

Marshall Memo 546

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education

August 4, 2014

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Quotes of the Week

“People who are checking things off the list all the time might look like they’re getting stuff done, but they’re not getting the big stuff done.”

Alan Castel, Penn State University, quoted in “Sometimes, Early Birds Are Too Early” by Matt Richtel in *The New York Times*, July 20, 2014, www.nytimes.com

“We need to change the way we think about testing. It shouldn’t be a white-knuckle finale to a semester’s work, but the means by which students progress from the start of a semester to its finish, locking in learning along the way and redirecting their effort to areas of weakness where more work is needed to achieve proficiency.”

Henry Roediger III (see item #3)

“If you thought I was perfect, you weren’t paying attention.”

A teacher after getting a glowing evaluation from the principal (see item #1)

“There is no better way to improve as a writer than to practice regularly.”

David Gooblar (see item #5)

“We live for the moment a child discovers the joy of reading and we will do just about anything to help them get there.”

Mary Cotillo and Erin O’Leary (see item #8)

“It’s not personality that makes a teacher great, but a specialized body of knowledge that must be learned – and that often goes against what comes naturally.”

Elizabeth Green (see item #2)

1. Effective Versus Mediocre Classroom Observation Skills

In this article in *Connected Principals*, Shawn Blankenship says teachers who get perfect evaluations from their principals are often disappointed. “If you thought I was perfect, you weren’t paying attention,” said one teacher. “I want honest feedback,” said another. “I want to be given extra ideas and ways to take it further, angles I haven’t thought of myself.”

A key factor, says Blankenship, is principals’ perceptiveness when they observe classrooms. There’s a big difference between a principal who stands at the back taking notes on what the teacher is doing versus a principal who moves around the room focusing on what students are doing (or not doing). Here are the notes taken by two different principals observing the same class:

Teacher-focused principal:

- Lesson plans are complete and meet district expectations. Teacher plans for low-, medium-, and high-level students.

Student-focused principal:

- Student work/outcomes look much the same regardless of students’ achievement level.

Teacher-focused principal:

- The teacher is moving around and seems to have a great rapport with students.

Student-focused principal:

- Although the teacher is mobile, four students have worked three of the first set of problems incorrectly.

Teacher-focused principal:

- Students are well behaved and seem to be engaged in the content.

Student-focused principal:

- Students are working independently. Two students have put away their unfinished work and are reading a novel. One student is doodling on his notebook. The teacher provides low-level feedback such as “Good job” and “You’re working hard.”

Teacher-focused principal:

- The learning goal is posted in the front of the class.

Student-focused principal:

- Only two of eight students chosen at random could recall the learning goal and only one student could demonstrate it with mastery.

Teacher-focused principal:

- Students are answering questions correctly and seem to have mastered the goal.

Student-focused principal:

- Each time the teacher asked questions, the same three students correctly answered them.

“Which notes will more likely translate into meaningful data to assist the teacher in improving his/her pedagogy?” asks Blankenship. Clearly, the second principal saw much more, and might follow up by asking the teacher one or more questions like these:

- When you were moving around the room, what did you hear your students say or do that demonstrated understanding of the learning goal? Which students?
- What artifact can you provide that demonstrates differentiation of instruction?
- What were you looking for specifically when you provided feedback to students?
- Why do you think only three students raised their hands?
- If you were to allow students to discuss for 30 seconds collaboratively with their peers before they answer your question, what do you predict would happen?

“These type of open-ended questions require a teacher to think cognitively and deeply about his/her own practice and, if presented thoughtfully, can lead to collegial conversations.”

“If You Thought I Was Perfect, You Weren’t Paying Attention” by Shawn Blankenship in *Connected Principals*, July 25, 2014, <http://connectedprincipals.com/archives/10634>

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2. Good Teaching Is Built, Not Born

In this article in *Parade*, Elizabeth Green shares some of the main points of her new book, *Building a Better Teacher* (Norton, 2014). It’s a myth that teaching is an innate talent, she says: “Researchers have found that the most effective teachers can be extroverts – or they can just as easily be introverts. Some are humorous, but others are serious. Some are as flexible as rubber; others are as rigid as a ruler. It’s not personality that makes a teacher great, but a specialized body of knowledge that must be learned – and that often goes against what comes naturally.” Here are five teacher actions that she believes have the greatest impact on student learning:

- *They use students’ mistakes to improve instruction.* Researchers have found that teachers who are best at spotting why a third grader would think that $307 - 168 = 261$ are the most successful at improving students’ math performance. “The best teachers put themselves in their students’ shoes,” says Green, “and grapple with how they arrived at the wrong answer in order to set them right.”

