Marshall Memo 896

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 19, 2021

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1. Adam Grant on "collective effervescence"
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Quotes of the Week

"The Declaration of Independence promised Americans unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If we want that pursuit to bring us bliss, we may need to create a Declaration of Interdependence."

Adam Grant (see item #1)

"We find our greatest bliss in moments of collective effervescence."

Adam Grant (*ibid.*)

"The human mind seems exquisitely tuned to understand and remember stories."

Daniel Willingham (see item #2)

"The most important thing about schooling is what students will remember after the school day is over."

Daniel Willingham (*ibid.*)

"You can also read American history in the same spirit, the way you would read a great piece of literature, seeking to understand the complexities and the nuances, the dark and the light, the good and the bad. You can be inspired by the Declaration of Independence, horrified by the expulsions of Native Americans, amazed by the energy of immigrants and frontier settlers. You can understand that the United States is a great and unique country whose values are worth defending – and realize simultaneously that this same country has made terrible mistakes and carried out horrific crimes. Is it so difficult to hold all of these disparate ideas in your head at the same time?"

Anne Applebaum in "Democracies Don't Try to Make Everyone Agree" in *The Atlantic*, June 28, 2021

"You might not feel intimidating, but you probably are."

Dan Rockwell on how leaders are seen by their colleagues (see item #5)

1. Adam Grant on "Collective Effervescence"

"Most people view emotions as existing primarily or even exclusively in their heads," says University of Pennsylvania/Wharton School psychologist Adam Grant in this *New York Times* article. "But the reality is that emotions are inherently social; they're woven through our interactions… We find our greatest bliss in moments of *collective effervescence*."

That term was coined by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim in 1912 to describe the feeling of energy and harmony when people are engaged in a shared purpose. Some examples:

- Sliding into rhythm with strangers on a dance floor;
- At a concert, singing along with a song that everybody knows;
- Engaging in a lively brainstorming session with colleagues and solving a problem;
- Singing in a chorus;
- Stretching in a group yoga class;
- Executing a successful play with soccer teammates;
- Enjoying a religious service with family members;
- Laughing with friends at a comedy show.

Researchers have found that in normal times, people experience this collective *joie de vivre* quite frequently – once a week, even daily.

But during the pandemic, there was a marked decline of collective effervescence. Negative emotions like fear and loneliness spread from person to person like the disease, amplified by social media, e-mail, and texts. "The number of adults with symptoms of depression or anxiety spiked from one in 10 Americans to about four in 10," says Grant. He believes that Zoom fatigue is partly the result of "hours of communicating with people who are also sad, stressed, lonely, or tired." When the pandemic began, there was speculation that introverts would thrive in an environment that limited social contact. But introverts have suffered as much as extroverts during this period of isolation; they, too, missed the joy of sharing positive in-person experiences with others.

As the pandemic wanes and we return to something approaching normalcy, people want to be joyful again, says Grant. He believes this is the perfect time to realize that we are hardwired to experience the greatest happiness with others. "We should think of flourishing less as personal euphoria and more as collective effervescence," he says. "The Declaration of Independence promised Americans unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If we want that pursuit to bring us bliss, we may need to create a Declaration of Interdependence… Joy shared is joy sustained."

"The Joy We've Been Missing" by Adam Grant in *The New York Times*, July 11, 2021; Grant can be reached at adam@adamgrant.net.

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2. Daniel Willingham on the Psychology of Remembering

"The most important thing about schooling is what students will remember after the school day is over," says Daniel Willingham (University of Virginia) in this article in *American Educator*. But many educators are unclear about how the human memory system works. We wonder why kids remember everything they've seen on TV and forget what we've painstakingly taught them – even when they *seemed* to be paying attention. On a more personal level, we forget what we came into the kitchen to retrieve (we knew it 15 seconds ago!), but can hum every note of an advertising jingle from years ago. Educators need a better understanding of the nuts and bolts of memory if students are going to remember what matters in the K-12 curriculum.

Willingham starts with a few misconceptions about improving students' retention of classroom content:

- Emotions – It's true that people remember things that are accompanied by strong feelings – a first date, the death of a loved one – but a lot of classroom instruction doesn't have much affect.
- Repetition – This is helpful, but it's not sufficient. For example, we've all looked at hundreds of pennies, but researchers have found that people are not successful at picking a genuine coin from counterfeits.
- Motivation – It would be great if really wanting to remember something would make it stick. "Sadly," says Willingham, "memory doesn't work that way."

