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Class rank weighs down true learning

By Thomas R. Guskey

*Phi Delta Kappan, 95 (6), 15-19*

**OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLE**

Through their grading systems, educators respond to this basic question: “Is my purpose to select talent, or is my purpose to develop talent?”

**KEY POINTS**

- If educators want to differentiate/select among students, then they’re likely to engage in these behaviors:
  - Teaching and assessing in a way that distinguishes talented, skilled, or smart students from those who are less talented, skilled, or smart.
  - Teaching all students poorly, so that only the most self-sufficient achieve.
  - Prizing GPA (with weighted and unweighted classes) and class rank.
  - Using admission to institutions of higher education as the excuse for prizing class rank.
  - Selecting a single valedictorian according to class rank.
  - Accepting that some students “game” the system in order to boost GPA, achieve higher class rank, and be named valedictorian.

- If educators want all students to succeed (that is, to develop talent), then they’re likely to engage in these behaviors:
  - Clarifying learning standards or goals for everyone.
  - Teaching everyone in the best way possible.
  - Ensuring that all achieve learning standards.
  - Not computing GPAs.
  - Not computing class ranks.
  - Honoring students in ways other than by making them valedictorian.

- Guskey says determining class rank has nothing to do with student learning, little to do with later student success and may, in fact, diminish motivation.

- Very few colleges admit students simply on the basis of GPA, which relates to student differences among schools, the academic rigor of those schools, and the various ways schools rank students.

- Guskey recommends adopting the college system of recognizing *magna cum laude*, *summa cum laude*, and *cum laude* achievement, having multiple valedictorians for a multitude of reasons (service, caring, compassion, and a sense of social justice, for example), and broadcasting to admissions departments the strength of the curriculum that students master.

**DEEPEN YOUR THINKING**

1. How would you characterize the culture of high school you attended? Was it competitive or cooperative? In what ways?

2. How important were GPA, class rank, and the role of valedictorian in your high school? How did you feel about these ways of distinguishing among students? How did others feel?

3. How would you answer the first two questions about a high school you know well today?
4. Guskey wrote, “Unfortunately for students, the best way to maximize differences in their learning is poor teaching. Nothing does it better.” What do you think of that statement? To what extent does poor teaching help to sort students? What other strategies (intended or not) might sort students?

5. GPAs are computed on the basis of grades (and weighting of grades). Should grading practices be changed to reduce sorting and develop talent? How?

6. Who would protest the dropping of GPAs, class rank, and valedictorians? How can their objections be overcome?

7. Who would support the dropping of GPAs, class rank, and valedictorians? How can their support be leveraged for change?

8. What difference(s) do varying school populations make in terms of GPAs and ranking? How have differences in school populations been addressed? What other strategies can be used to lessen the differences among school populations?

9. What do you think of scholarship programs to college based on class rank? About “percent plans” with guaranteed acceptance of a percentage of top students?

10. What difference would it make if high schools stopped ranking students by GPAs and left that job to college and university admissions departments?

**EXTEND YOUR THOUGHTS THROUGH ACTIVITIES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION**

The June 2, 2013, NBC News story “We’re all No. 1! Is 21 valedictorians too many?” by Bill Briggs (http://nbcnews.to/1aXSEDH) raised a few issues that you and your colleagues might want to discuss. Locate the article online and use it as the basis of a discussion.

**Facts from the news story**

21 valedictorians from South Medford High, Medford, Ore.

34 from Enterprise High School, Enterprise, Ala.

More than 10% of 84 graduates from Bluffton High School, Bluffton, Ohio, were valedictorians.

Then, based on your discussion, Guskey’s argument, and your own context (school, district, or state), discuss GPAs, class rank, or valedictorians according to the following template:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circle one: GPA</th>
<th>class rank</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>REASONS FOR</td>
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<td>Evidence from news article</td>
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<td>Evidence from Guskey article</td>
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OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLE
Educators must address the pyramid of prejudice from the bottom — the mostly unconscious stereotypes people have — through the other layers to the top — extreme actions of hatred.