- *They are precise in their instructions.* Green approvingly cites Doug Lemov’s observation that saying “Shhhh” to a noisy class is ambiguous. “Are you asking the kids not to talk, or are you asking the kids to talk more quietly?” asks Lemov. Best practice is to eradicate ambiguity, respond to misbehavior with specificity, and describe the desired behavior rather than the problem. To get distracted students back to work, a teacher might say, “We’re following along in our books.”

- *They encourage deeper thinking.* Researchers who observe classrooms internationally have noticed that there are more “explain how and why” questions in higher-performing

countries like Japan, Singapore, and Finland – questions that get students thinking at a higher level – for example, *How did you find the area of this triangle? Why is the area 17?* In American classrooms, there are more “name/identify” questions: *What kind of triangles have we studied? What is the length of this shape?* One study found that in the U.S., students helped initiate the solution to a problem in only 9 percent of lessons, compared to 40 percent in Japan. “By asking questions that pushed students to think on their own, Japanese teachers taught them more,” says Green.

- *They cold-call.* Calling on students whose hands are not raised gets much more mileage from each question, increasing the chance that all students will be thinking through the answer. It’s also effective to ask the question first, pause, and then call on a student.

- *They show more than tell.* Telling students to read a passage again or make a weak essay better is not very helpful. It’s most effective to show students the invisible mental steps that go into effective performance – making your thinking visible. “By taking students through each mental leap, one at a time, teachers can help them see the exact processes they’ll need to complete to be a better reader, write a better essay, or make a better argument,” says Green.

“Building a Better Teacher” by Elizabeth Green in *Parade*, August 3, 2014 (p. 6-9), www.parade.com

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3. Low-Stakes Quizzing As a Key to Student Mastery

Test are under attack from all sides, says Henry Roediger III (Washington University/ St. Louis) in this *New York Times* article – too much pressure on students, too much lost instructional time, too much narrowing the curriculum by teaching to the test. “But the truth is that, used properly, testing as part of an educational routine provides an important tool not just to measure learning, but to promote it,” says Roediger.

A central challenge in classrooms is that much of what students “learn” is quickly forgotten. Here are three ways to prevent this from happening:

- *Retrieval* – When students are asked to write down everything they remember immediately after reading a text, their long-term retention of the material improves dramatically compared to students who re-read the passage. The key is quizzing students right in the classroom (or studying immediately after a lesson) using low-key instruments that don’t raise the anxiety level. “Students in classes with a regimen of regular low- or no-stakes quizzing carry their learning forward through the term like compounded interest,” says Roediger, “and they come to embrace the regimen, even if they are skeptical at first. A little studying suffices at exam time – no cramming required.”

- *Spaced review* – A way to enhance the retrieval effect is to repeat the process at gradually widening time intervals, just as memory begins to fade. “The added effort required to recall the information makes learning stronger,” says Roediger.

- *Interleaving* – It’s also helpful to combine different items to be remembered – for example, several types of solid geometry problems in a random sequence, or different baseball

pitches. This improves retention and better prepares students to apply learning in real-world situations.

Roediger says research has shown that the most frequently used study methods – underlining, highlighting, re-reading – “create illusions of mastery but are largely wasted effort, because they do not involve practice in accessing or applying what the students know.” In one experiment in an Illinois middle school, students who used immediate testing earned A-grades on material that was presented in class, compared with C+ grades for students who used conventional methods – and the advantage the first group had was still there when students were re-tested eight months later. Another study by Pat Wenderoth at the University of Washington found that these study methods were effective with female students and underrepresented minorities who tended to have high washout rates in science courses.

“This isn’t just a matter of teaching students to be better test takers,” Roediger concludes. “As learners encounter increasingly complex ideas, a regimen of retrieval practice helps them to form more sophisticated mental structures that can be applied later in different circumstances... We need to change the way we think about testing. It shouldn’t be a white-knuckle finale to a semester’s work, but the means by which students progress from the start of a semester to its finish, locking in learning along the way and redirecting their effort to areas of weakness where more work is needed to achieve proficiency... These steps cost little and cultivate habits of successful learning that will serve students throughout their lives.”

