

Marshall Memo 576

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

March 2, 2015

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Quotes of the Week

“Some [students] will have learned to revere their teachers from a distance, others to negotiate with their teachers as they would with a peer, and still others that they owe their teachers no respect until it's earned.”

Hilary Dack and Carol Ann Tomlinson (see item #4)

“The pain associated with diversity can be thought of as the pain of exercise. You have to push yourself to grow your muscles. The pain, as the old saw goes, produces the gain. In the same way, we need diversity – in teams, organizations, and society as a whole – if we are to change, grow, and innovate... This is how diversity works: by promoting hard work and creativity; by encouraging the consideration of alternatives even before any interpersonal interaction takes place.”

Katherine Phillips in “How Diversity Makes Us Smarter” in *Scientific American*, September 16, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1N9tbco>

“Too many teachers still view books about African Americans as relevant only in February or as an occasional addition to a set curriculum.”

Terry Meier (see item #6)

“Collaboration is a long way from the silver bullet many educators wish it to be.”

Deanna Kuhn (see item #3)

“[I]t is not enough simply to put individuals in a context that allows for collaboration and expect them to engage in it effectively. Intellectual collaboration is a skill, learned through engagement and practice and much trial and error.”

Deanna Kuhn (*ibid.*)

“Students should be able to pull out their syllabus in any class period and use it to help identify where the course has been, where it stands now, and where it is headed.”

James Lang (see item #5)

1. How Mountain Guides Are Like Good Organizational Leaders

In this *Wharton Leadership Digest* article, Chris Maxwell (Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania) describes the key leadership strengths of world-class mountain guides, all of which apply to leading successful organizations:

- *Socially intelligent* – Guides must quickly establish positive relationships with climbers, scoping out their individual proclivities, what kind of support they will need, and how they will contribute to the effort.

- *Adaptable* – Guides match their leadership style to rapidly changing conditions. In some situations, they are authoritative, guiding clients along a path of self-discovery and accomplishment; in crisis situations they are authoritarian – “Do it, now!”

- *Empowering* – Guides provide climbers a supportive space for growth and development, which includes leading by example, coaching, participative decision-making, informing, showing concern, and interacting with the team. “You really are building others up, inspiring clients to find in themselves what they might not have thought themselves capable of,” says guide Christian Santelices.

- *Trust-builders* – “Trust is not the same as faith in the reliability of a person or system,” says British sociologist Anthony Giddens. “It is what derives from that faith. Trust is precisely the link between faith and confidence.” John Sims builds on that thought from his perspective as a business executive: “Without trust, you will be painstakingly slower,” he says. “Without trust in your teammates, you will only do as much as your faith in your own limited abilities will take you. You will not risk stretching your own expertise or experience, and you are unlikely to learn as much from those around you. Each person will revert to being an island, placing trust only in their own abilities and therefore limiting individual and corporate horizons.”

- *Risk aware* – Guides operate with skill in uncertain and dangerous conditions. Sometimes they calm down a shaky climber with a statement like, “That space is an irregular ledge, but it’s larger than the curb you stand on every day for the bus.”

- *Big-picture thinkers* – Guides take a holistic view of the endeavor. “The lure of the summit is strong,” says Maxwell. “Guides know that their clients want to reach the top of the mountain, but they also know that the summit as the *only* goal isn’t the best idea for anyone... Guides have learned to appreciate the uncertainty of the endeavor as something to be savored, and the best guides do what they can to pass this wise understanding on to summit-focused clients.” It’s the journey that counts.

“To Be a Better Leader: Lead Like a Guide” by Chris Maxwell in *Wharton Leadership Digest*, March 1, 2015, <http://wlp.wharton.upenn.edu/LeadershipDigest/3023.cfm>; Maxwell can be reached at maxwellc@wharton.upenn.edu.