So how does it work? Over the course of evolution, the human brain has come up with a system: If we don't focus cognitively on something while it's happening, it probably isn't that important – so it's forgotten. If we do attend to something in real time, it's a sign that it will be important to us in the future – so it's remembered. In short, says Willingham, our grey matter has evolved to be much more likely to remember what we've spent some time thinking about. In other words, *memory is the residue of thought.*

For teachers, there are two twists. First, schools want students to think about and remember what things *mean* – not what curriculum content *looks* like or *sounds* like or *feels* like, but what it means. This puts a premium on "message discipline" with each lesson. Second, students won't remember something unless they've mentally focused on an aspect of the fact, concept, or skill that's most likely to be retrieved later on. Willingham gives the example of quizzing young students on their memory of the word *piano* when it's been presented in different ways (a piano being laboriously hoisted up a flight of stairs; a maestro playing with grace and artistry). Students remember much better if the prompt for remembering the word piano is close to the way it was initially taught.

"The obvious implication for teachers," says Willingham, "is that they must design lessons that will ensure that students are thinking about the meaning of the material." Here's a

negative example: a sixth-grade teacher has students draw a diagram of the plot of a book they've read showing how the story elements relate to one another. Students get engaged in their intricate drawings and lose sight of the plot. A better approach: have students use words and phrases rather than pictures, which gets students focused on how the elements of the plot were connected.

Good unit and lesson plans present ideas coherently, which helps students focus, understand, and remember. Here are some key principles:

• *Organize lessons like a story*. "The human mind seems exquisitely tuned to understand and remember stories," says Willingham, which is why story structure is one of the most effective way to present lessons. There are four key elements, all beginning with C:

- Causality – Events are causally linked to one another.
- Conflict – For example, the main character is pursuing a goal and can't yet attain it.
- Complications – These make it challenging to reach the goal.
- Character – A good story is built around strong, interesting people in action.

These elements help students know that events aren't happening in a random sequence and stay interested because there's a lot going on. Because students have been thinking about the story and making inferences as events unfold, the curriculum content is more likely to be remembered.

"This doesn't mean you must do most of the talking," says Willingham. "Small-group work or projects or any other method may be used." The key is orchestrating the lesson so the key question is clear, there are conflicts and complications and characters, and students have to do some real cognitive work to arrive at the answer (the point of the lesson). "I sometimes feel that we, as teachers, are so focused on getting to the answer," says Willingham, "we spend insufficient time making sure that students understand the question and appreciate its significance. To us, the question and its importance are obvious. To them, they aren't."

• *Scrutinize lessons for what students will think about*. Not what we *hope* they'll think about, but what thinking experiences it's impossible for them to avoid. Willingham once observed a high-school lesson on the Spanish Civil War where this didn't happen. Groups of students got so caught up in the bells and whistles of PowerPoint presentations they were preparing for classmates that there was little attention to the historical content. (After this debacle, the teacher restructured the plan for the following year.)

• *Think carefully about attention grabbers*. It's good to kick off a unit or lesson with something dramatic to pique students' interest, but this gambit can backfire, says Willingham. He once questioned his sixth-grade daughter about a demonstration she had observed in a science lesson on chemicals. "He had this glass?" she said. "That looked like water? But when he put this little metal thingy in it, it boiled. It was so cool. We all screamed." Dad asked why the teacher did that. "I don't know," she said. No doubt the teacher explained what it was all about, but because students were still thinking about the dramatic demonstration, they tuned out the explanation. Kids remember what they think about.

Here's a more effective attention grabber. A biology teacher asks students to remember the very first thing they saw in their lives. Students mention their mother, the doctor who

pulled them out, and other early experiences. “Actually,” says the teacher, “the first thing each of you saw was the same. It was pinkish, diffuse light coming through your mother’s belly. Today we’re going to talk about how that experience affected how your visual system developed, and how it continues to influence the way you see today.” This surprising revelation intrigues students and they’re eager to learn more as the lesson unfolds.

The challenge for teachers, says Willingham, is “how you will draw a connection between the attention grabber and the point it’s designed to make.” In his daughter’s science class, it would have been better for the teacher to explain the principle first, then do the metal thingy demonstration – having first asked students to make a prediction.