“How Tests Make Us Smarter” by Henry Roediger III in *The New York Times*, July 20, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/XxwiWi>

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4. How Teachers Can Help Students Spread their Wings

In this *Teachers College Record* article, Toni Kempler Rogat, Shelly Anne Witham, and Clark Chinn (Rutgers University) report on their study of the ways in which four 7th-grade science teachers went about giving their students more autonomy in their classrooms. What does autonomy look like? Most educators think of it as giving students some choices in the classroom, but Rogat, Witham, and Chinn have a more robust definition: Autonomy, they say, is when a student’s actions originate from within and are owned by him or her. It’s also when “students’ interests, values, and goals are aligned with their behavior, because they endorse the significance of these behaviors as relevant to their own internal goals.”

Does giving students more autonomy make a difference? Definitely, say the authors: Autonomy enhances competence, enjoyment, intrinsic motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes, they contend. Here are the autonomy-supportive practices their study identified as teachers implemented an inquiry-based science curriculum:

- *Organizational and procedural autonomy* – Giving students opportunities for decision-making on procedures and task format – for example, choosing group members, how to work with materials, how to display work, and which group should present first.

- *Rationale and relevance* – Connecting lesson or task purpose to students’ personal interests, values, and goals – The more teachers draw connections between content, tasks, and

skills and connect with students at a personal level, the more the students will invest in learning in an autonomous way.

- *Responsiveness* – Listening to students and responding to questions. This includes active listening, providing feedback, and elaborating on students’ ideas.

- *Feedback* – Offering encouragement when students show effort and persistence and recognizing mastery, progress, and improved understanding based on student-initiated ideas.

- *Cognitive support* – Encouraging students’ ownership of ideas, strategies, thinking, and learning. This includes teachers being open to students’ content ideas and accompanying justifications, eliciting students’ thinking, and encouraging a range of explanations.

Rogat, Witham, and Chinn conclude by suggesting that principals and others who evaluate teachers need to stretch their definition of autonomy-producing teaching practices to include these five categories.

“Teachers’ Autonomy-Relevant Practices Within an Inquiry-Based Science Curricular Context: Extending the Range of Academically Significant Autonomy-Supportive Practices” by Toni Kempler Rogat, Shelly Anne Witham, and Clark Chinn in *Teachers College Record*, July 2014 (Vol. 116, #7, p. 1-46), <http://www.tcrecord.org/ExecSummary.asp?contentid=17489>

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5. Daily Writing to Kick Off College Classes

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, David Gooblar, an English professor at Mount Mercy University, says he’s found it very effective to have students spend the first five minutes of each class writing quietly in response to a prompt. Here’s why:

- Silent writing provides “a clear break from the noise and distraction of the world outside your classroom,” says Gooblar.
- It helps students focus on the content they’re about to explore so they can be “their best intellectual selves.”
- A well-constructed prompt can check on students’ understanding of the reading – and whether they’re doing it.
- Open-ended questions can also improve students’ understanding of the reading.
- Prompts can also lay the groundwork for good class discussions.
- Writing up front primes students to be more involved in the lesson, especially shy students who are reluctant to participate in discussions.
- Daily writing is good for students – and teachers: “There is no better way to improve as a writer than to practice regularly,” says Gooblar. “You may find this pays dividends when it’s time to read their essays.”

Gooblar suggests collecting these brief pieces of writing and looking at them quickly, giving a check mark for good-fair effort. Another option is having students do their beginning-of-class writing in stand-alone notebooks and checking those periodically.

“The Obvious Benefits of In-Class Writing Assignments” by David Gooblar in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 18, 2014 (Vol. LX, #41, p. A31), <https://chroniclevitae.com/news/588-the-obvious-benefits-of-in-class-writing-assignments>

6. Internal Versus Instrumental Motivation – Which Is More Helpful?

In this *New York Times* article, Amy Wrzesniewski (Yale University) and Barry Schwartz (Swarthmore College) say people can have two possible motives for engaging in an activity: internal (a scientist's satisfaction in making a new discovery) and instrumental (the scientist winning fame and recognition or making a lot of money from the discovery). "What mix of motives – internal or instrumental or both – is most conducive to success?" ask Wrzesniewski and Schwartz. The common assumption is that having both types of motivation will produce the best results – two are better than one. But in a paper the authors and their colleagues published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, they say that this isn't the case.