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2. Understanding Psychological Distance and Using It To Our Advantage

In this *Harvard Business Review* article, Rebecca Hamilton (Georgetown University) explores the effect of psychological distance on leadership along four dimensions:

- Social distance – between you and other people;
- Temporal distance – between the present and the future or past;
- Spatial distance – being close or far away;
- Experiential distance – experiencing something and imagining it.

For example, skillful negotiation involves narrowing the social distance between your interests and those of others; effective time management involves accurately predicting which commitments will be most pressing in the future (narrowing temporal distance); and inspired leadership involves taking into consideration your colleagues’ goals and how they will change over time (narrowing social and temporal distance).

What’s the optimal psychological distance? It depends on the situation, says Hamilton. She’s found that effective managers use two specific strategies to find the sweet spot for a given situation:

- *Appropriately adjusting distance* – On the social dimension, it might be good to reduce distance by trying to understand another person’s point of view – or it might be helpful to increase distance by giving subordinates visionary, abstract goals to shoot for. On the temporal dimension, self-imposed action-forcing deadlines can improve focus and performance – but there are situations where thinking ahead to ultimate outcomes (increasing temporal distance) can help clarify what actions to take. On the spatial dimension, face-to-face meetings can make thinking more concrete – and stepping away from a situation (or even working in an office with higher ceilings and more-expansive views) can make our thinking more abstract and creative. And on the experiential dimension, hands-on contact can be very helpful in some situations [for example, visiting a classroom or sitting down and taking the test students are going to take] – but there are situations where abstract analysis allows us to step back and get the bigger picture.

- *Switching from one type to another* – “Because all psychological distance involves the same underlying thought processes,” says Hamilton, “substituting one type for another can spur either more-abstract or more-concrete thinking.” Here are some examples of manipulating psychological distance to our advantage:

- Searching for common ground in a challenging negotiation with another person, it can be helpful to ask yourself what you would propose if a decision had to be reached in two hours (reducing temporal distance).
- In a situation where you need to command respect among colleagues, it can be helpful to move to a new office down the hall or give yourself more space sitting around a conference table (increasing spatial distance).

- In the midst of writing a strategic plan, it may be helpful to envision the legacy you'd like to create and think in big-picture terms (increasing experiential distance).
- If you're procrastinating on a big project, schedule a meeting with a colleague to whom you'll need to deliver the completed work (decreasing social distance).
- If you're putting off making retirement plans, research has shown that envisioning your face many years older can spur action (decreasing temporal distance).
- If you're stressed about a looming deadline, studies have shown that simply leaning away from your computer screen is helpful (increasing spatial distance).
- If you're trying to influence colleagues or stakeholders, visit with them, chat about personal stuff, and emphasize common attributes and interests. If you're in different locations, use Skype or other video conference services (reducing social and spatial distance).

“Managing Yourself: Bridging Psychological Distance” by Rebecca Hamilton in *Harvard Business Review*, March 2015 (Vol. 93, #3, p. 116-119),

<https://hbr.org/2015/03/bridging-psychological-distance>

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3. When Student Collaborative Work Is Fruitful and When It's Not

In this article in *Educational Researcher*, Deanna Kuhn (Columbia University) notes that getting students working in collaborative groups is widely regarded as an enlightened classroom practice that will (a) build “21st-century skills” and (b) help students master academic content. On (a), Kuhn says there's no doubt about the downstream benefits of collaborative classroom activities. “The intellectual demands encountered in adult life are not only many and varied but also subject to frequent and rapid change,” she says. “A large proportion of these are encountered in contexts that are collaborative... Young people have not been well prepared for adult life today unless they are comfortable and well practiced in addressing collaboratively the kinds of problems and objectives that 21st-century life poses. Without question we need to learn how best to prepare them for these roles.”

But on (b), Kuhn says, “Collaboration is a long way from the silver bullet many educators wish it to be.” When students work in groups, the most-competent members sometimes do the heavy lifting, coming up with the answer (or solving the problem) without transmitting their skills and knowledge to their peers. Group members sometimes engage in parallel work without truly engaging with each others' thinking. And some students work better alone than in a group. The true test of collaborative learning, says Kuhn, is “mutual engagement in a coordinated effort in which group performance and/or subsequent individual performance exceeds that which any member brought to the group.” Under what conditions does this happen?