KEY POINTS

• “Subdued forms of everyday prejudice” such as saying, “That’s so gay,” are the basis for more extreme prejudicial acts and must be addressed by educators.

• The psychology of prejudice includes stereotypes based on assumptions about people, which is a way to simplify the complex social world.

• Prejudice is also a way to promote our selves and our roles, but it often also protects our privileges.

• Discrimination, “behavioral and systemic,” builds on prejudice through policies and codified social relationships.

• The “-isms” such as “racism” or “classicism” are individual or group beliefs that influence action; they represent prejudice and discrimination.

• The prejudice pyramid moves from latent prejudices within everyone to blatant prejudices of a few.

• First, educators need to address both within themselves and their students the bottom of the pyramid, where most people reside, which is characterized by unconscious or “fast” thinking.

• Then they need to address subsequent levels of the pyramid, leading to the top, which is dependent upon the “attitudes and behaviors established by the levels below.”

• The law is the appropriate tool for addressing the top and levels just below it, but education is the appropriate tool for addressing the base and levels just above it.

• From speaking up to addressing stereotypes through character education programs, and “-isms” through the curriculum, educators can help students understand and mitigate against prejudice.

DEEPEN YOUR THINKING

1. How have issues of prejudice changed in your lifetime so far? What elements of the pyramid have you experienced or observed?

2. What role, if any, has school played in helping you, personally, deal with prejudice?

3. How are stereotypes helpful? Harmful?

4. What evidence do you have that prejudice protects privilege?

5. What have the media done in terms of creating or ameliorating prejudice?

6. What social and political policies (local and national) have had an effect on prejudice?

7. In what ways has technology (social media and the Internet, in particular) affected prejudice?
8. To what extent does global awareness affect prejudice?

9. How does school today help students address prejudice? How could today’s schools address the pyramid of prejudice?

10. What prevents people from speaking up when confronted with “commonplace prejudices” such as remarking that boys do better in mathematics?

EXTEND YOUR THOUGHTS THROUGH ACTIVITIES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

With colleagues, consider films and television shows in terms of how they might help educators talk about the pyramid of prejudice. Here is a list of films and shows from the Teachers Against Prejudice web site. Select one that most of you have seen and explore how it might be used. Suggest other films and television shows (particularly current ones) that could be referenced in classrooms to start a dialogue about the effects of prejudice. Also consider online games.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Film/Movie</th>
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<td>Akeelah and the Bee (2006)</td>
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<td>The Attic (1992)</td>
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<td>The Boys of Baraka (2005)</td>
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<td>Brian’s Song (1971)</td>
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<td>Bye Bye Birdie (1963)</td>
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<td>The Color of Friendship (2000)</td>
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<td>Cry, the Beloved Country (1995, 1951)</td>
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<td>Driving Miss Daisy (1989)</td>
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<td>Drumline (2002)</td>
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<td>The Great White Hope (1970)</td>
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<td>Gung Ho (1986)</td>
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<td>Having Our Say: The Delaney Sisters (1999)</td>
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<td>I Am Sam (2001)</td>
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<td>Imitation of Life (1959)</td>
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<td>Judgment at Nuremberg (1961)</td>
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<td>The Killing Floor (1985)</td>
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<td>The Last of His Tribe (1992)</td>
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<td>Little Big Man (1970)</td>
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<td>The Loretta Claiborne Story (2000)</td>
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<td>The Mighty (1998)</td>
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<td>Mrs. Doubtfire (1993)</td>
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<td>Music of the Heart (1999)</td>
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<td>Pride (2007)</td>
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<td>Pushing Hands (1992; 7th grade and above)</td>
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<td>Rabbit-Proof Fence (2002)</td>
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<td>Remember the Titans (2000)</td>
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<td>The Rosa Parks Story (2002)</td>
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<td>Ruby Bridges (1998)</td>
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<td>The Secret Life of Bees (2008)</td>
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<td>Separate But Equal (1991)</td>
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<td>The Simple Life of Noah Dearborn (1999)</td>
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<td>Star Trek: Let That Be Your Last Battlefield (1969)</td>
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<td>Swing Kids (1993)</td>
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<td>10,000 Black Men Named George (2002)</td>
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<td>To Kill a Mockingbird (1962)</td>
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<td>West Side Story (1961)</td>
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<td>Whale Riders (2003)</td>
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<td>Whitewash (1995)</td>
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<td>X-Men (2000)</td>
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Reference