The researchers did a longitudinal study of 11,320 West Point cadets in nine entering classes, asking them up front to rate how much their decision to come to the United States Military Academy was influenced by a desire to be trained as an Army leader (internal) or a desire to get a good job later in life (instrumental). The study then looked at the cadets' downstream results and here's what they found:

- Cadets with strong internal reasons for coming to West Point were more likely to graduate and become commissioned officers.
- Cadets with strong internal motives did better in the military – early promotion recommendations – and were more likely to stay in the military after their five years of mandatory service.
- Surprisingly, cadets with strong internal *and* instrumental values performed worse on every measure than those with strong internal motives and weak instrumental motives – they were less likely to graduate, less accomplished as military officers, and less committed to staying in the service.

What's going on here? Wouldn't it make sense that having both types of motivation would be better than one? After all, in terms of effects, students get internal satisfaction from doing well in class – and are rewarded with good grades (instrumental). A skilled doctor gets internal satisfaction from curing patients and also has the instrumental benefit of making a good living.

"But just because activities can have both internal and instrumental *consequences* does not mean that the people who thrive in these activities have both internal and instrumental *motives*," say the authors. "Our study suggests that efforts should be made to structure activities so that instrumental consequences do not become motives." In other words, it's better to keep people focused on the meaning and impact of their work rather than financial rewards. Ironically, not focusing directly on financial rewards may result in making more money down the road. In K-12 schools, pizza parties and monetary rewards may get students to participate, but the result may be less well-educated students.

The same goes for schemes to motivate teachers, say Wrzesniewski and Schwartz: "Accountability is important, but structured crudely, it can create the very behavior (such as poor teaching) that it is designed to prevent." Trying to make something more attractive by

emphasizing internal and instrumental rewards is intuitively appealing, but it may end up weakening internal motives that are so important to success.

“The Secret of Effective Motivation” by Amy Wrzesniewski and Barry Schwartz in *The New York Times*, July 6, 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1s7aJFh>

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7. Campbell’s Law Comes to Atlanta

In this article in *The New Yorker*, Rachel Aviv provides a blow-by-blow account of the recent standardized-test cheating scandal in the Atlanta schools, focusing on one middle school where the fallout was particularly intense. This school, which had been one of the poorest-performing in the city, won national recognition from the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2007 for its surging test scores. But the higher scores were largely based on teachers stealthily gaining access to the state tests in advance and, after students took the tests, erasing many incorrect answers and changing them to correct answers.

How could this have happened? Aviv describes the intense pressure on schools from the superintendent and area managers to meet arbitrary test-score targets, accompanied by a “no excuses” ideology that was fiercely intolerant of anyone using neighborhood poverty and students’ family conditions as reasons for not meeting targets. At the annual district convocation in the Georgia Dome (where the Atlanta Falcons play), staff members of schools that met their performance targets were seated on the field while those from lower-performing schools sat in the bleachers. At one school, a principal forced a teacher whose students had done poorly on the tests to crawl under a table. “The way principals keep their jobs in Atlanta is they make targets,” said one area manager – and indeed, many principals were replaced for inadequate achievement gains.

Some early signs of cheating made their way up the chain of command, but no action was taken. A principal who voiced suspicions about highly inflated test scores among students coming from feeder elementary schools was told, “You need to keep your mouth shut.” At one point in 2006, a teacher wrote a letter to the superintendent reporting cheating at her school, but no action was taken and the teacher was transferred against her will to one of the most dangerous schools in the district. Word of these and other interactions spread, sending a clear signal that cheating was a way to meet the superintendent’s expectations.

At Parks Middle School, the focus of Aviv’s article, conditions were improving, the principal and teachers were working hard, the football and basketball teams were nearly undefeated, and students were taken on trips to Washington, D.C., New Orleans, and New York City. But the principal believed strongly that the superintendent’s targets were unattainable. Desperate to keep the school from being closed for poor performance, he began to recruit teachers who were willing to be “team players” and embarked on a program of systematically altering students’ tests and fudging student attendance data. Over time, the cheating operation became a well-oiled machine. The educators involved believed they were committing a victimless crime, doing something they needed to do so they could deal with

issues more relevant to students' lives. Some even rationalized that they were engaging in civil disobedience against a corrupt and oppressive system.

As the school's test scores rose, it began to get more and more attention until it was honored with great fanfare with the Casey Beating the Odds award. Partly to cover the real source of improving performance, the principal boasted about the school's "data-driven" approach. "Even the kids know their data," he said. The school's testing coordinator told the foundation that data was a "passion, it's a love, because it tells the truth: it's not what I think and what I feel, and what ought to be, and how I perceive it – but how it actually *is*." Teachers were directed to maintain "standard-based mastery folders" listing all the objectives that each student needed to learn in each lesson. "It was a wonderful system," said a teacher, "but we only put it in place to hide the fact that we were cheating."