• *Use discovery learning with care*. Getting students to explore objects, discuss problems with classmates, design experiments, and engage in inquiry can be valuable, says Willingham, especially if students have choice and agency and think deeply about the content. But teachers may fail to get their intended learning results if students explore ideas that are not relevant to the lesson – which can easily happen because what students think about is unpredictable. “If memory is the residue of thought,” he says, “then students will remember incorrect ‘discoveries’ as much as they will remember correct ones.”

This suggests a cardinal principle for discovery learning: students must get *prompt* feedback on whether they’re thinking about the problem in a useful way, and be provided with immediate help is they’re off track. This principle tends to operate well when students are exploring a new computer program or app in an unstructured way: they find out very quickly if they’re not using it correctly. The same would not be true if they were “messing around” with a frog dissection.

• *Organize lessons around a conflict*. “There is a conflict in almost any lesson plan, if you look for it,” says Willingham. Students need to find the answer to a key question, and that’s the challenge or conflict. Being very clear about the question provides a natural progression of topics, he says. Take a sixth-grade science standard – learning about the different models of the atom that scientists were debating around the turn of the 20th century. Thinking backwards from the intended learning, the curriculum unit can be structured as a story, with competing scientific models and experiments – and complications – all revolving around an essential question: *What is the nature of matter?* If this process is handled well, students will come away with an understanding of the big ideas and enduring understandings of the discipline.

• *Don’t overdo relevance*. Willingham says he’s bothered by the frequent message that teachers need to make the curriculum relevant to students. First of all, he says, a lot of what’s taught is not immediately relevant to kids. Trigonometry? The Epic of Gilgamesh? “Making these topics relevant to students’ daily lives will be a strain,” he says, “and students will probably think it’s phony.” Second, if we’re not successful in convincing students that something is relevant, should we take it out of the curriculum? If we keep trying to build bridges to kids’ lives, doesn’t that convey that school is always about them? Willingham believes there is “value, interest, and beauty” in learning about lots of things that aren’t currently on students’ radar.

"What I'm suggesting," he concludes, "is that student interests should not be the main driving force of lesson planning. Rather, they might be used as initial points of contact that help students understand the main ideas you want them to consider, rather than as the reason or motivation for them to consider these ideas."

"Ask the Cognitive Scientist: Why Do Students Remember Everything That's on Television and Forget Everything I Say?" by Daniel Willingham in *American Educator*, Summer 2021 (Vol. 45, #2); Willingham can be reached at willingham@virginia.edu.

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3. The Advantages of Having Students Use Handwritten Notebooks

In this *Edutopia* article, Pennsylvania high-school teacher Benjamin Barbour says that during the 2021-22 school year, he will require students to take notes by hand in paper notebooks. After a year of staring at tablets and laptops, he believes this low-tech approach will "reclaim some balance between digital and analog learning." Here's how:

• *Organization* – When students use an app for notetaking, the technology helps them create and manage their thoughts – but perhaps it helps them too much. "I've found that using notebooks places more responsibility on students to find, adapt, and stick to a method that works best for them," says Barbour. Being able to capture a lecture or presentation in real time, devise symbols and shorthand techniques, and organize information in a way that's easy to study later on – all these are essential skills for high school, college, and many careers.

• *Focus* – When students are taking notes on a device, they can't help but see updates, messages, and notifications and are constantly tempted to browse the Internet. Learning significant content, says Barbour, "requires concentration and deep, uninterrupted immersion in a topic." Constant interruptions and multitasking produce fleeting attention and superficial learning. Daniel Goleman has said that the ability to focus is more important to a student's life success than IQ and socioeconomic status. Yes, students can doodle and daydream as they write in their notebooks, but a break from their devices gives them a leg up.

• *Learning* – Some studies have shown that taking notes in longhand (versus typing) results in better retention and deeper understanding of cognitively complex material. The same benefits may apply to using a stylus to write notes on a tablet or laptop with apps like Notability, Noteshelf, and GoodNotes. But students may be in college classes where the instructor does not permit the use of electronic devices, so being skilled at handwritten notetaking is a skill worth learning.

• *Monitoring* – "When I review students' notebooks," says Barbour, "I can quickly see if they're following directions and keeping up with the material satisfactorily or if they're taking disorganized or incomprehensible notes." When he spots problematic notes, he intervenes and helps students shift to a better notetaking approach – sometimes prodded by points or a grade for organization, legibility, and completeness.

