Nurturing Passionate Teachers:
Making Our Work Transparent

By Randall Wisehart

At the beginning of the school year the first year teachers and student teachers I will be working with will hear this typical statement from the principal of our high school: *We need to get those test scores up. We want our school to look good. Our goal is to increase the percentage of students passing the state test by 10% this year and another 10% next year. I expect all of us to be working toward this challenging goal.*

I don't even have to ask. I know what they're thinking. "Is this what teaching is about now, raising test scores? This isn't why I became a teacher. I'm not approaching my first year of teaching excited about the possibility of getting my students from a 465 (just below the cut score) to a 475 (just over the cut score). I can't imagine arriving at school each morning pumped at the idea of raising those test scores. I want to inspire students to become lifelong learners. I want to be a passionate teacher; I want to help students use their minds well. But I still want to be able to pay my rent. Help me. I'm confused. Do I build relationships with students or focus on raising those test scores?"

I have been a teacher in public schools for over 25 years. Over the last few years I have also taught students from Earlham College as well as mentoring beginning teachers. During 2002-2003, in my capacity as a mentor teacher, I worked with over a dozen beginning teachers and student teachers and got from them lots of feedback about what was helping them and what wasn't. They were very clear about what helped:

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- seeing me demonstrate lessons;
- asking me questions as I reflected on a lesson;
- sharing specific strategies and activities and discussing possibilities;
- reflecting with them after I watched *them* teach.

Most important they said, was having me share what was going on in my mind as I taught, asked questions, did professional reading, talked to my peers about what I was thinking and reflected on how it might impact my practice. When I was able to make my thinking transparent to them, they saw possibilities for themselves (Fullan, 1993). When I posed questions to them, they could see applications for their own practice. When they tried things in their own classrooms, they came back to me and I tried to help them make their own teaching, in turn, transparent (Schon, 1987). They were learning how, in a world focused on standardized testing, to become passionate teachers (Fried, 2001).

I believe strongly that the numbers and letters in our grading systems get in the way of what is important in classrooms (Guskey, 2001b). When we reduce learning in our students' eyes to numbers and letters, we lose passion, we lose complexity, we lose fun, we lose depth, we lose the essence of learning (Meier, 2002).

I do believe it is important that we learn specific classroom strategies that help students construct meaning, and that we analyze classroom data so students can understand what they do well and how they need to improve. I also want students to look at their scores on standardized tests as one way of understanding themselves as learners. However, I want them to be able to put that standardized test score in a context of learning that also includes rich classroom assessments, careful documentation of goals accomplished, and thoughtful self-assessments. What we seem to have lost is the scope of how students learn. This is what I want beginning teachers and student teachers to reflect on as they enter the profession of teaching (Stiggins, 1999; Wiggins, 1998b).

Anyone who works with new teachers must let them know that they should not have to make a choice between bringing up test scores or promoting lifelong learning. Mentor teachers must show beginning teachers how to be "passionate teachers," which I define as living a life as a reflective educator, making it a priority to build positive relationships with students, creating a classroom community in which students share responsibility for their own learning and the learning of their peers, nurturing a climate that focuses on learning rather than rules, developing strategies that grow from students' emerging strengths as learners rather than by dwelling on learning deficiencies (Sizer, 1992).

Becoming a passionate teacher means more than merely being passionate about skills, content, and the habits of mind we may wish to engender in our students. First and foremost, it means making a commitment to recreating oneself as an educator — and continuing that regenerative process throughout a career. As I work with beginning teachers and student teachers, I try to demonstrate the habits

of a reflective practitioner — living a life of inquiry, reading the research, analyzing my practice to make more of an impact on student learning. I must invite beginning teachers in by making my reasoning transparent so they can examine how I make decisions as a passionate teacher. We must discuss what excites us, what scares us, and what options they have as they begin to work in their own classrooms (Barth, 2001).

Challenging the Game of School

During in-class workshop time, my 9th grade students are either finishing drafts of writing or doing independent reading. I have brief conferences with students as three college students look on.

