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From Stereotyping and Put-Downs to Collaboration and Problem-Solving: A Journey in Search of Academic Engagement

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I valued everything – specific strategies, lessons (frames, birthdays, talking partners, etc.) But I valued even more the subtle tips and advice on how to ask questions in an open-ended way and ways to structure classrooms to engage all students.”

“So much of what makes this effective are subtle (things that some people could go through the training and not realize are happening but are keys to why it works). I find myself impacted by the phrasing of questions and how every detail of instruction is intentional and important.”

“I valued learning why it is so important to really demonstrate and prove why all of my students are intellectual resources in the classroom and not merely to compliment students for their behavior.”

“I learned how to show my students that I have confidence that they can perform at a rigorous academic level.”

“I valued the reminder to not accept ‘I don’t know,’ and to find ways to get that student to answer the question and turn it into a teachable moment.”

“I valued everything so far!!! I really appreciate how reflective we are structured to be – and all the amazing modeling!! I love learning by modeling!!”

These are the words of experienced teachers searching for ways to engage reluctant learners in academically rigorous instruction. They are participants in Equity and Access (E&A), a professional growth program seeking to ensure that *all* students have *full, equitable access* to the intellectual learning resources in their classrooms. Addressing the obstacles to active learning for low-academic status students is a special program focus. The participants, teacher-learners themselves, are immersed in instructional processes that closely parallel the student-centered approach to teaching and learning that they intend to establish in their own instructional practice.

Equity and Access evolved over a 15-year period to augment the professional development (PD) programs conducted by regional sites of the California International Studies Project (CISP). In turn, CISP is one of nine discipline-focused networks that collaborate under the auspices of the California Subject Matter Project (CSMP) to strengthen teachers’ knowledge and instructional skills in their teaching subjects. This article traces the development of E&A from a recognition that too many students in California schools are on the periphery of rigorous learning to collaboration that offers the possibility of making whole-school progress in bringing these underserved students fully into the instructional mainstream.

BEGINNING THE SEARCH FOR ENGAGEMENT

Three relevant project developments occurring in the early 1990s laid the groundwork for the organization of the Equity and Access program. The first was a growing awareness that our programs were not sufficiently addressing the needs of low-literacy and reluctant learners in the classrooms of teachers attending the project's PD programs. At the time, discipline-rich professional growth programs were being conducted for already employed teachers throughout the state. Distinguished world affairs scholars and specialist contributed to institutes that were designed to strengthen teachers' knowledge and understanding of world cultures, world history, international relations and contemporary world issues. Instructional resource materials were being produced to support the professional growth opportunities for teachers, and extended travel/study programs abroad augmented the formal study for many participants.

Still, for a project with priorities that included developing cultural knowledge and understanding, examining complex issues from multiple perspectives, and building safe and supportive environments in diverse communities, there was clear room for improvement. Too frequently seen among students of program participants was a lack of respect for ethnic, cultural or different life experiences; communication and interactions characterized by stereotyping and put-downs; and weak evidence of collaboration and problem-solving skills. And too many underserved students – impoverished, reluctant and low-literacy learners, and potential dropouts – were operating in the instructional shadows. There was work to be done.

The second important development during this period was the appointment of Professor Elizabeth Cohen, a sociologist in Stanford University's School of Education, as the faculty advisor for CISP. Of particular interest to the project was the instructional approach that she and colleagues had developed to address limitations of collaborative small group instruction. She demonstrated that domination by high academic status students in teamwork processes was interfering with the very collaboration and problem solving that small group instruction was intended to produce.

Professor Cohen specialized in organizing instruction for students in heterogeneous school environments, especially those with disproportionate numbers of low-academic status students. Central to her philosophy is "multiple ability instruction," the idea that lower performing students must be brought into the educational mainstream by achieving academic success that deliberately utilizes the knowledge, skills and life experiences that they bring to the classroom. But as starting places for instruction, these characteristics usually lie outside the traditional indicators of academic success: being skilled in reading, writing or math.

"Students who lack traditional academic skills or proficiency in the language of instruction, or who are social isolates, are often perceived as low-status students. They barely participate, are often ignored, and frequently are not given a share of the materials or a turn at the activity" (Cohen, Lotan, Scarloss, & Arellano, 1999, p. 84).

