

TEACHING TOWARD “WOW!”

With our focus on “raising test scores,” we often lose sight of the “miracle” of learning. Of course, we *should* raise test scores, but not at the expense of what I call the “genius” of childhood itself. Adults tend to live in the world of facts, understanding, and judgment. In other words, in the world of “I got a lot on my plate.” Children, however, live in the world of the senses, imagination, and emotions. In other words, in the world of wonder and magic.

Thirty years in education has taught me this: clarity and understanding *require* mystery and surprise; intellect is a *function* of imagination; comprehension isn’t the goal, *amazement* is; and children (all of us) don’t listen with our ears but, ultimately, with our *passions*. And that is what teaching toward “WOW!” is all about.

No matter how “standardized” education becomes, it must always be in service to the uniqueness of each child. As a teacher, my motto was always: “I want YOU to be more YOU-like.” Common Core puts “creativity” at the top of its learning model. And, having taught creative learning techniques for decades, I am so grateful for that. But we as educators are charged with fostering that creativity in our students. And it isn’t about simply putting more art in the curriculum (as important as that is). It is about teaching more creatively *throughout* the curriculum.

SOME PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES:

1. **Remember to laugh.** Children love to laugh. The average grownup laughs fifteen times a day. The average five-year-old laughs *four hundred* times a day! We should NEVER laugh *at* a child (or anyone). But children remind us that joy is at the heart of things and humor is just around the corner. Humor is where the imagination dances with the intellect.
2. **Never grow up.** “Childhood” shouldn’t end at “adulthood.” Who says you can’t grow younger and wiser at the same time? Children figure that you “know your stuff.” But what they *want* to know is that you remember being a kid. To bring out the adult in the child, it helps to bring out the child in the adult. Otherwise the world can become not only a seriously scary place but a scarily serious place.
3. **Make mistakes.** If learning is incremental and making mistakes counts against us, then we lose half the genius of childhood – which is to learn from everything with all of ourselves in leaps and bounds and trials and errors!
4. **Draw everything!** My handout “*Drawing Out the Best In Your Students*” will give you tons of drawing ideas. But the core idea is that drawing helps us think. Period. At the same time children are learning to read and write, they LOVE to draw and talk. So, as a teacher, I had children draw *everything* – feelings, facts, ideas, the taste of chocolate, the sound of a door closing, Ben Franklin’s kneecaps. And I showed children how to draw fearlessly, not flawlessly!
5. **Learn the art of motivation.** We are all motivated by three things: pleasure, mastery, and values. So, I have students make a simple “Self-Esteem Inventory.” They take a piece of paper and make three columns: FUN, EXPERT, and HEROES/SHEROES. The first list is everything they do for fun. The second list is everything they do well. The third list is everyone they look up to (living or

deceased, actual or fictional). It is an easy way to collect what gives students their pleasure, mastery, and values. They just list words, not sentences (i.e., “reading” not “I like to read.”)

6. **Victories and what works.** Once a week as a class, or even with your family, make a list of all the victories you have had and the things you did that worked, individually and as a group (family or class). We tend to DO more of what we track.
7. **Teach facts, understanding, and judgment through the senses, imagination, and emotions!** I remember in high school learning about Avogadro’s number. It was the number of molecules in a mole of air (a cube of air about a foot by a foot by a foot in size). The number was 6.02×10^{23} . A very big number. But nothing about the number actually *looked* “big” until it was put into a *picture*. Here is the picture: if each molecule in a twelve inch cube of air were the size of an unpopped kernel of popcorn, there would be enough kernels to blanket the entire continental USA in a layer nine *miles* deep! I don’t know about you, but when I read that, my head practically blew off.
8. **Bring your personality to school.** No matter how much material you have to “get through,” it is important that students get to see YOU. In the words of Vincent Van Gogh, “LOVE what you love!” Everything you have a burning interest in traces back to a time, a place, and a person. For example, I love history! I remember when I was six years old and my grandmother showed me a fifty-year-old piece of wedding cake. WOW! I love art: I remember my Aunt Janice teaching me watercolors on the front room couch. I love words. I remember my mother’s love of reading. Share the stories of your *own* passions with your students.
9. **Safety, freedom, and courage in that order.** It all starts with a safe place...then freedom and play...then stretching oneself.
10. **Everyone roots for each one.** This was the culture I worked to instill in the classroom. It isn’t enough that we “accept” one another, we need to celebrate one another. It isn’t enough that we eliminate bullying, we need to actively support each other and make that part of our culture.
11. **Academic, social, artistic!** Everything I taught had an academic, social, and artistic component. I found that students learn best when they go from listening... to drawing what they’ve heard...to sharing it out loud with a partner or a group.
12. **Your three-part Gifted Kit.** Highly intelligent people do three things naturally: they think in greater detail, ask more questions, and make odder and deeper connections. We can all strive to do these three things more consciously.

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