Teachers Against Prejudice. www.teachersagainstprejudice.org/.
Dangerous conversations: Persistent tensions in teacher education

By Stephanie Jones & James E. Woglom

\textit{Phi Delta Kappan, 95 (6), 47-56}

**OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLE**

This article, told as a graphic novel, makes the point that teacher educators sometimes prepare education students for a world in which theory and research lead to student-centered learning; however, when teachers get into schools, they often find a world that is governed by testing, mandates, and politics.

**KEY POINTS**

- The authors trace a “long history of teacher education” that has sought to be rigorous and, at the same time, graduate enough students to fill classrooms.

- Normal schools expanded into regional and state colleges that provided enough teachers for classrooms as well as a curriculum that was more than teaching courses.

- Eventually, research institutions focused on the theory and research of pedagogy, while other colleges and universities focused on pedagogy itself, linked to theory and research.

- The authors tell the story of a professor in a teacher preparation program who helps her education students design an adventurous after-school program. The after-school program is scheduled in a school whose administrator is worried about test scores and wants to use after-school time for tutoring related to the tests.

- The after-school program proceeds as designed by the education students and their professor.

- After the adventurous after-school program ends, the school’s principal tells the professor that her education students are no longer welcome in that school.

- The professor is devastated, not only about being unwelcome at the school, but also about the gap between the world she is preparing her education students to inhabit and the world of mandates, state testing, curriculum pacing guides, and regulation.

- The story illustrates the tension between worlds: the world of teacher preparation (research and theory stimulating thoughtful and innovative pedagogy) and the world of real schools (mandated testing and curriculum restricting thoughtfulness and innovation).

- She realizes that her education students also need to learn about power and different expectations about children’s learning.

- She says, “I was ashamed of the massive gap between the Real World of teaching and learning that theory and research can explain and the surreal places called the Real World.”

- She wanted her education students “to believe that, when they found teaching jobs, they would be able to lean on theory and research and create schools that would be responsive to their students’ needs.”

**DEEPLY THINKING**

1. What do you remember about teacher preparation?

2. What do you remember about student teaching and your first year of teaching?

3. To what extent was your teacher preparation program aligned with what you experienced during student teaching and your first year of teaching?

4. How do you see the tension the authors noted: between the world of teacher preparation (research and theory stimulating thoughtful and innovative pedagogy) and the world of schools (mandated testing and curriculum that restrict thoughtfulness and innovation)?
5. What do you think today’s teacher preparation students are experiencing? How well do you think today’s teacher preparation programs prepare future teachers for the real world of today’s schools?

6. What responsibility do these programs have for focusing on research and theory? What responsibility do they have for helping students learn how to create ideal conditions for student learning?

7. What is the real world of schools? What responsibility do teacher preparation programs have for helping students learn about the real world?

8. Have you ever read a graphic novel? How do both graphic and written representations work to convey meaning?

9. How well did this graphic presentation work for you in terms of understanding and appreciating the topic?

EXTEND YOUR THOUGHTS THROUGH ACTIVITIES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

You may have been surprised that Kappan published an article in the form of a graphic novel. Actually, graphic novels are gaining popularity and not just among young people. In a post in The Philosophers Magazine, Jeff McLaughlin made a case for “Deep Thinking in Graphic Novels.”