There appeared to be a fortuitous alignment between Dr. Cohen's approach and needs in the CISP community.

Simultaneously, the CISP network was becoming familiar with an online international negotiations exercise that roughly parallels the Model United Nations simulation usually offered as an academic enrichment opportunity for high-achieving students in high schools and universities. Originating at the University of Maryland, the exercise had special appeal for its direct relevance to international studies objectives. In

addition, its requirements for diplomatic behavior, collaboration, problem solving, teamwork, research and writing made it a compelling fit for CISP. That fit was augmented by the conviction that teacher effectiveness exerted a powerful influence on the abilities of underserved students to succeed academically, a conviction validated by the research of Topping and Sanders (2000, p. 334). Similarly, reporting on his research, Atchison observed that:

“While student traits such as low socio-economic level, poverty status did impact student achievement, teacher effectiveness had a profoundly positive effect on student achievement, even when taking into account negatively correlated student factors” (2012, p. 16).

Believing that such outcomes were within reach, CISP began to recast the international negotiations simulation as a professional growth experience for teachers and establish it as a signature program within the CISP network. It was adapted primarily for high school 9th and 10th grade students enrolled in World History, World Geography and Contemporary World Issues courses, and teacher participants were recruited from schools statewide that enrolled large numbers of underserved students. The admonition of Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin guided development of the program. Effective PD must be “... sustained, ongoing, intensive, and supported by modeling, coaching, and the collective solving of specific problems of practice” (1995, p. 598). These were the origins of the Contemporary World History Project (CWHP).

During the CWHP exercise, students study in depth the nation state that their class represents in the simulation. Their teachers prepare them to work in theme-based teams to research global problem topics in security, economics, health and environment; develop possible solutions to these problems from the perspective of their nation state; provide evidence to support proposed solutions; write and refine position papers based on feedback from teachers and project staff; negotiate their positions online with counterpart teams from other schools; and finally meet face-to-face in a one-day Global Forum on a university campus to try to bring closure to their ongoing negotiations.

From the outset, student outcomes have been impressive. Students acquire respect for one another and their differences, dialogue and presentation skills are developed, off-task behaviors are minimized, and collaboration, teamwork and problem solving are routine. CWHP classes become distinctive in their high school communities, and Global Forum observers express wonder at the evident decorum and maturity of the 15-year old “country delegates” who interact thoughtfully and responsibly for an entire day. (For contemporary relevance, the skills required of teachers and students in this equity-focused program map almost perfectly onto instructional processes and skills now embedded in the Common Core and ELD standards.)

The simulation exercise also established that underserved students could achieve academically through alternative forms of instruction. Results of a comprehensive CWHP evaluation -- a pre/post, comparison group study -- provided evidence (1) that the intervention students significantly outperformed a comparison sample of students, and (2) that the lowest performing students on pre-test achievement measures made the greatest gains during the course of an academic year. The report concluded:

“Many programs boost the performance of the lowest students but do little to narrow the gap between higher- and lower-skilled students. The findings reported here show that the gap between the highest and lowest performing students in the intervention classes is lessening while comparison classes show no such results” (Scarloss et al, 2004, p. 44).

CWHP, which continues with separate Northern and Southern California cohorts for teachers and students, has engaged about 750 students annually since the mid-1990s.

EXPANDING THE DISCIPLINARY SCOPE

In the 2001-04 period, the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) awarded funding to deepen the CWHP involvement of History-Social Science and International Studies faculties in three Los Angeles-area high schools: Belmont, Lincoln and Manual Arts. Midway through the award period, participating teachers and administrators from the partner schools urged the project to open the PD to teachers in their schools from additional disciplines. Seeing the benefit of aligning instructional processes within their schools, they were particularly eager to involve the ELA co-teachers of the H-SS participants, since they either taught together or otherwise shared students. The schools recognized that the PD characteristics -- participant dialogue, facilitated presentations, use of visual materials, problem solving, time and classroom management, random calling, use of open-ended questions and discussion prompts; conceptual thinking; authentic and timely feedback; ongoing assessment -- would benefit instruction more broadly. At the conclusion of the CPEC award period, these school partners asked the project to extend the PD experience to still other teachers in their school, and they offered to cover the costs. With that validation, and active interest expressed by other schools in the region, Equity and Access was launched.

