JAY MCTIGHE ON TEACHING TOWARD PERFORMANCE TASKS

In this online article, author/consultant Jay McTighe says teachers of music, visual arts, and career and technical subjects, as well as those who work with students on theater, athletics, and yearbooks, naturally start with a performance or product in mind – the Friday night game, the concert, the public art display, the yearbook deadline. Having a similar focus on a meaningful, real-life performance task can energize academic classrooms. "Planning our teaching 'backward' from desired performances on rich, authentic tasks helps teachers focus on what matters most," says McTighe. "With this performance orientation, teachers are less likely to simply march through lists of content objectives or pages in a textbook, or to have their students compete worksheets on discrete skills." He recommends five practices that set students up for success on authentic performance tasks.

- **PRACTICE #1:** *Plan each curriculum unit backward from authentic performance tasks.*

Here are the key steps, as articulated in the *Understanding by Design* process:

- Decide on an authentic performance task with the six GRASPS components: A <u>g</u>oal; a real-life <u>r</u>ole for students; an <u>a</u>udience other than the teacher; a realistic <u>s</u>ituation; a culminating <u>p</u>roduct; and <u>s</u>tandards on which the product will be judged (usually a rubric).
- Deconstruct the performance task. What are the concepts, knowledge, and skills students will need? McTighe highly recommends the Literacy Design Collaborative website https://ldc.org/how-ldc-works/mini-tasks for examples of units in ELA, science, technical subjects, and history/social studies.
- Give students appropriate choices in how they tackle the performance task.
- Pre-assess. What are students' entry-level skills and knowledge?

October 2016

Volume 4, Issue 2

IMPORTANT DATES

October 10	**Columbus Day**
October 13	**CALMER CHOICE** Parent Informational Night @ SAE LIBRARY, 6-7PM
October 25	**EARLY RELEASE DAY** Parent Conference PREK-5; Professional Development 6-12
October 27	**EARLY RELEASE DAY** Parent Conference PREK-5; Professional Development 6-12
October 31	**Halloween** (Monday)

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

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Due to one of our members at the CO being highly sensitive to any type of fragrance, we ask that staff visiting/meeting at the Administration building refrain from using any scented products. Fragrances from personal care products, air fresheners, laundry and other cleaning products have been associated with adversely affecting a person's health. We ask that we all work together to make the environment a safe and healthy workplace for everyone. Thank you very much for your cooperation!

- Plan lessons.
- Use formative mini-tasks. These are simplified or scaffolded versions of the summative task and provide feedback to students along the way.
- Allow time for practice and revisions.

The last two, says McTighe, are often neglected in classrooms, but they're essential for students to "put it all together." Is this teaching to the test? Yes, in the sense that teachers and students are working with the assessment in mind, but there's nothing wrong with that as long as the assessment is high-quality and measures what's important. "Have you ever heard coaches apologize for coaching to/for the next game," asks McTighe, "or theater directors say they are sorry when their actors rehearse for the play?"

• **PRACTICE #2:** *Present authentic performance tasks as the learning targets*. Lesson objectives on the board are not enough, says McTighe. Students should know "not only what they will be learning today, but also why they are learning it and how this learning will prepare them for something worthwhile in the future." Throughout the curriculum unit, there should be a clear statement on the wall that starts with, *We are learning this so that you will be able to…* Examples from other arenas: colored belts for karate proficiency levels or Boy Scout and Girl Scout merit badges. The performance tasks are known up front, as are the criteria on which performance will be judged. "Like the game in athletics and the play in theater," says McTighe, "having a clear and authentic performance goal (solid performance on a known task) focuses both teaching and learning." See the full article (link below) for examples of performance tasks on curriculum units on Roman roads, fracking, and fuel efficiency.

