

Why I Fell Out of Love with my Job- and How I Learned to Fall in Love Again
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I have the best job in the world; I get paid to learn! I have been teaching high school since 1981 and every day I learn something new about the subjects I teach--ancient history and philosophy- and my students teach me as well about who they are and how they learn. I have always been excited to get up and go to work every day, BUT- about 5 years ago I began to become extremely disillusioned with the profession that I love.

I began to notice that many high students seem to have lost their ability to be curious and to ask questions. They seemed to have a hard time doing the hard work of thinking and the even harder work of wrestling with confusion. The most common question students were asking me on the first day of school was "Mrs., Cadwell, what do I have to do to get an A?"

Every time I heard this question my heart would sink. ... But then I began to realize that these students were doing EXACTLY what they were trained to do- to focus on answers. I also began to realize that I was trained as well. I was a cog in a wheel in a system that put a premium on a product rather than on the process of inquiry.

It became very clear to me that I needed to radically change my teaching practice- not just for the sake of my students, but also for the health of our democracy.

Our educational system is still currently in the dark ages. Many of us are working to redesign teaching and learning at the state and at the district level with the introduction of proficiency-based education, and this is a step in the right direction. Yet despite these initiatives, many high school students remain in classrooms where they still sit in rows and listen to the teacher who tells them what they need to know -and then they dutifully regurgitate this information back on tests. Learning is passive. Questioning is discouraged. Obedience is rewarded. This is what my classroom looked like for years:



I realized that I was helping those young people who knew how to play the game of school to excel, while equally talented students who did not know how to – or did want to- to play this game suffered. I became clear to me that Benjamin Franklin was right when he said, “Never let schooling get in the way of your education.”

I also needed to redesign my classroom because brains of teenagers in my classes may be developing in significantly different ways than the brains of students before the invention of electronic devices. The addiction that many teens have to their devices may be changing the way their brains are wired making them more distractible, less able to focus and less likely to complete tasks New research on smart phone and screen use by teens suggests that these devices may promote antisocial behavior, prolong childhood, and increase political disconnectedness, loneliness and depression. Ask any high school teacher or any parent and they will tell you that the enemy of focused activity, critical thinking and engagement is the screen



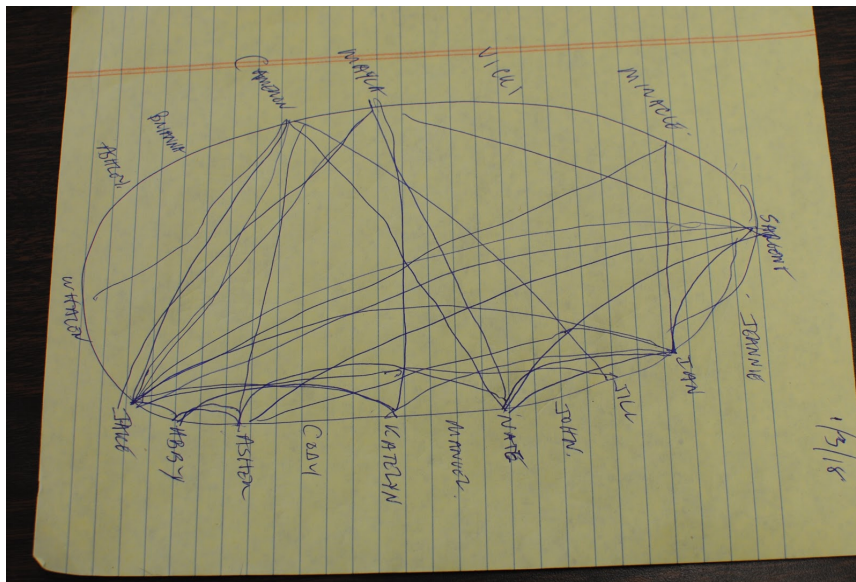
The root word of education, “Educere” is from the Latin, meaning “to draw out” or “to be present at the birth of.” I began to think, *What if I said to my students “this is the most important device that you own and that we are going to turn on and use everyday? What if I grounded my teaching and learning in current on how the brain learns? What if I focused on questions rather than answers? Most important of all--what if I stepped back and encouraged my students to step up and engage in the messy work of learning?”*

Socrates believed that “Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel”. I wanted my students to ignite the flame of their own learning and to find their voice so I decided to do some thing radical- I turned my classroom over to my students

This is what my classroom looks like now:



In my classroom learning takes place around an oval table called a Harkness table. In our Harkness discussions, the students drive the conversation. They read primary source materials and work together to ask and answer essential questions and solve difficult problems. They may not simply write down what I say--because I am not talking! I am at the table and while I may speak from time to time, I do not direct the conversation or lead students to a conclusion that I want them to reach. Instead, they must work together to understand difficult texts, to reach their own conclusions and to solve the problems I create for them. The pedagogy is grounded in equity- all voices are valued and encouraged. I often tell my students that “none of us is as smart as all of us” While students are talking I track the dynamics of their discussion and give them feedback on their skills of civil discourse



This Harkness method is grounded in four critical principles of brain research; 1) that “the one that does the work does the learning, 2) ”new learning must be connected to a few big ideas, 3) new learning must be useful and 4) interference must be reduced.

In my classroom there are no cell phones; this was a rule that the students in my classroom actually developed at the beginning of the year, although they are angry with me as I am still enforcing it. Students are not looking at their screens or at me- they are each other, as everyone has to be engaged in the messiness of learning- and this is really transforming traditional teaching and learning on its head.



At the beginning I had to teach the skills of eye contact, appropriate body language and how to demonstrate tolerance and respect for others' viewpoints. The greatest challenge was teaching students how to ask questions. When easy answers are readily available on a hand held touch screen, students seemed to have lost the ability to ask probing and provocative questions. This is difficult and challenging work, but we are making progress. Now, the dynamics of the classroom are changing. Instead of looking at me and asking, "Mrs. Cadwell, can you just tell me the answer?" I am overhearing comments such as these, when one student said "Sam, I respectfully disagree with you on this point" or another student responded by saying, "Evan, do you have some text evidence to back up your points?" After one lively discussion a 15-year-old boy named Matthew ran up to me and exclaimed, " You know Mrs. Cadwell, these Harkness discussions are fun- but this is much harder than a regular classroom. In this class you actually have to think!"

I am no longer discouraged and disillusioned with my job. I am re-energized- and I am having more fun than ever as I watch my students relearning how to be curious, how to engage in civil discourse and how to take charge of their own learning.

Transforming education is not just about what happens in the classroom; it is about the type of world that we want to create. Democracy depends on dialogue- not on shaming, blaming, yelling or tweeting. . I do not have to tell you that there are not enough role models in our public sphere today for how we want our young people to act. Democracy is grounded in inclusion and civil discourse- and this begin in the classroom.

Transforming teaching and learning doesn't have to cost millions of dollars. It can begin right now in the classroom if teachers were supported to have the courage to learn how to step back to allow students to step up and find and use their voices.