THE EQUITY AND ACCESS OBJECTIVES

As a professional development program, E&A partners primarily work with school communities that have disproportionate numbers of students that have very low expectations of their ability to learn or to succeed at school performance and achievement. But when given the chance, these low-academic status students have interest, curiosity and capabilities for learning at high levels of academic achievement. Schools have the capacity to engage their students fully and to instill in them the conviction that they can succeed at rigorous academic tasks.

Such schools share many challenges and problems, but none are more fundamentally important than the choices they make about the ways that instruction is conducted in individual classrooms and across the campus. School culture is largely shaped by how these challenges are addressed, resolved and integrated into the fabric of the school's values, vision, priorities and practices. In support of these objectives, E&A is organized around five key instructional themes: expectations, accountability, engagement, sharing authority, and high order thinking.

1. Develop teachers' convictions that all students can succeed at rigorous academic tasks.

The experience of school for low-academic status students often confirms their own low expectations of themselves as learners. They have rarely, if ever, felt successful in school, a pattern that repeats itself again and again as they progress through the grades. However, in a classroom environment that expects them to be successful and with teachers who believe that they can be, these low-academic status students consistently rise to the occasion. They grapple with complex issues, think critically about information presented, and use academic language to present their thoughts and ideas in an organized manner. Schools can convince both students and teachers that underserved students can succeed academically.

2. With diligent consistency, hold all students to successful completion of assignments and to observing classroom norms, standards, timelines and schedules.

Students in underserved schools often go to great – and creative – lengths to avoid doing serious work and completing assignments. They are very skilled at avoiding responsible problem solving by appealing, often successfully, to their teachers’ impulses to be helpful rather than solving the problems themselves. The school sends an important message, for example, when consistent strategies are developed for responding to students who are frequently tardy, who routinely answer with “I don’t know” when asked to respond, or who regularly fail to complete and submit homework.

3. Organize instructional work that routinely requires active student participation.

No learning occurs without students’ active participation with the curriculum, but student engagement levels are low, particularly in underserved schools. To counter low levels of participation in curriculum activities, teacher talk must be minimized and “accountable” academic talk by students greatly expanded. The teacher as facilitator guides the learning with a variety of prompts and open-ended questions, while leveling the playing field to prevent dominating students from controlling collaborative student tasks.

4. As individuals, pairs and/or small groups, give students more responsibility for organizing and presenting the academic substance of lessons.

To enable students to solve academic problems together, their skills and confidence need to be built. Students come to class with their own bundle of skills, knowledge and life experiences which teachers have the opportunity – and the task -- to develop and expand. Instruction is greatly enriched when teachers access these already existing capacities, and students have a greater stake in their own learning.

5. Establish that higher order thinking and critical evaluation of academic content will be normal expectations.

Factual questions are minimized in favor of open-ended and higher order questions that are addressed equitably to higher- and lower-academic status students. Critical thinking questions are used to draw students into the academic content in a meaningful way and to increase the chances that they will grapple with the content. “How” and “why” questions enable students to contribute something that they do know, and others are then called on to flesh out or elaborate on the response.

KEY CONCEPTS AND PROCESSES

Movement toward such a conception of teaching and learning is a big transition for many teachers. The magnitude of that transformation was captured by SRI International, which conducted a case study evaluation of E&A in 2009 (Bier, Gallagher, Greene, Kim and McCaffrey). The approach

“requires teachers to teach in ways that are drastically different from traditional instruction. Teachers must change the way they plan assignments, communicate with students, and manage their classroom. They must shift traditional norms of authority by increasing students’ responsibility for instruction and learning. Finally, teachers must become skilled facilitators

who hold students accountable for becoming resources for knowledge development themselves instead of being the main source of knowledge in the classroom” (p. 18).

“Equity and Access introduces teachers to a wide array of strategies that meet teachers where they are in their instructional skills and helps them move forward to creating a more engaging classroom. The strategies can be applied to any context and content area. Teachers are active participants in their learning and work together to learn new strategies. The ongoing coaching helps teachers to effect deep change in their classrooms. All these characteristics are research-based features of effective professional development” (p. 24).