Not with problem-based learning (PBL), she believes. In a number of experiments, Kuhn and her colleagues found that students working individually or in groups all made gains in PBL classrooms. The key ingredient was not collaboration but grappling with a challenging problem with knowledge insufficient to solve it, which required students to extend and apply

existing knowledge and understanding to generating a solution. It's the problem, not the collaboration, that provides the academic payoff. The impetus to solve the problem (and avoid failing to solve the problem) is as effective with students working alone as it is for a group of students.

But collaboration is a definite plus with argumentative discourse – pairs of students engaging in an ongoing dialogue with other students holding an opposing point of view. As Kuhn describes it, “The pair must attend to and examine the opposing pair’s position with the aim of weakening it. They must also work to develop and uphold their own position in the face of parallel efforts of the opposing pair to weaken it. These dual objectives can only be met successfully if participants recognize the two different perspectives that exist, reflect on and gain understanding of each of them, and strive to coordinate them in a manner that fulfills the objectives of the activity... Thus, participants’ talk is not confined to the task content itself; they also engage in talk about their thinking.” In the argumentative discourse format, interacting with one’s teammate is absolutely essential. Kuhn and her colleagues conducted an experiment in which students tried to engage in this kind of discourse solo and it was far less productive. In another experiment, they had students take part in argumentative dialogues through written essays, and the benefits were also disappointing. In other words, it’s the *content* of collaborative work that determines whether there will be true collaboration and students will enhance their skills and knowledge.

Kuhn concludes that “intellectual collaboration does not come naturally... [I]t is not enough simply to put individuals in a context that allows for collaboration and expect them to engage in it effectively. Intellectual collaboration is a skill, learned through engagement and practice and much trial and error. Without sufficient skill development, children may fail to benefit from it.” When they are very young, children begin to recognize the differing perspectives of others, and as they mature, they gradually learn to take those into account and move past parallel play. “A developmental perspective raises the possibility of introducing educational interventions with the objective of accelerating progress and/or maximizing attainment,” says Kuhn. “Collaboration entails demanding, resource-consuming skills of coordination, as we have highlighted, as well as affective, interpersonal ones. Their development, at a minimum, requires extended practice.”

“Thinking Together and Alone” by Deanna Kuhn in *Educational Researcher*, January/February 2015 (Vol. 44, #1, p. 46-53), <http://bit.ly/1vUUnGo>; Kuhn can be reached at dk100@columbia.edu.

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4. Four Steps to Cultural Competence

(Originally titled “Inviting All Students to Learn”)

“All people are shaped by the culture in which they live,” say Hilary Dack and Carol Ann Tomlinson (University of Virginia) in this *Educational Leadership* article. “The shaping process is both subtle and pervasive, and it can be difficult for all of us to grasp that people shaped by other cultures will see and respond to the world differently than we do.” As a result,

it's easy for educators to interpret unfamiliar student behaviors as expressions of disinterest, deficiency, disrespect, or defiance. Dack and Tomlinson suggest four ways to become better attuned to differences so all students flourish:

- *Recognize and appreciate cultural variance.* Good teachers have always been “students of their students,” say the authors; now it’s important to be students of their cultures, “attuned to their languages, appreciating their experiences and histories, and valuing their lenses on the world.” This might include joining students at concerts, plays, movies, and other events reflecting a diverse array of cultures.