• **PRACTICE #3:** *Present the evaluative criteria, rubrics, and models up front*. This helps students focus on the purpose and important dimensions of authentic performance, says McTighe: "When students know the criteria in advance, they don't have to guess about what is most important or how their work will be judged. There is no 'mystery' as to the elements of a quality product/performance or the basis for its evaluation (and grading)… If we expect learners to produce high-quality work, they need to know what that looks like, and how it differs from work of lesser

quality." Students might be enlisted in constructing the rubric, which gets them more involved, creates better understanding of what's involved in quality work, and also makes it easier for them to self-assess as they proceed.

• **PRACTICE #4:** *Assess before and while you teach*. Pre-assessments are just as important to an effective curriculum unit as a physical exam is to a doctor's medical decisions. Knowing students' skill and knowledge levels, misconceptions, and attitudes is the starting point for decisions on content, activating prior knowledge, pacing, and differentiation. Ongoing check-for-understanding assessments are also essential for keeping tabs on students' learning and making mid-course corrections. At their best, formative assessments are timely, specific, understandable to students, and help students revise, refine, practice, and re-try. Here's McTighe's acid test for good feedback: "Can learners tell specifically from the given feedback what they have done well and what they could do next time to improve?" And this formative feedback should not be averaged into the final grade – it's part of the learning process.

• **PRACTICE #5:** *Expect students to self-assess and set goals*. This encourages metacognition, which has always been the hallmark of good learners. "Teachers are often pleasantly surprised at how honest students can be with the assessment of their own work and that of their peers," says McTighe. Here are some prompts to get students thinking about what they're producing before they turn it in:

- **What aspect of your work do you think was most effective? Why? How so?**
- **What aspect of your work do you think was least effective? Why? How so?**
- **What specific action(s) would improve your performance based on the feedback?**
- **What advice would you offer to next year's students to help their performance on this task?**
- **What did you learn from working on this task – about the content, topic, process, and/or yourself?**

All this tells students that self-assessment and goal-setting are part of a learner's job.

For a collection of authentic performance tasks and associated rubrics, see the Defined STEM website – free trial at http://www.definedstem.com/learn/free-trial.cfm.

Teaching Writing Effectively

"The writing process is a learned skill," say Lucy Calkins and Mary Ehrenworth (Teachers College, Columbia University) in this article in *The Reading Teacher*. "It comes from many hours spent writing a lot. It comes from a mind-set that whenever you write, you consider not only what you will write *about* but also how you will write *well*."

There's no question, say Calkins and Ehrenworth, that writing is an essential 21st-century skill – and many schools are not teaching it effectively. Recent complaints from the business world are less about grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and more about "fuzzy thinking," young people not knowing how to bring "focus, energy, and passion" to the points they want to make, and not being able to analyze information and write with "a real voice."

"The good news," say the authors, "is that across the nation, thousands of schools are finding that when students participate in a culture that values writing, are given explicit instruction in the skills and strategies of proficient writing, and work toward crystal-clear goals and receive feedback on their progress, their writing skills increase dramatically." They believe these are the key elements:

The enduring essentials of good writing instruction:

• ***Protected time to write*** – "Writing, like running or reading, is a skill that develops with use," say Calkins and Ehrenworth. "Writers need time to write. In too many schools, this time is compromised." They suggest that the ideal (daily) writers' workshop should have 10 minutes of explicit whole-class instruction, at least half an hour of writing time (with the teacher conferencing with students), ending with

5-10 minutes for students to share what they've done with another writer and set goals.

• ***Choice*** – "To write well," say the authors, "writers need to write about topics they know a lot about and care about… A writer's commitment to his or her subject leads that writer to bring the imprint of his or her own passions to the page, writing with that magical quality we call voice."

• ***Feedback*** – The best feedback includes "medals and missions" – compliments and next steps. "Feedback is most potent when students don't yet have mastery," say Calkins and Ehrenworth, "and when it is given just in time to learners in the midst of work." The best feedback is frequent, close to the time the writer writes, and followed by opportunities for more practice.