For veteran and less experienced teachers alike, three challenges are prominent: (1) Acquiring the skills needed to conduct the program in their classrooms; (2) Having confidence that facilitator-guided instruction will be effective with their students when they themselves may have little or no prior personal experience with such learning; and (3) Obtaining the support needed to adopt a new teaching approach.

Program Priorities and Student Responses

Instructional activities undergo significant change for both teachers and students when equity, engagement and facilitated learning become priorities for teachers and schools. Teachers require new or strengthened skills for building respectful classroom environments, guiding instruction with open-ended questioning, broadening the range of skills needed for successful student learning, establishing and maintaining new classroom norms, and leveling academic status differences to promote dialogue among students. And Linda Darling-Hammond reminds us that it isn’t just about learning new practices; it is also about unlearning established ones.

“Teachers have to accomplish the serious and difficult tasks of *learning* the skills and perspectives assumed by new visions of practice and *unlearning* the practices and beliefs about students and instruction that have dominated their professional lives to date” (1995, p. 597).

Students, too, need new skills to more fully access the curriculum. Those who have hidden in the classroom’s shadows, and maybe grown comfortable with their invisibility, can no longer remain anonymous. And higher academic status students may need to lower their profile and learn new ways to provide leadership among their classmates. Key requirements addressed by the program are described below, along with the likely responses of students to instructional processes that they may not have experienced previously.

Create Safe Environments for Students to Take Intellectual Risks: Low-academic ability students often experience ridicule and put-downs from classmates for their awkward and tentative efforts to participate more actively in the classrooms. And when teachers make commitments to expand the engagement of all students, underserved students will be put at additional risk unless a deliberate, successful effort is made to build an environment of mutual respect and safety. The teacher’s leadership is essential because these students who have performed poorly in school are likely to have low expectations that the adults in their lives will value them as people or have confidence in their ability to succeed academically. Teachers model a constructive environment for learning in many ways, including demonstrating genuine caring for all students, making names important and learning them quickly, and preventing put-downs. Creating activities that enable students to interact

academically and equitably with all other students in the class supports the building of a safe environment.

Develop Interaction and Engagement Skills: During a regular classroom period in a traditional classroom, a student's use of academic language may be limited to a one- or two-minute exchange with the teacher. Rich and regular use of the language of the discipline can be greatly expanded, however, by developing students' skills to engage in academic conversations with one another in a talking partner format.

Unless students have had prior, successful experiences with equitable dialogue processes, a carefully developed skill-development process will be required. They need to develop skills for listening as well as talking, displaying interest in their partners' ideas, asking questions for clarification, and summarizing the dialogue. Teachers need to take a number of preliminary steps to make it more likely that students will talk, that they will talk about academic content, and that they will have something relevant to say. They prompt the dialogue with rich visual and textual material -- a short narrative text, a photograph, a political cartoon, a math problem, a graph or chart, a relevant quotation -- and facilitate students' interaction with questions that take them deeply into the academic content. And they provide structures to facilitate the dialogue, provide time for thinking, rotate talking and listening roles, and establish responsibility for initiating the conversation. Students are called on randomly to share the results of their discourse, and other students may be asked to amplify on the response or restate its essence in a different way. Teachers develop alternative strategies for problem-solving the talking partner pairs that are unable to sustain an academic dialogue in the early stages.

Pose Questions that Promote Dialogue and Interaction: Students are likely to respond with one-word or short answers when factual questions and prompts are posed, and they may shut down entirely when they don't know the precise answer. Frequent, rich use of disciplinary concepts and vocabulary is a key objective of instruction. When adequate prompts and background knowledge are provided, critical thinking and open-ended questions are likely to generate a more robust and rigorous use of academic language by all students. Prompts and open-ended questions need to be worthy of a thoughtful discourse.

