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## Walking the Walk: An Educator's Perspective From All Views

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As an education professor, I recently decided it was time to *walk the walk* of my graduate and undergraduate students. I was ready to experience what happens when the educational neuroscience and the social and emotional disciplines meet head-on with real-life challenges and opportunities. So, while continuing with my courses at the University, I became a fifth grade co-teacher, joining an incredible group of educators from Washington Township, a large public school district in Indianapolis.



## Joining a Courageous Pilot Program

On Tuesday and Thursday mornings, I watch the scenery change from theory to practice when I meet with my team to plan, assess and observe academic standards. We weave topics and benchmarks into strategies that will build engagement while aligning with our students' interests, stressors and varied learning profiles. Our goal is to lessen the "survival" instinct and create a classroom culture that will:

- Accept differences
- Encourage questions
- Embrace breathing practices, prediction and storytelling
- Create personalized learning for every student *and teacher*

This semester, we're incorporating three brain-compatible practices into the curriculum of this fabulous but challenging pilot program. Through a focused attention practice, we teach students what happens in their brains and bodies when they feel anger, fear and anxiety. We're modeling how to "lessen" these reflexive responses by allowing their minds to relax and clear away thoughts and emotions that interfere with attention and focus. We use breath work, visualization, and thought exercises.

The following brain-break questions help students focus attention by turning their thinking upside down.

1. Are you more like a cracker or cookie?
2. Would you rather be extra-large or extra-small? Why?
3. What if walls could talk? Which walls would you most like to interview? Why?

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4. What are the disadvantages of being able to read minds? Write the schedule you will follow on a new holiday called Opposite Day.
5. Write a description of an imaginary teacher who teaches you in the most fabulous ways.
6. Describe a problem that has no solution.
7. Describe five unusual uses for a toothpick.
8. You have the world's oldest notebook, and inside are five of the world's top secrets. What are they and what will you do with them?
9. You are allowed to fly 10,000 feet in the air for three hours. Where would you go and what would you like to see?
10. Are you more like earth, air, fire or water?

## **Snapshots of a Very Educational Day**

Join me now for three very different yet integrally related moments on a particular Tuesday.

### **The Engaged Brain: Whole Numbers Meet Decimals (9:00 AM)**

In this 30-minute lesson, I observed "deepened learning" -- and had an "AHA!" moment of my own. As the students stood and watched, I laid a blue post-it in the middle of the classroom and tore a pink post-it into tiny pieces, which I scattered on the floor. I then asked the students to discuss with their groups what the blue post-it and the tiny pieces of pink post-it have to do with whole numbers and decimals. As I walked the room and listened, I felt real joy as those fifth graders made excited guesses and voiced their discoveries. Not only did each table share the relationship between a whole number and a decimal, but they also explained the analogy of how the paper represented each number or parts of a number. It was their second day of comparing decimals to whole numbers, so this skill was still new to them. However, we'd already talked about the importance of effort and mistakes -- wrong answers lead to right answers, so mistakes were welcomed!

I then brought out a number line with the numbers 0-9 marked on small cards and taped to a wire. Volunteers eagerly added other cards with numbers or decimals. As a class we discussed how .7 could be mistakenly placed between the whole numbers 7 and 8. This brain-compatible lesson required the students to move, predict, anticipate, discuss, self-assess and think about their thinking -- taking them beyond the math world sometimes monopolized by worksheets. Following a short video covering a four-step process from least to whole, we asked the students to create their own decimals and whole numbers, and place those on the number line, watching them self-assess their work throughout this lesson. The success they experienced empowered them to continue their learning even when they were unsure of the answer.

### **From Theory to Practice (12:30 PM)**

I don't remember ever feeling such joy inside an instructional practice as I drove from the elementary school back to campus for my undergraduate "Inclusive Classroom" course. The fifth grade math lesson had been engaging and therefore brain-compatible, but certainly not flawless. I discussed mistakes and successes with the 30 pre-service teachers in my class. Today I shared not only the theory, research and video clips of brain-compatible teaching, but also my personal experience that morning. We discussed what happens in the brain when questioning and prediction create the mind states of anticipation and curiosity. We thought of our own questions and predictions for "what would happen on Thursday" when I returned to the fifth grade classes.

### **Sitting Beside Graduate Students (6:00PM)**

Five hours after my undergraduate class, I met with my graduate students, second-year teachers in a national transition-to-teaching program who work in inner city districts and charter school classrooms. This time I met them on a level playing field as we compared, contrasted and questioned our teaching experiences, problem solving around the practices we all had employed earlier that day.

We discussed the power of a brain-compatible strategy called "story chunking" as related to "plot line," one of the fifth grade standards. I related how, earlier that day, I'd called small groups of fifth graders to stop, sit and listen as I shared a personal narrative about my family watching Fourth of July fireworks from a boat. The children were intrigued as I presented setting, characters, problem, climax and resolution. This was a much more brain-engaging way of introducing the *exposition of a story* than defining what exposition is. When we personalize the dry, isolated content from standards in a way that builds on students' prior knowledge and engages their hearts and minds, we create a win-win for academic and behavioral success -- because students are "present," relating, and attaching emotion to the subject matter as their personal experiences and desires are woven into it.

## **Engaging Brain and Heart**

For the past six years, my work in higher education has enhanced the lives of the K-12 students I've indirectly addressed through pre-service and beginning teachers. But now I can experience my mistakes as great learning opportunities, which I share alongside my successes with my collegiate and beginning teachers who are navigating this very rewarding yet complex terrain of education. Our brains and hearts are the GPS for engagement, mastery and assessment, but as I provide direct instruction, feedback, and creative options inside the classroom, these things are molding me into a better instructor, a teacher willing to teach from a much grander perspective.

How have you brought theory to practice and vice versa? Please share your story in the comments section below.