With colleagues, read some of the points that McLaughlin makes about graphic novels and serious content. With these ideas in mind, discuss your own reading of the Jones and Woglom article. Also discuss how you might use graphic novels in your own organization.

If you are feeling really adventurous, capture your discussion as a graphic novel (don’t worry too much about the art)! Here’s an example:

“Comic books have no place in school

Comic books allow us to engage all of our senses in terms of making meaning!

“Graphic novels have provided their creators with a golden opportunity to express themselves in very adult ways — even if they are doing so by telling stories with talking animals (for example Art Spiegelman’s Maus, which deals with the Holocaust).”

“Graphic novels are really just comic books without the negative connotations.”

“Comic books themselves look more like magazines than books, and to think of them as being comical is to dismiss the vast majority of them.”
“The action takes place in illustrated panels (i.e., the “movie frames”) as well as in-between the panels.”

“With a graphic novel, the audience actively personalizes the experience by, for example, imagining the voice of each character. They can linger over images and revisit any image or text. They can go to the end before they start at the beginning or they can jump from page to page.”

“Graphic novels are not just illustrated stories or picture books but a series of sequentially organized panels that blend text and image in a way that makes the whole more than the sum of the parts. But if you just want to refer to them as fat comic books that is fine too.”

“Some individuals just don’t like graphic novels or understand their appeal, while others just have difficulty following them.”

“When it comes to appreciating and accepting graphic novels, we are at the early stage . . . [M]ovies were once rejected as being unworthy of study on the grounds that they were merely entertainment and could not provide sufficient content in two hours of viewing time when compared to a book. Now film studies is a standard program area at many universities.”

“The good ones or, more correctly, the useful ones, can help students learn about a variety of topics in an unintimidating way . . . [They can] create a bridge between what is new (and sometimes overwhelming) with something that they already know.”

“The graphic novel can act as a thought experiment on paper.”

**Reference**

OVERVIEW OF THE ARTICLE
Seven practical strategies (with examples from states that have applied them) help educators prepare citizens for changes related to implementing the Common Core State Standards.

KEY POINTS

- Even though most states have adopted the Common Core, only about one-third of the American public has heard of them.
- Through interviews, the Education Trust studied how states have communicated changes in assessment processes.
- Lesson #1 is to include all stakeholders in open dialogue from the beginning (Tennessee provides an example).
- Lesson #2 is to develop two-way communication, building relationships for both speaking and listening (Georgia, Tennessee, Florida, Virginia).
- Lesson #3 is to make sure everyone has the same, core message and understand that everyone is a messenger (Florida).
- Lesson #4 is to survey existing methods for communication and use those that work best (New York, Kentucky, Georgia, Tennessee, Texas, New York).
- Lesson #5 is to keep messages simple and clear and also differentiate the message for specific audiences and local issues (Tennessee, Georgia).
- Lesson #6 is that tools and delivery processes matter (Tennessee, Georgia).
- Lesson #7 is to start communicating early . . . and continuously, rather than waiting for opposition to arise.
- Specific strategies include coalitions of organizations; comprehensive communications campaigns, engaging business leaders; visiting media markets; surveying stakeholders; focus groups; hotlines; town hall meetings; RSS feeds; stakeholder-tailored emails; specific talking points; follow-up; working with organizations such as Kiwanis and Rotary; use of regional education offices; customer call centers with trained staff; message campaigns addressing methods, target audiences, and feedback mechanisms; naming the campaign; mid-course corrections; talk shows; expecting culture shifts; and understanding leverage.