What recent research says:

• ***Direct instruction*** – Clear, explicit instruction on specific points takes place in mini-lessons, conferences, and small-group work. "We have found," say Calkins and Ehrenworth, "that when curriculum is organized so all students in a class (or better yet, at a grade level) are working within a shared genre – employing strategies and emulating mentor texts of that genre, teachers have a context within which to explicitly teach the craft and structure of that particular genre."

• **Working toward clear goals –** "To accelerate achievement, learners need to answer the question, 'Where am I going?'" say the authors. And that means having a crystal-clear vision of what good writing looks like (mentor texts are important) and specific goals for getting there.

• **Transfer** – Calkins and Ehrenworth quote Grant Wiggins saying that students often don't realize that what they learn in one classroom can help them in another. Sometimes teachers don't realize that either.

The role of school leaders:

• ***Teachers need a shared vision of good writing.*** Ideally this is developed collaboratively (the principal as the key orchestrator) and has buy-in across a school. Student exemplars are important to showing

and tracking good work over time. "One of the most potent ways for a school or a district to lift the quality of good writing," say Calkins and Ehrenworth, "is for teachers across a grade level to meet together to norm their expectations of student writing, learning to look at student writing with shared lenses."

• ***Teachers need a shared vision of good writing instruction.*** Teachers benefit enormously "from observing teaching together, talking afterward about what worked and what could have been better," say the authors. "Raising the level of writing in a school or district takes a collaborative mind-set."

• ***Teachers need to teach within a strategic cross-grade curriculum.*** "In too many schools, kids need to luck out to get a teacher who teaches writing," say Calkins and Ehrenworth. Teachers need to develop a grade-to-grade progression of skills, so instruction builds each year on a solid foundation. The Common Core standards provide a good template for this (although poetry needs to be added).

• ***Teachers need shared expectations and ways to track growth.*** It's essential, say the authors, to track student progress by looking at regular on-demand writing – where students write from start to finish without help from others. "When teachers study students' on-demand writing from the start of the year until the most recent assessment," they say, "what they see is the effect of their instruction over the year. This requires a mind-set wherein teachers study student work not only as a reflection of students' progress but also as a reflection of the teachers' teaching… Shared assessments, exemplars, and tools for self-assessment and goal setting can make an important contribution toward helping a school move from an individualistic culture to a collaborative culture – one in which teachers think not about 'my kids' but about 'our kids.'"

• ***Teachers need serious professional development.*** "Professional development will be the heartbeat of your school," say Calkins and Ehrenworth. "It should be intense, collaborative, collegial, and practical. It should be focused on strengthening teachers' methods and spirits. It should be varied in form, flexible, and responsive. Good professional development creates lasting communities of practice."

"Growing Extraordinary Writers: Leadership Decisions to Raise the Level of Writing Across a School and a District" by Lucy Calkins and Mary Ehrenworth in *The Reading Teacher*, July/ August 2016 (Vol. 70, #1, p. 7-18), available for purchase at http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/trtr.1499/abstract; Calkins can be reached at lucy@readingandwritingproject.com.

A Different Way of Thinking About Differentiation

What is the problem to which differentiation is the solution? asks Kim Marshall in this article in *Phi Delta Kappan*. "Clearly it's the fact that students walk into school with a wide range of differences in prior knowledge, vocabulary, reading proficiency, fluency in English, attitudes toward school, mindset about learning, tolerance of frustration and failure, learning-style preferences, special needs, and distracting things on their minds." Whole-group instruction for a classroom of students with even a few of these differences is likely to leave many students bored or confused, so differentiation would seem to be a moral imperative. Carol Ann Tomlinson, a leading expert in this area, makes a compelling case for "effective attention to the learning needs of each student… getting to know each student and orchestrating the learning environment, assessments, and instruction so all students learn what's being taught." Tomlinson and other proponents suggest that teachers differentiate by content (what is taught), process (how it's taught), and product (how students are asked to demonstrate their learning).