"Matt, what have you been doing well in the class over the last grading period?"

"I dunno."

"What about reading? What are you reading on your own time?"

"I'm still reading *IT* by Stephen King."

"Right. Well, how's that going?"

"I dunno."

I know from past conferences that Matt is often reluctant to be reflective, but I plunge ahead hoping that today will be the day I break through and get him to talk in specifics about what he is doing well and where he needs to improve in terms of Indiana English/language arts standards.

"Well, are you confused by anything or interested in any certain part?"

"The dialogue and description."

Finally, I have something to work with. "So you get lost in the descriptive passages and prefer the sections where there is more dialogue? How do you vary your reading strategies when you're reading the descriptive passages, then?"

"No, you've got it backwards. I like the descriptive part. I get confused by the dialogue."

When I debriefed this interaction, my college student observers asked if it was frustrating, and I said of course it is. But conferencing is a cornerstone activity in nurturing dynamic relationships. Most of the kids in Matt's class are not confident readers. They all missed the cut score on the 8th grade state exam and had come to my class for extra help with literacy. At this point in the year, they hadn't learned yet to articulate what they do well and what they need to do better. It takes months to get reluctant learners there. Even my stronger students are so used to playing the game of "guess what the teacher wants me to do, and do that and nothing more" that an open honest discussion about their learning doesn't come easy (Bomer, 1993; Burke, 2003).

I want to tell beginning teachers how to create a community of learners in their classrooms, in stark contrast to the "game of school" (Fried, 1995) that most students are used to. I want to help them engage students in honest discussion about learning. I want them to see their students as co-learners who have much to offer,

rather than as people with deficiencies. Passionate teaching isn't about correcting mistakes (although that is often part of it); it's about honoring what students bring to the classroom; it's about helping students demonstrate what they are learning and produce quality work; it's about showing students how to reflect on their work and continue to improve.

Lessons From the Classrooms of Passionate Teachers

Of course, one can be an impassioned lecturer, but passionate teachers remember that, ultimately, teaching is about building relationships. Dealing with content, skills, and habits of mind must come after teachers and students feel comfortable together. As with Matt, I try to model for newer teachers some specific strategies and practices that are more conducive to becoming a passionate teacher. I emphasize Socratic seminars,[1] collaboration with students about most major classroom decisions, helping students relate what we're learning to state standards, and student self-assessment. This all sounds good, the beginning teachers and student teachers tell me, but how do we get students to do the work? Do we give lots of points to them if they "try"? Do we give separate grades for "effort"? How do kids even know what "quality work" is?

I invite them to watch me at work. I ask my 9th grade students:

1. If you could talk to the author of this book, what would you say or ask?
2. What has the author done to help you enjoy the book so far?
3. What has surprised you most about a character?
4. What other author does this book remind you of?

One student's uncorrected response:

1. I would ask why would people give their lives up to save someone else;
2. He made the book adventeres;
3. They would go out to the ocean and save someone;
4. This book reminds me of tears of a tiger because they both try and save someone.

This does not show much depth of thought. I could have put a large red "F" on the paper since the student did not adequately respond to the prompts. Instead, as I read more and more responses, I reflected. Yes, I had made a gallant effort to model reading techniques while we read together, showing them my own responses and asking them to reflect on what could be added to make them better, etc.

I showed the first year teachers and student teachers samples of the reading responses. I shared with them my plan. I decided to revise a rubric based on the criteria I had already given out (Goodrich-Andrade, 2000; Stiggins, 2001; Wiggins, 1998a). I had already established that students could "redo" their work at any time and receive "full credit" for their revised work if it was better than the original. After handing out the revised rubrics and my feedback to their responses, I met with some students and left others to work from my written comments.