DEEPEN YOUR THINKING

1. What do you know about working on political campaigns?
2. How do you imagine working on a political campaign is related to helping communities understand change in a school system?
3. What is your estimate of how many noneducators in your own community know about the Common Core and/or new state assessments? How does this estimate differ from Bushaw’s and Lopez’s statistic of “less than two-thirds” of the American public who have heard of standards and related assessments? What might explain the differences, if there are any?
4. Has your state changed its assessment system in the past five years? If so, how receptive was the public to the new system? If not, how do you think the public would react to a future change in state assessment?
5. How difficult is it to have open two-way communication at the beginning of a change? During the middle of the change? At the end of the change?
6. To what extent is communication between educators and the public a matter of “buy-in”? Typical of a “buy-in” message is this sentiment: “We’ve already decided this, and we want you to like it . . . or at least not reject it.”

7. How much trust is there between the public and educators in your community? In your state? In the nation, as a whole?

8. Have you ever had to share bad news with the public in your community? How did you prepare the public for the bad news? How did the public react to the bad news?

9. How can messages be both consistent and tailored to the needs of different people?

10. How can educators avoid being defensive about changes in education?

**EXTEND YOUR THOUGHTS THROUGH ACTIVITIES FOR GROUP DISCUSSION**

The National School Public Relations Association has published a sample outline for a strategic communication plan. The outline addresses both “regular” and “change-oriented” needs related to effective communication, addressing how a hypothetical district might establish itself as “the district of choice” for quality teaching, learning, and student achievement (NSPRA). The plan is “based on recommendations from an NSPRA Communication Audit Report” (NSPRA).

With colleagues, discuss this outline in terms of the needs of your educational organization and the ideas in this article.

**Objectives and Action Steps:**

1. Establish regular communication with the nonparent public.
   - Develop a publication for district residents.
   - Provide new inserts for business/community publications.
   - Implement a speakers bureau for use by community and business organizations.
   - Use a public access channel to deliver information on a regular basis.
   - Initiate regular communication with local clergy.
   - Improve communication with senior citizens.

2. Establish a Key Communicator Network
   - Identify influential parent, community, and business leaders, including minority leaders.
   - Invite identified key communicators to meet with the superintendent/area superintendents several times each year.
   - Resurrect and redesign (or create) a newsletter to keep key communicators informed between meetings.
   - Investigate the possibility of sending this newsletter electronically to key communicators.
   - Establish a hotline or direct contact for key communicators to clarify information or head off rumors.

3. Expand district cable television programming.
   - Improve distribution of programming schedule to a broader audience.

4. Increase programming related to what the district is doing relative to the goal.
   - Use technology equipment and software to research viewer interest in specific topics.
   - Produce more PSAs and infomercials highlighting students and schools.
   - Evaluate feasibility of using the channel for staff development.

5. Expand and improve the district web site.
   - Redesign homepage for easier navigation by users.
   - Update information on a regular basis (weekly or biweekly).
   - Make publications available online in PDF format.
   - Include marketing components (for schools, recruitment, the organization’s goals).
   - Provide a page to respond to rumors and myths in the community and promote the web site as a source of accurate information.
6. Continue to develop a “shared leadership” style across the district.
   a. Close the communication loop on all projects by explaining rationale for actions and result of efforts.
   b. Solicit input and conduct research before making important decisions. Leadership technology equipment and focus groups can be used.

7. Continue to develop public engagement/outreach strategies.
   a. Hold town halls or forums regionally.
   b. Hold study circles on “hot topics.”
   c. Provide opportunities for public input that don’t require attendance at a meeting.
   d. Develop outreach programs to distribute information and gain feedback on issues impacting facilities.
   e. Build partnerships with ethnic agencies.
   f. Provide visual signs of welcome and appreciation of diversity at schools.

8. Develop communications goals that are designed to improve and integrate effective communication at all levels and that are tied to the district’s strategic directions.
   a. Form and then involve a strategic communications advisory committee in defining the communication program and developing specific goals and action steps.
   b. Determine a plan format based on the four-step public relations process of research, planning and assessment, communication, and evaluation.
   c. Establish a process to review and update the plan on a regular basis.

9. Create individual communication plans for any major initiatives or changes in district programs or practices.
   a. Assess communication needs and how they relate to the district’s strategic directions and the overall strategic communication plan as new efforts arise.