For all its obvious appeal, differentiation is not without its critics, and they have raised a number of concerns:

 Can a teacher realistically tailor instruction to 20-30 different students?

 Is differentiation inherently exhausting, leading to teacher burnout and attrition?

 Can differentiation result in lowered expectations for students who are behind?

 Does it spoon-feed students, undermining self-reliance and initiative?

 Does it balkanize classrooms, sacrificing group cohesion and collective experiences?

 Is it effective?

Mike Schmoker is a leading critic, asserting in a 2010 article that differentiation is based "largely on

enthusiasm and a certain superficial logic" and describing what he has seen in classrooms around the country: teachers trying to match each student's or group's "presumed ability level, interest, preferred 'modality,' and learning style… In English, creative students made things or drew pictures. Analytic students got to read and write… With so many groups to teach, instructors found it almost impossible to provide sustained, properly executed lessons for every child or group."

Tomlinson and David Sousa responded to Schmoker's critique, conceding that trying to customize worksheets and coloring exercises to students' supposed learning styles was "regrettable and damaging." They agreed on the importance of clear objectives, high standards, and frequent checks for understanding, and stoutly defended differentiation's track record – students learn better, they said, when the work is at the right level of difficulty, personally relevant, and appropriately engaging.

This hardly settled the issue, and three other experts have been heard from in recent years: John Hattie's comprehensive meta-analysis, *Visible Learning*, ranked individualization 100th out of 138 classroom methods, with an effect size of only 0.23. Cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham debunked the idea of catering instruction to students' individual learning styles. And PD guru Jon Saphier believes that differentiation is a "low-impact strategy" that's not the best target for professional development if other fundamentals aren't in place. The debate continues, leaving many educators scratching their heads about the best approach to the day-to-day challenge of teaching students with many different needs.

Marshall suggests stepping back and analyzing the differentiation challenge from a broader perspective. Consider the following classroom scenarios with two questions in mind:
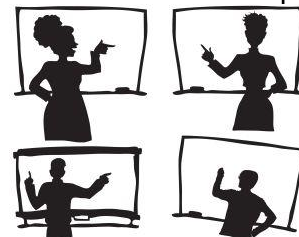
Which is the most and the least differentiated? And in which is the most learning taking place?

- ☐ **A college professor gives a lecture to 700 students.**
- ☐ **A 6th-grade class discusses a bullying incident.**
- ☐ **A group of 2nd graders does an experiment with batteries and bulbs.**
- ☐ **First graders sprawl on a rug engrossed in books they chose.**
- ☐ **High-school biology students work individually or in groups on a "layered" unit, choosing whether to do one set of tasks for a C, additional work for a B, or higher-level work for an A.**
- ☐ **Eighth graders watch a film about the Holocaust.**
- ☐ **Seventh graders read the same article on climate change at five different reading levels, using the website NewsELA (https://newsela.com).**
- ☐ **Fifth graders use a computer program that adapts the level of difficulty to their responses.**
- ☐ **A Reading Recovery teacher tutors a struggling 1st grader for 30 minutes a day.**
- ☐ **A middle-school physical education class does stretching and aerobic exercises in unison.**
- ☐ **Kindergarteners paint with watercolors with encouragement and feedback from the teacher.**
- ☐ **A docent at a city art museum teaches visiting 10th graders about a Renoir masterpiece.**

On the first question, differentiation runs all the way from zero in the college lecture hall to 100 percent with one-on-one tutoring and a personalized computer program. On the second question – well, it depends. "Even one-on-one tutoring can be off-track on the curriculum and produce bored, confused, and alienated students," says Marshall. "But handled skillfully, each scenario has the potential for high levels of appropriate learning" – even the college lecture (in the hands of a brilliant and charismatic professor) and the phys. ed. class (aerobic exercise has an especially beneficial impact on ADHD and overweight students). The conclusion: trying to assess a teacher's work asking, *Is it differentiated?* runs the risk of missing the forest for the trees. Better, says Marshall, to ask two broader questions (tip of the hat to Rick DuFour):

- ☐ **What are students supposed to be learning?**
- ☐ *Are all students mastering it?*

"Embedded in these questions," says Marshall, "are all the variables that research tells us will produce high levels of student learning: appropriate cognitive and noncognitive goals for the year, the curriculum unit, and the lesson; a positive classroom culture;

instructional strategies that will best convey the content; the right balance of whole-class, small-group, individual, and digital experiences; frequent checking for understanding; a clear standard of mastery (usually 80 percent); effective use of assessment data to fine-tune teaching; and follow-up with students below mastery."