Establish Engagement Norms and Develop Aligned Skills: Since students will probably be encountering a new learning approach, they are likely to be confused and uncertain about classroom learning priorities. Families, teachers and schools have admonished them, often for years, to do their own work. For collaboration to acquire legitimacy, it is necessary to reverse that mindset. Norms are needed to support instruction focused on dialogue, collaboration and problem solving. Just as teachers establish classroom management norms and standards early in the school year, students similarly need clear, early and consistent indications of their teachers' instructional priorities. Examples include "Give Reasons for Your Suggestions," "Discuss and Decide," and "Everyone Gives Information." Such norms have special significance in underserved school communities, since low-literacy and low-academic status students are not likely to have much prior experience with them. The teacher's rhetorical support alone will not be adequate. Skill building exercises and activities give concrete meaning to new instructional norms, and immediate application in aligned learning activities in the discipline further establishes their relevance.

Anticipate Initial Resistance to Heightened Expectations: Many students will object, and some are likely to vigorously resist, when they are first required to take a substantially more active, equitable and responsible part in their own learning. Low-literacy and reluctant learners especially often put considerable effort into becoming invisible in the classroom, while still other students make a cottage industry of finding creative ways to avoid doing rigorous academic schoolwork. These responses are mitigated, however, when students have a material stake in school and classroom processes, and they are recognized for contributing to learning in their classes. Despite the signals that students frequently send about their commitment to schoolwork, most have an interest in learning and, above all, they want their time to be used well, and they don't want to be bored.

Eliminate Dominating Behavior in Interactions: Many students are disengaged from the instructional process and do not see themselves, nor are they seen by classmates or their teachers, as able to contribute to learning in the classroom. These are said to be "low-academic status" students compared to classmates who are more highly skilled and, as a result, usually more confident and assertive. Significant differences in academic status tend to create dominating behaviors in collaborative learning activities, suppress communication and interaction between students, and inhibit effective learning. It is the teacher's role to recognize academic status issues when they exist, distinguish them from discipline problems, understand their impact on communication and engagement, and level the playing field to ensure that effective communication and collaboration is occurring.

Ensure Academic Success for Low-Academic Status Students: While they may not see themselves, or be seen by their teachers and fellow students, as being "smart" in reading, writing or math, low-literacy and reluctant learners have valuable intellectual skills, knowledge and experience often not recognized or acknowledged in traditional classroom settings. Instruction that allows for, or even depends upon, the use of these already existing capacities will enable underserved students to believe, possibly for the first time ever, that significant academic learning is within their reach. Students who deny that they have musical skills may, for example, be able to create rhythm using everyday objects or summarize and prioritize information as songwriters do.

The teacher's task is to open instruction and the curriculum to a more diverse range of skills and knowledge and to publicly acknowledge students who use them successfully in lesson activities. Such a broadened, or multiple abilities curriculum, will ensure that underserved students will gain in academic interest, self-confidence and self-worth as their learning and school performance increase.

Connect Instruction to Students Lives and Interests: Students often dismiss the relevance of instruction when they see little connection between the academic content of the curriculum and themselves or their lives. But it is likely that some reluctant learners will begin a lesson or unit somewhat more engaged if some brief activity, or hook, connects the academic content of the lesson to their experience or their interests. Little by little, over a period of time, more students are likely to see connections between the curriculum and themselves. Effective hooks are attention getting, and they range widely: they can draw on prior knowledge, invite imagination, stimulate humor, pose challenges, raise questions, or show relevance or relationships to things in the students' world.

Provide Multiple and Varied Instructional Experiences: A single or narrow presentation of a key concept will usually be insufficient for underserved students to acquire an adequate understanding of

the idea. These students require multiple and varied introductions to key concepts to enable them to establish a firm grasp of their importance. All will benefit from multiple exposures; a few may respond particularly well to some stimulating materials but not to others. Various combinations of charts, graphs, photographs, political cartoons, narrative texts, videos and direct experiences are among the possibilities. By varying the medium, such repetition, or conceptual redundancy, deepens understanding and increases the likelihood that underserved students will access the curriculum.

Maintain Consistency in Assignments and Classroom Management: Students are notoriously quick to note when their teachers set standards for conduct, performance, maintenance of schedule, etc. and then ignore, contradict or fail to follow through on their original position. At a minimum, teachers undermine their credibility and standing with their students when they say one thing, then do another. Students, seasoned veterans at recognizing mixed messages, often act on the inconsistencies that they are experiencing. They may ignore directions, attempt to negotiate their fulfillment, speculate about how seriously standards and norms should be taken, and/or find creative ways to take advantage of the disparities.