10. Conduct regular research and evaluation components on communication efforts.
    a. Use a survey equipment to assess staff and community attitudes.
    b. Continue opinion polling on a regular basis.
    c. Conduct readership surveys of staff and parent publications.

11. Expand and improve school newsletters.
    a. Develop graphics standards
    b. Train staff in using the district stylebook and how to prepare an effective newsletter.
    c. Conduct readership surveys of school newsletters.
    d. Prepare brief updates on district news that can be placed in all school newsletters.
    e. Investigate different ways to distribute school newsletters to a broader audience.

12. Develop communication protocols.
    a. Create a committee of staff and parents to develop guidelines for email and voice mail communications.
    b. Evaluate the use of automated answering systems to determine effectiveness and impact on customer service.

13. Improve internal communication.
    a. Evaluate the effectiveness and readership of internal communication and revise to make more timely and useful to staff.
    b. Investigate the feasibility of an electronic newsletter for staff.
    c. Maximize use of voice mail for distributing time-sensitive or critical information to staff.
    d. Develop standard procedures for reporting the outcome of meetings involving staff.
    e. Develop a management memo for building communications.
    f. Celebrate staff contributions and efforts.
14. Emphasize the role of employees as “ambassadors for education.”
   a. Develop an ambassador component for new employee orientation, both certified and classified.
   b. Provide inservice and review ambassador role with all staff on a regular basis.
   c. Recognize employee efforts as ambassadors.

15. Evaluate the use of internal email.
   a. Assess the system with a committee that includes members from all job roles.
   b. Have the committee develop guidelines for internal use of email.
   c. Assess and address staff access to email.

16. Provide communication inservice training for staff.
   a. Develop a series of employee communication workshops and market them to staff.
   b. Provide incentive for staff to attend communication workshops.

Within each objective and for each task consider the following: target audience, budget, timeline, responsible persons, and evaluation measures.

Reference

Applications

This Professional Development Guide was created with the characteristics of adult learners in mind (Tallerico, 2005):

- Active engagement
- Integration of experience
- Choice and self-direction
- Relevance to current challenges
- Learning style variation

As you think about sharing this article with other adults, how could you fulfill the adult learning needs above?

This Professional Development Guide was created so that readers could apply what they have learned to work in classrooms (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001):

- Identifying Similarities and Differences
- Reinforcing Effort and Providing Recognition
- Nonlinguistic Representations
- Setting Objectives and Providing Feedback
- Cues, Questions, and Advance Organizers
- Summarizing and Note-Taking
- Homework and Practice
- Cooperative Learning
- Generating and Testing Hypotheses

As you think about sharing this article with classroom teachers, how could you use these strategies with them?

References


About the Author

Lois Brown Easton is a consultant, coach, and author with a particular interest in learning designs — for adults and for students. She retired as director of professional development at Eagle Rock School and Professional Development Center, Estes Park, Colo. From 1992 to 1994, she was director of Re:Learning Systems at the Education Commission of the States (ECS). Re:Learning was a partnership between the Coalition of Essential Schools and ECS. Before that, she served in the Arizona Department of Education in a variety of positions: English/language arts coordinator, director of curriculum and instruction, and director of curriculum and assessment planning.

A middle school English teacher for 15 years, Easton earned her Ph.D. at the University of Arizona. Easton has been a frequent presenter at conferences and a contributor to educational journals.

She was editor and contributor to Powerful Designs for Professional Learning (NSDC, 2004 & 2008). Her other books include:

- The Other Side of Curriculum: Lessons From Learners (Heinemann, 2002);
- Engaging the Disengaged: How Schools Can Help Struggling Students Succeed (Corwin, 2008);
- Protocols for Professional Learning (ASCD, 2009); and
- Professional Learning Communities by Design: Putting the Learning Back Into PLCs (Learning Forward and Corwin, 2011).

Easton lives and works in Arizona. Email her at leastoners@aol.com.