With these two questions in mind, teachers' work (and principals' support and evaluation of that work) falls logically into three phases – a different way of thinking about content, process, and product that is more in synch with the day-to-day work of schools:
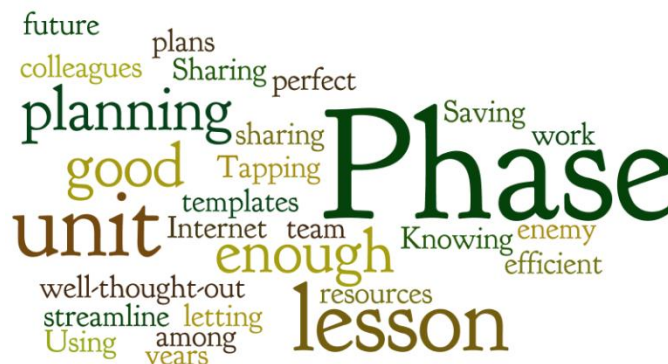
o **Phase 1: Planning units and lessons** – Good unit plans, ideally crafted by same-grade/ same subject teacher teams, focus on standards and have clear statements of what students will know and be able to do; a pre-assessment; likely misconceptions; essential questions to guide students to the key understandings; periodic assessments; and a lesson-by-lesson game plan. Good lesson plans build in multiple entry points, using the principles of Universal Design for Learning to make learning accessible to as many students as possible, and have clear goals; thoughtful task analysis; chunked learning; teaching methods appropriate to the content; links to students' interests and experiences; checks for understanding; and accommodations for students with special needs. "All students learn more," says Willingham, "when content drives the choice of modalities." Teachers also need to put well-chosen visuals on the classroom wall – essential questions, examples of student work, rubrics, worked problems, word walls, anchor charts, graphic organizers, mnemonics, and other helpful visual aids.

Phase I is where there is the greatest danger of teachers overthinking, overworking, and burning out, says Marshall, and points to several critical success factors:

- ☐ **Sharing the work of unit and lesson planning among team colleagues;**
- ☐ **Using efficient, well-thought-out templates to streamline unit and lesson planning;**
- ☐ **Tapping into Internet resources;**
- ☐ **Saving and sharing good unit and lesson plans for future years;**
- ☐ **Knowing when enough is enough – not letting**

the perfect be the enemy of the good.

• **Phase 2: Delivering instruction** – "Lessons are where the rubber meets the road," says Marshall, "and a major factor in student success is a set of in-the-moment moves that effective teachers have always used, among them effective classroom management; knowing students well; being culturally sensitive; making the subject matter exciting; making it relevant; making it clear; taking advantage of visuals and props; involving students and getting them involved with each other; having a sense of humor; and nimbly using teachable moments." But equally important is checking for understanding – dry-erase boards, clickers, probing questions, looking over students' shoulders – and using students' responses to continuously fine-tune teaching. Critical success factors in Phase 2 are:

- ☐ **Being sharp and fresh every day for energetic and sensitive lesson execution (another reason for not working too long and hard on lesson planning the night before);**
- ☐ **Managing student behavior so the teacher is able to move around the room delivering appropriate support and help;**
- ☐ **A classroom culture in which students are comfortable asking for help and helping each other;**
- ☐ **Ways of checking the whole class's understanding and following up;**
- ☐ **Resisting the urge to do too much for students.**