All of these outcomes erode trust and confidence in the teacher's leadership and authority, and they are destructive to a positive learning environment. Consistency, by contrast, has multiple benefits: increasing confidence in the teacher, reinforcing a sense of fairness, and building trust in the classroom community as a safe place to take academic risks.

An Immersion Experience in Facilitated Learning

Originally as K-12 and college students and subsequently as teachers themselves, most educators have known only traditional forms of teaching with a heavy emphasis on lecturing and instruction directed by someone with special academic knowledge. And while such learning experiences served them well enough to become teachers, they are poor models of the equity and academic engagement-focused instructional practice targeted by this professional development.

To ensure that teachers will fully grasp the project's teaching and learning approach, PD participants are asked to walk in students' shoes: they are immersed in a learning environment that parallels the classroom environment for learning that is envisioned for their own students. The program is fast-paced and deliberate, with participants often noting that they don't have time, or the inclination, for their mind to wander or to engage in off-task activities such as reading their email. Most of the exercises, activities, skill-builders, facilitated dialogues, and lesson demonstrations are conducted in "student mode." All activities are debriefed, with participants staying initially in "student mode," then shifting to "teacher mode" to consider implications of the activity or lesson for the teachers themselves.

Supporting Implementation in Classrooms and Schools

From the origins of CWHP, it has been an article of faith that new teaching practices required support additional to workshop experiences to have a serious chance of being integrated into teachers' instructional repertoire. A Kansas study found that skilled instructional coaches increased the likelihood that new teaching approaches would be adopted and that they would be adopted at a higher degree of quality (Knight and Cornett, 2008, p. 210). Consequently, instructional coaching closely tied to the PD objectives and processes has been integral to the E&A experience. Through open-ended questioning and constructive feedback during

multiple observations, teachers are guided to reflect on their instruction. Assisted by the coach when necessary, teachers identify their own areas of strength and weakness and determine next steps to improve their practice.

Acting solely on their own initiative, individual teachers are fully capable of transforming learning for students, one classroom at a time, and many do. The likelihood of success is increased, however, when colleagues share the institute experience and are available to engage in a school-based, on-going dialogue about instructional practice across disciplinary and grade-level boundaries. They draw support from one another, and peer coaching also becomes an option, enabling them to obtain additional external perspectives on the effectiveness of their implementation.

School-wide implementation is considerably more challenging, especially in schools with substantial populations of underserved students. Noting these difficult odds, Connolly and his colleagues argue that the culture of schools must undergo a restructuring to improve school and staff performance and to sustain needed changes over an extended period of time. To alter these “organizational cultures, the internal models -- the assumptions, beliefs and principles on which teaching and organizing are founded -- need to be changed” (Connolly, James and Beales, 2011, p. 430). Walberg makes the case that such systemic change is well within the capabilities of school communities to accomplish. Examining a large number of cases involving schools, districts and even states, he concluded that “... the fact that some schools, districts and states can beat the poverty odds to achieve well suggests that others can also rise to the occasion” (2006, p. 95.)

The chances for beating these odds and generating larger-scale instructional change are improved when teachers participate in multi-disciplinary teams and equity- and engagement-focused processes and strategies are shared, particularly in middle and high schools where students must negotiate different instructional cultures each time they move from one class to another. When students begin to experience new expectations, norms and processes in multiple classrooms with some consistency, school-wide progress becomes increasingly evident.

E&A partners with school communities that are making such commitments, as well as those giving serious considerations to that goal. Academies, small learning communities and small schools may sponsor the participation of their entire professional staff simultaneously when summer or academic-year scheduling can be arranged. When that isn't possible and in the case of larger schools, multi-disciplinary school teams often participate in successive institute cohorts until all or most of the instructional staff has had direct program involvement. For consistency purposes and additional impact, these schools usually make a place in their internal professional development activities for the project's equity and engagement values and processes.

E&A continues to partner with schools, districts and programs that are committed to expanding the academic participation of underserved students. Inquiries should be directed to rherring19@gmail.com.

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