

EDUCATION WEEK

Published Online: October 4, 2010

Published in Print: October 6, 2010, as **Teaching for Inspiration**

Teaching for Inspiration

By David Rockower

Inspire: *To fill with enlivening or exalting emotion; stimulate to action; motivate. To affect or touch. To breathe life into.*

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The longer I teach, the more important it is for me to see that my students are curious, hardworking, and happy in my classroom. Early in my career, I was content with *happy*. As my realizations and expectations of their potential have grown, that's no longer enough. I want rigor and engagement, too. Not the kind that means mountains of worksheets and memorization, but the kind that is born of the individual interests and passions of my students. Happiness will be a natural result of investigating what matters.

But the real trick is bringing children's interests to the surface. Many don't know what they want to learn. They've been bludgeoned by tasks and assignments. And after years of being told what to do, they find it easier to simply ask, "What do I need to do to get an A?"

In an era of standards-based instruction, it may sound irrational to suggest that we consider the idea of inspiration when designing a curriculum, but I believe it's absolutely necessary. If we spent as much time creating a curriculum with the students' interests and needs in mind as we do carving out objectives, criteria, and measurement tools, we would have a more energetic, inspiring school environment.

Primary school children typically enjoy schoolwork, but as they progress through the intermediate and middle grades, there is a steady decline in interest and engagement. The early curiosity so present and electric in kindergartners stands in stark contrast to the distant, tired eyes of the lethargic 6th grader.

Often, we blame this change on adolescence, or a move from play-based learning to a more passive *sit-and-learn* curriculum. I believe, in the eyes of our students, the curriculum is largely tiresome and irrelevant. Rarely are they given the time and flexibility to explore topics that energize and inspire. And when teachers see the eye-rolling and slumping, it's nearly impossible for them to rejuvenate a classroom with their own dose of theater.

I remember little from my elementary school years. I can see the endless pages of multiplication tables, the long lists of temporarily memorized spelling words, and the story problems for which I had no patience. And then there was the occasional project that allowed me to explore the history of baseball or simulate the voyages of famous explorers. Unfortunately, these were few and far between.

The majority of my time in school was spent completing tasks. I sat, listened, received instruction, and

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filled in the blanks. I did what I was supposed to do, and I got by. But I was rarely engaged, motivated, or excited about learning.

I do remember two large-scale projects, one from 4th grade and the other from 5th. The first occurred while we studied famous explorers. Students were split into groups (each group was a different ship sailing for the New World). I have vivid recollections of the maps we created, but most importantly, I remember the excitement that swirled around every social studies lesson. That was a rare and beautiful thing.

Toward the end of 5th grade, we were assigned a long-term independent project. We chose the topic, and our teacher led us through the information-gathering stages. Our charge was to share everything we learned with the class in a formal presentation.

A few things set this apart from the typical classroom report. We had the freedom to choose our topic, we worked on it in school, and we were not rushed. To this day, I remember the posters I created, the notecards I held, and the clothes I wore. I was guided to discover all I could about baseball, the sport that was my life.

Throughout the rest of my formal education, I wondered why I was never given an opportunity to learn that way again.

Each of these projects inspired me in a unique way. The simulation project brought the class together, rallied us around a common theme. With her enthusiasm and careful planning, our teacher transferred the classroom into a sailing vessel, and we all jumped on board, happily blinded from the "work" she seamlessly wove into our journey.

When researching baseball, I was able to invite my playground passion into the classroom. Though initially my activities seemed almost taboo (after all, who gets to spend months of school immersed in baseball cards, books, posters, and Phillies memorabilia?), eventually I realized this way of learning was working for everyone. Our teacher watched us dive into encyclopedias, conduct interviews, and construct research papers with heart. We were smiling, laughing, and secretly hoping that school would be like this forever.

As a teacher, I've made it a priority to incorporate one large-scale, time-consuming project that extends some aspect of the curriculum. Early in my career, we created a 40-minute iMovie. Students helped write the script, act, direct, film, and edit. We worked for five months, devoting small portions of each school day to the project. Occasionally, students would stay after school to help with the editing process, and we even shot some of our scenes (with parental assistance) during evening hours. The movie was a huge success; parents and kids were mightily proud.

During my most memorable year as a teacher, I collaborated with a high school culinary arts instructor to guide my kids toward running a restaurant. The students learned about the inner workings of a food establishment, studied how to prepare and serve food, manage the cash register, and so on. Near the end of the year, we cooked for and served more than 40 of the students' parents, grandparents, and siblings.

The students supported one another all year, and we were truly a team. Knowing they were a part of something so real, so exciting, so rewarding naturally created an authentic learning environment. There were many tears shed on the last day of school.

These projects enriched our learning environment. Some of the necessary drudgery became tolerable because, if we could just get through this hour, it would be project time! Yes, I wished more of our day could be devoted to such a motivating endeavor, but just knowing it was part of our lives made each school day colorful.

It's no coincidence that, as both a student and teacher, my happiest and most productive experiences have been during interest-driven, in-depth projects. I needed either to have or to be a passionate teacher, and I needed the time and freedom to sink my teeth into subject matter that was relevant and interesting. This often meant leaving the cookie-cutter lesson plans behind and making room for spontaneity and creativity; I needed to trust that, even without strictly written standards and objectives, learning was going to occur.

I'm not suggesting we do away with a structured curriculum. But it need not be stifling or suffocating. Curricula need to be written with inspiration in mind. Does this unit have the capacity to inspire? Can I see myself, my students, and the school community rallying around these ideas? Is there room for individual choice? Community service? Will the given age group find an authentic connection to the material? Will there be more listening or more doing?

With the talk of creating national standards, it's crucial that we consider the interests of our students when planning curriculum. Instead of deciding what every 4th grader needs to know, we must listen to 4th graders and discover what will inspire them, sustain their interest, and set them on a self-motivated path to discovery and learning.

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