• *Creativity* – A common misconception is that traditional notebooks limit students' creativity. Not so, says Barbour, if the teacher has students pause and reflect on what they've

written and jot big ideas, perhaps using color, images, or a sketch to capture their deeper thoughts.

"One Advantage of Paper Notebooks" by Benjamin Barbour in *Edutopia*, July 13, 2021

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4. Beyond Black History Month

In this article in *Edutopia*, New Jersey educator Rann Miller says that Dr. Carter G. Woodson's idea for Negro History Week "was never meant to be a one-off acknowledgement, recognition, and celebration of black history. It was meant to serve as a short period for students to display what they'd learned about the history of black people, as well as their accomplishments and contributions to the United States and the world." Woodson advocated teaching African-American history *every week*, and would have seen Black History Month the same way – a culmination of learning that happens throughout the school year and across the curriculum.

What does this look like in the classroom? For starters, it means including people of color in whatever subject is being taught. For example, when an American literature course get to the Romantic period, include writers of color from that era – what inspired them and what connects their work with the social events and injustices of that time.

Teachers can also incorporate African-American perspectives by highlighting the work of scholars, journalists, and artists and what motivated them. "Doing this," says Miller, "can inspire students to discover their own purpose, which fuels their ambition."

Finally, Miller urges teachers to invite diverse politicians, doctors, and entrepreneurs into classrooms throughout the year, not only as guest speakers but to partner with students on projects and performances – always putting classroom guests' work and contributions in historical perspective. "We can do this similarly," says Miller, "through the lens of the Indigenous, Latino/a, and Asian communities with reference to the American experience and questioning injustice."

"Teaching Black History Year-Round Requires Rigorous Sight" by Rann Miller in *Edutopia*, July 9, 2021

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5. Managing by Walking Around – Done Right

In this *Leadership Freak* article, Dan Rockwell says he's a big fan of leaders spending time out and about, observing and interacting with colleagues face to face. But if this style of management is to be productive, it must be handled with emotional intelligence. Rockwell's suggestions:

- Show up enough that people aren't shocked to see you.
- Show up to connect with people, supporting more than challenging.
- Keep visits short; several mini-observations are better than a long visit.
- Give more than you take; listen more than you talk.

- Smile. You might not feel intimidating, but you probably are.
- Demonstrate humble respect; you're nothing without the people you lead.
- Ask, "What's working?" and "What do you think?" Listen for people's ideas and solutions.

"5 Reasons People Wish Lousy Leaders Would Stay Away" by Dan Rockwell in *Leadership Freak*, July 16, 2021

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6. Short Item:

Recommended Reading for Students – These online *School Library Journal* links highlight high-quality children's books and include cover images and short reviews:
"16 Must Read Realistic Chapter Books, Summer Reading 2021"
"10 YA Sports Novels That Knock It Out of the Park; Summer Reading 2021"
"Game, Set, Match: Two Picture Books About Tennis Superstars" (Althea Gibson and Serena Williams)

"Summer Reading 2021" in *School Library Journal*, May 19, May 25, and July 1, 2021

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If you have feedback or suggestions,
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About the Marshall Memo

Mission and focus:

This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 50 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

To produce the Marshall Memo, Kim subscribes to 60 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). Every week there's a podcast and HTML version as well.

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Core list of publications covered

Those read this week are underlined.

All Things PLC
American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
American Journal of Education
American School Board Journal
AMLE Magazine
ASCA School Counselor
Cult of Pedagogy
District Management Journal
Ed. Magazine
Education Digest
Education Gadfly
Education Next
Education Update
Education Week
Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis
Educational Horizons
Educational Leadership
Educational Researcher
Edutopia
Elementary School Journal
English Journal
Exceptional Children
Harvard Business Review
Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk (JESPAR)
Kappa Delta Pi Record
Knowledge Quest
Language Arts
Literacy Today (formerly Reading Today)
Mathematics Teacher: Learning & Teaching PK-12
Middle School Journal
Peabody Journal of Education
Phi Delta Kappan
Principal
Principal Leadership
Psychology Today
Reading Research Quarterly
Rethinking Schools
Review of Educational Research
School Administrator
School Library Journal
Social Education
Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
Teaching Tolerance
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
The Learning Professional (formerly Journal of Staff Development)
The New York Times
The New Yorker
The Reading Teacher
Theory Into Practice
Time
Urban Education