Following is the revised version of the student's response, albeit done only after a rather vehement protest:

> 1. This book reminds me of when I had to try out. I was nervous just like Mike was. Mike was scared that the coach was mean or something. I think it is scary to try out for a basketball team.
>
> 2. The author made this book joyful because it made me think. It almost feels like it is a true story. He tells a lot of good details and ideas.
>
> 3. Yes, because they felt scared when it came down to tryouts. A real person would feel that way too. I would be scared not to make the team.
>
> 4. I like the section where the coach was picking the players when he got to the last player he made it look like he was going to pick someone else. Instead, he picked Mike. He told some jokes as he picked the players. Everyone cheered for one or the other.

This is still not exemplary work, as I reminded the first year and student teachers. However, if my questioning during student conferences can help students, like Matt, who are labeled "at risk" or "below standard" according to test scores take small but significant steps to improve the quality of their work, I will help them get that much closer to being able to produce work that will help them continue to make progress as learners — and come closer to passing that high stakes test.

Passionate teachers continually reflect on the interplay of standards, student motivation, student learning and grades. Given the current emphasis on standards and high stakes tests, more and more teachers wonder about giving "credit" for effort.[2] A passionate teacher wants students to achieve the standards and produce quality work, to complete their assignments but also to understand the importance of developing good habits of mind and habits of work.

If I give students "credit/points/grades" for effort, irrespective of performance, what I am really communicating is, "If you will be quiet and not bother me, I will give you a minimal passing grade or enough points for effort that it will make up for substandard work." If I do this, I am not helping students; I am perpetuating school as a game with minimal expectations. Instead, I show new teachers how to give students feedback on dispositions or habits of mind. A passionate teacher can explicitly discuss with students concepts such as "persistence" and describe what it looks like. Teachers and students could then collaboratively develop a rubric and use it to give students feedback on developing and sustaining qualities of persistence. In this case, giving students "credit" for persistence or effort takes on an entirely different tone (Guskey, 2003).

This is a lot for a new teacher to think about, especially if her own K-12 experience has been a traditional one. My challenge as a mentor teacher is to keep showing her examples and to continue to share what I think of as I teach — how this lesson relates to state standards; how that observation connects with students' past

performance; whether or not to give immediate feedback or let the student work on; should a student redo something or move to something else and come back to this later; whether to ask another question or simply listen to the student for a bit; what to do about other students who need my assistance; whether to intervene in an issue on the other side of the room; how to respond to the administrator who just walked into my room to ask if I have taken attendance yet? And these are all questions to address within a span of about 30 seconds. Welcome to my world.

The Passionate Teacher Researcher: Stories and Test Scores

Working with first year teachers and student teachers means doing a lot of demonstrating and reflecting, as well as sharing stories such as this:

A few years ago I had finally begged and bribed nineteen eighth graders to pilot an exhibition system in which they would present their humanities portfolios to a committee for feedback. At the last minute Tammy, my teaching partner, asked me to add Christy, who had come to our eighth grade humanities class in February, from an alternative school, and had recently had her baby taken away by the legal system. She had missed all of our foundational work from the first semester. Christy had been in and out of alternative schools for years and had a history of failure. She was an angry girl with loads of problems.

Over the course of the winter and spring, students in the pilot program were given extra class time to work on their portfolios and prepare work for public presentation. As her classmates revised their written work and planned how to best demonstrate their growth as learners, Christy kept writing and revising drafts of her poems.

When the time came for students to present, Christy did not show the poise or insight of most other students. She did not make the connections to other subject areas and did not have nearly as much written work in her portfolio. She was, however, justifiably pleased with the poetry she had written about her baby.

After all twenty students had presented, they displayed their portfolios in booths for parents, other students, and other teachers (Meier, 1995; Sizer, 1984). Christy's mom came to see Christy's booth. She was dressed nicely and brought a camera as well as a few young children in tow.

"This is the first time in five years that Christy has finished a school year without being expelled. She actually wanted to come to school. Before she was always ditching." The look of pride in her mother's face shone like a medal.

