands—places completely divorced from relevance and reality. Outside of schools, students are surrounded by challenge and opportunity, and having grown up in a world where digital tools make it possible for anyone to drive change, they aren't comfortable standing idly by (Tapscott, 2009). Inside of schools, however, our students are trapped in classrooms that haven't changed in a hundred years, hopelessly looking for a greater purpose in the content that they are forced to master in order to succeed.

There is nothing fundamentally surprising about Shakur's discovery, is there? Even for adults, meaning and motivation go hand in hand. As Harvard business researchers Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer (2011) demonstrate in *The Progress Principle*, people engaged in knowledge-driven work—much like the work done by the students in our classrooms—become *less* committed, creative, and productive when asked to tackle tasks that seem pointless or impossible. On the other hand, individuals who believe in themselves, the people they are working alongside, and the greater purpose behind their practices invest extraordinary amounts of time and energy into their work. “In other words,” write Amabile and Kramer (2011), “the secret to amazing performance is empowering talented people to succeed at meaningful work” (p. 2).

## Succeeding at Meaningful Work

Succeeding at meaningful work—like designing a new test for pancreatic cancer, developing a popular YouTube channel dedicated to advancing the maker movement, or raising international awareness about food insecurity—isn't *just* about increasing motivation, however. Succeeding at meaningful work depends on mastering the competencies that modern employers are searching for. Mechanization, globalization, and transformational technological change have largely erased opportunities for low-skilled workers to make a decent living (Smirniotopoulos, 2014). That means learning to solve problems, to efficiently and effectively manage information, to identify sources of bias, to set criteria and to make judgments, to think creatively, and to persist in the face of challenges are the new entry level skills (Mourshed et al., 2012; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013). Why will students like Jack, Sylvia, and Martha survive and thrive in the modern workplace? Because they can do *more* than just read, write, and calculate—the kinds of basic skills that critics like Bauerlein are content to mourn.

The skills that Jack, Sylvia, and Martha are mastering while succeeding at meaningful work also mirror the skills that the Partnership for 21st Century Skills—an organization of interested businesses, policymakers, and education leaders founded

in 2002 to start conversations about the importance of 21st century skills—believes should stand at the center of classroom practice.

- **Communication:** Students must learn to articulate their thinking in a variety of formats and in a variety of contexts in order to succeed in the modern workplace. They must be skilled at asking questions, sharing thoughts, polishing ideas, and proposing solutions. They must also become expert listeners, recognizing that communication depends on honest efforts to understand people with differing positions.
- **Collaboration:** Flexibility and compromise, particularly when working on diverse teams, is also essential to success in the modern workplace. Students must learn to take responsibility *and* to value the contributions of others when working in collaborative environments. They must also learn to leverage the collective expertise of the group in order to best accomplish shared tasks.
- **Critical thinking:** The modern workplace values individuals who can evaluate evidence, analyze alternative points of view, make connections between arguments, and draw conclusions based on reasoned judgments. That means the students in our classrooms need to become skilled at managing information, looking at ideas in new ways, and drawing on information from multiple disciplines when solving problems.
- **Creativity:** Innovation in the modern workplace depends on individuals who demonstrate a willingness to think differently about the solutions to common problems. That means our students should be practicing creative thought on a regular basis in our schools—learning practices that can facilitate ideation and processes for revising, polishing, and improving on their own thinking and the thinking of others. They should also be open to suggestions, comfortable with the notion that failure and mistakes are a part of successful innovation, and ready to work within real-world limits when designing new ideas. (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, n.d.c)

And the best news for classroom teachers is that succeeding at meaningful work doesn't mean that our students won't meet the expectations of the increasingly demanding stakeholders that we serve. In fact, the chances are that regardless of where you live or what you teach, *mastery* is being redefined. Need an example? Look at the expectations laid out in documents like the Common Core State Standards or in the Next Generation Science Standards. You will see that the knowledge-driven

objectives that have traditionally dominated our instruction have been pushed aside in favor of objectives that require students to do something with what they know. What's more, students who are doing meaningful work are far more likely to see a reason for wrestling with the concepts required by state and district curriculum guides. That means that giving the kids in your classrooms chances to solve the kinds of challenging problems that Jack, Sylvia, and Martha were wrestling with will leave them even better prepared to meet your community's expectations.

But succeeding at meaningful work isn't something that every student is ready to do alone. While students may be comfortable with new tools and technologies, few see the opportunities that new tools and technologies make possible. Need proof? Then turn your next class loose in the computer lab for an hour or two without any kind of structured task and watch how they spend their time. If your kids are anything like mine, they are far more likely to spend their time checking their social media profiles or watching random videos on YouTube than developing tests for pancreatic cancer or drawing awareness to global food insecurity. They *are* kids, after all. How would you have spent two hours of unstructured time at school? Helping students to succeed at meaningful work, then, depends on our ability to build a bridge between what today's kids *can* do and what they *are* doing with technology.

That's what this book is all about.