• **Phase 3: Following up after instruction** – "No matter how well teachers plan and execute," says Marshall, "some students won't achieve mastery by the end of the lesson or unit. This is the moment of truth – if the class moves on, unsuccessful students will be that much more confused and discouraged and fall further and further behind, widening the achievement gap." Timely follow-up with these students is crucial – pullout, small-group after-school help, tutoring, Saturday school, and other venues to help them catch up. Critical success factors in Phase 3 are:

- ☐ **Time for same-grade/same-subject teacher teams to meet and look at student work;**
- ☐ **Having prompt access to data from well-**

- crafted common assessments;
- Analyzing what material students had problems with and why;
- Organizing effective help for struggling students;
- Honestly assessing teaching techniques in light of the results.

If these factors aren't in place, the "professional learning community" process can result in a cycle of repeated failure.

In all three phases, another priority is building students' self-reliance and not doing too much for them. "Among the most important life skills that students should take away from their K-12 years," says Marshall, "is the ability to self-assess, know their strengths and weaknesses, deal with difficulty and failure, and build a growth mindset. Student self-efficacy and independence should be prime considerations in planning, lesson execution, and follow-up so that students move through the grades becoming increasingly motivated, confident, and autonomous learners prepared to succeed in the wider world."

"Rethinking Differentiation – Using Teachers' Time Most Effectively" by Kim Marshall in *Phi Delta Kappan*, September 2016 (Vol. 98, #1, p. 8-13), available for purchase at http://pdk.sagepub.com/content/current

Meaningful Parent-Teacher Conferences

(Originally titled "Parent-Teacher Conferences: Outdated or Underutilized?")

"For some parents, teacher conferences are more like speed dating than substance," says Sarah McKibben in this article in *Education Update*. Attendance at these conferences declines steadily as students move through the grades, from 89 percent in primary grades to 57 percent in high school according to one study, and many parents don't believe they're worth the trip. McKibben reports on some ideas for improvement:

- ❖ **Rebrand.** A more inviting name for these perennial meetings is "progress conferences." This is more positive and doesn't seem to exclude foster parents and guardians.
- ❖ **Build relationships and trust up front**. Home visits, frequent e-mailing or texting, and partnering around academic issues build the groundwork for face-to-face conferences.
- ❖ **Finesse the childcare issue.** "To pay a babysitter to watch your three younger siblings so a parent can attend a conference is not going to happen," says Ohio high-school teacher Allison Ricket. She invites parents to bring along other children and provides crayons and paper in an area at the back of her classroom where they can entertain themselves during conferences.
- ❖ **Accommodate.** Some parents need an interpreter (children shouldn't be asked to translate) and support with disabilities.
- ❖ **Change the dynamic.** It makes a difference if a teacher sits side by side with family members and doesn't hold a clipboard or pad of paper; open hands suggest an open mind.
- ❖ **Clarify learning outcomes**. Surprisingly, only 7 percent of parents in a National Parent Teacher Association survey in K-8 schools said they were informed of grade-level curriculum expectations in conferences. One idea from the Flamboyan Foundation (called Academic Parent-Teacher Teams) is convening parents to talk as a group about curriculum expectations and teaching ideas three times a year, with parents following their children's individual progress folders. Parents then have a single one-on-one parent conference once a year.
- ❖ **Involve students.** Progress conferences are much more helpful when students are at the table reporting on their progress, challenges, and goals. Advisory group meetings focus on preparing students to lead parent conferences and lobby their parents to attend.
- ❖ **Listen.** "Parents usually come in having an idea of what they want to talk about, so I like to be open and ready for whatever they need," says Ricket. Although she has students' grades and portfolios on hand, she lets parents go first and is careful to empathize with any concerns they have.

"Parent-Teacher Conferences: Outdated or Underutilized?" by Sarah McKibben in *Education Update*, September 2016 (Vol. 58, #9, p. 1, 4-5), available for purchase at http://bit.ly/2cjKtu4