I believe that Christy didn't give up because we were willing to scaffold her as she came closer to producing quality work. Christy didn't give up in part because we helped her set realistic goals and let her know that we expected her to do well. She knew Tammy would not give up on her. Something clicked for Christy in a positive way that we hope she can build on. The rest is up to her.

What did I learn from telling this story to beginning teachers? Christy clearly

was not performing up to "standard" on most measures of academic performance. She had trouble writing grammatically correct sentences even after several revisions. What did she learn? She learned to persist, to adjust her work to come closer to standards, to organize, to express her thoughts and feelings. That was clearly documented.

It isn't always easy to draw a direct correlation between passionate teachers and the standardized test scores of their students. The documented experiences of students such as Christy help to show the impact passionate teachers can have. As a passionate teacher who works with new teachers, I must show them how to tell their own stories and how to put into practice what they learn from their stories.

"All right," the beginning teachers and student teachers tell me. "We can see some use of anecdotes. But what about those test scores?"

For the entire school year of 2001-2002, I told them, I continued to teach my high school freshmen as I always had — lots of writing workshop time, Socratic seminars each week, response journals rather than questions at the end of chapters, projects and performance rather than traditional tests, mini-lessons and lots of revising/proofreading of their own writing rather than lessons on parts of speech, grammar, and usage, and lots of conferences on how their work was (or was not) measuring up to state standards (Burke, 1999; Strickland, 2002).

I was anxious to see how my students did on the high stakes test in the fall following their year with me. I had a wide range of students, including roughly as many highly at-risk students as other teachers. (I had 145 students out of the 485 in the entire 9th grade.) My students beat the grade/average by nearly ten percentage points, with 69% scoring above the cut compared to 59% of their fellow students who had had more traditional instruction in their freshman year.

This seemed to impress the beginning teachers. They were often told by others that the only way to bring those test scores up was for schools to reject "innovative" methods in favor of traditional instruction, to use more worksheets, to focus on discrete facts and isolated skills, to stay close to the suggested curriculum framework and follow the text book chapter by chapter. My stories and reflections balanced what they were hearing from other teachers, an argument for learner-centered classrooms even in this era of standardized testing (Fried, 2001; Meier, 2002).

As a year of working with beginning teachers and student teachers came to an end, I realized that wherever they went to teach, they would have to find a support network or else they would gradually slip into traditional practices and view passionate teaching as impractical if idealistic in today's schools.

If we believe that teachers, acting on their own, can create and maintain classrooms of passionate learning when isolated behind closed doors, we are kidding ourselves. A passionate teacher, for her own survival, must reach out to others, share her questions and inquiries, try to keep the professional conversation on teaching and learning (Barth, 2001; Fullan, 1999).

I have encouraged several student teachers and their mentors this year to

engage in an inquiry project and share what they are learning. I believe that all passionate teachers should engage in some form of an inquiry cycle as an integral part of their teaching. Passionate teachers should pose important questions about teaching and learning, collect data from their classrooms to help them reflect, do professional reading to inform their inquiry, and share with colleagues what they are learning and how they are adjusting their practice based on their inquiry. The more I work with beginning teachers, the more I believe that when teachers engage in inquiry about their practice, they are modeling the characteristics of lifelong learners.

The questions beginning teachers ask themselves are crucial. They must ask questions that help them navigate the dangerous terrain between being true to their students and focusing mainly on achieving higher test scores. Those of us who are veteran passionate teachers routinely recreate ourselves through our questions, our observations, our adjustments, our failures, our successes. Our gift and our responsibility to beginning teachers is to make our passionate teaching transparent. We must show them how building genuine relationships with students helps them score better on tests. Only with our support can beginning teachers hold onto the passion that brought them to this work.

Notes

[1] See Dennis Gray. Putting minds to work. *American Educator,* Fall 1989, pp. 16-25 and Art Costa and Bena Kallick, *Discovering and exploring habits of mind* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2000).

[2] Thomas Guskey. How classroom assessments improve learning. *Educational Leadership,* February 2003, pp. 6-11)

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