In fact, the use of data had nothing to do with the school's improvement. In Aviv's words, "'Data' and 'accountability' had become almost magic words: if administrators repeated them enough, it seemed they believed that scores should rise, even if there hadn't been significant enhancements in instruction."

Finally the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published stories alleging widespread cheating. The district conducted an investigation that was branded as a whitewash, and in 2010 the governor issued an executive order granting authority to the former state attorney general to conduct a more thorough investigation. Scores of agents with subpoena power visited schools, interviewed teachers, and got some confessions. The final report found that 44 schools had cheated and that a "culture of fear, intimidation, and retaliation has infested the district, allowing cheating – at all levels – to go unchecked for years." Data had been "used as an abusive and cruel weapon to embarrass and punish." One hundred seventy-eight educators were found to have been involved, and in July 2011, 110 teachers were placed on administrative leave. The cases against those alleged to be involved, including the superintendent, are working their way through the courts. Parks Middle School lost nine educators. Its reputation in ruins, test scores declined, and the school was merged with its arch-rival nearby.

"Wrong Answer" by Rachel Aviv in *The New Yorker*, July 21, 2014 (p. 54-65), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/07/21/wrong-answer>; Campbell's Law goes like this: "The more any quantitative social indicator (or even some qualitative indicator) is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor." (Donald Campbell, 1976)

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8. Reading Liftoff in a Massachusetts Middle School

In this article in *Reading Today*, Massachusetts teachers Mary Cotillo and Erin O'Leary, dubbed the "Crazy Reading Ladies" by students, describe how their school developed a schoolwide book club. Each year they choose a book, dole out copies to interested students, engage in various zany activities (kids diving into a recycle bin full of shredded paper to

simulate Bilbo's quest for treasure; teachers wearing Hobbit princess gowns), quiz students as they read the book, and give tickets to the movie version of the book to students who show mastery. Here were their book choices and the reading statistics for each year:

- 2012 – *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins: 42 percent of the student body
- 2013 – *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien: 38 percent (41 percent of students on IEPs)
- 2014 – *Divergent* by Veronica Roth: 59 percent (31 percent of students on IEPs)

Isn't using the movie as a reward an extrinsic motivation? Not a problem, say Cotillo and O'Leary: "See, the movie gets them to pick up the book, but it's not the promise of a movie that keeps the pages turning. It's the story... Extrinsic motivation begets intrinsic motivation... We live for the moment a child discovers the joy of reading, and we will do just about anything to help them get there." There's also students' desire to belong to the reading club. With their antics and well-chosen books, these teachers have succeeded in making it cool to be seen with a book in hand.

"All In! Engaging Readers Through a Whole-School Book Club" by Mary Cotillo and Erin O'Leary in *Reading Today*, July/August 2014 (Vol. 32, #1, p. 20-22); the authors can be reached at 2crazyreadingladies@gmail.com.

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Do you have feedback? Is anything missing?

If you have comments or suggestions, if you saw an article or web item in the last week that you think should have been summarized, or if you would like to suggest additional publications that should be covered by the Marshall Memo, please e-mail: kim.marshall48@gmail.com

About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 43 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, and writer, lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 64 carefully-chosen publications (see list to the right), sifts through more than a hundred articles each week, and selects 5-10 that have the greatest potential to improve teaching, leadership, and learning. He then writes a brief summary of each article, pulls out several striking quotes, provides e-links to full articles when available, and e-mails the Memo to subscribers every Monday evening (with occasional breaks; there are 50 issues a year).

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
ASCD SmartBrief/Public Education NewsBlast
Better: Evidence-Based Education
Center for Performance Assessment Newsletter
District Administration
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Elementary School Journal
Essential Teacher
Go Teach
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Education Letter
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Journal of Staff Development
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Middle School Journal
NASSP Journal
NJEA Review
Perspectives
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Principal's Research Review
Reading Research Quarterly
Reading Today
Responsive Classroom Newsletter
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Teacher
Teachers College Record
Teaching Children Mathematics
Teaching Exceptional Children/Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The District Management Journal
The Language Educator
The Learning Principal/Learning System/Tools for Schools
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Wharton Leadership Digest