- *Tune in to culturally influenced learning patterns.* Some students’ backgrounds are collectivist while others are more individualistic, say Dack and Tomlinson: “Some will have learned to revere their teachers from a distance, others to negotiate with their teachers as they would with a peer, and still others that they owe their teachers no respect until it’s earned... Each new layer of understanding provides a platform for creating a classroom in which all comers can feel at home.” Here are a few other cultural continuums on which individual students are arrayed:

- Needs to observe <---> Needs to test ideas
- Needs external structures <---> Creates own structures
- Competitive <---> Collaborative
- Conforming <---> Creative
- Reserved <---> Expressive
- Fixed sense of time <---> Flexible sense of time
- Information-driven <---> Feeling-driven

A teacher noticed that several students were uncomfortable responding to quick-response questions and on-the-spot writing prompts. Advised by a colleague that these students had been taught to value reflection over speed, and to listen and reflect before speaking, the teacher made two adjustments: first, she gave advance warning of an upcoming question by saying, “I want to hear from a couple of additional students on this topic. Then I’m going to ask for your thinking.” Second, early in a lesson she said, “As we conclude our lesson today, I’m going to ask you to summarize your understandings in writing.” These minor tweaks made a noticeable difference to the comfort and performance of formerly reticent students – and not just those the teacher originally had in mind.

- *Look beyond cultural patterns to see individuals.* Although there are learning-style patterns within cultures, there are plenty of individual differences. Students who appear to be part of a homogenous group can vary tremendously because of differences in gender, school experience, parental support, time in the U.S., and personal temperament. “True cultural sensitivity requires person sensitivity as well,” say Dack and Tomlinson.

- *Plan inviting curriculum and instruction.* This means teaching history, literature, music, language, and contemporary issues in ways that make as many connections as possible to students’ varied cultures and experiences. “In other words, the curriculum leads students to explore content through universal lenses rather than only parochial ones,” say the authors. “A teacher who looks at students as individuals – no matter what their cultural experiences are –

will attend to their varied points of readiness, their interests, their exceptionalities, their status among peers, and so on when planning curriculum and instruction.” And from a pedagogical perspective, it’s wise to try to hit as many points on the continuums listed above as possible, either in unit and lesson plans or the choices students are able to make.

For example, in preparing students for a challenging assessment, a teacher might give two options: a quiz bowl, in which students compete in teams to answer sets of questions, or a tag team, in which students collaborate in groups to propose answers to the same questions, explain their thinking, and ask one another for elaborations to clarify their thinking.

Dack and Tomlinson close by quoting John Hattie on the characteristics of classrooms that invite students to learn:

- Respect – Every student is valuable, able, and responsible.
- Trust – Each student contributes to the learning process.
- Optimism – Each student has the potential to be successful.
- Intentionality – Every step of a lesson invites each student to learn.

“Inviting All Students to Learn” by Hilary Dack and Carol Ann Tomlinson in *Educational Leadership*, March 2015 (Vol. 72, #6, p. 10-15), available for purchase at <http://bit.ly/17KV7mq>; the authors can be reached at hgd3gf@virginia.edu and cat3y@virginia.edu.

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5. A Course Syllabus as a Learning Document

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, English professor James Lang reports on the feedback he and his colleagues at Assumption College in Massachusetts received in a forum with students who tutor their peers at the campus tutoring center:

- *Give us the big picture.* Students said they don’t always see the logical progression of a course, how the different units relate to each other, how the first week of the semester connects to the last. Progressions that seem clear and elegant to professors sometimes come across to students as “one damn thing after another” (a quote from writer Elbert Hubbard).

- *Be explicit about expectations.* Students are often unclear about the reasoning behind pedagogical choices – for example, why is there a lecture on Monday and a discussion on Wednesday, and what are students expected to take away from each? “Class discussions that sparkle with life and energy, and that we view as triumphs of great teaching, might just seem pointless and confusing to students,” says Lang.

- *Excitement is contagious.* One of the students said, “We know you have passion for the course material, but students don’t always see that in classes. I know that when professors get really excited about what they are teaching, it makes me more curious and interested to find out about it.”

Lang’s biggest take-away from the feedback session was that he needed to rethink the way he constructed and used the syllabus for each of his courses. Going forward, he wanted the syllabus to serve three key functions:

- *Promises* – This is a prime opportunity “to demonstrate your energy and excitement for the course content,” says Lang. “Because this document often represents the first official meeting between your students and your course material, it can be an ideal moment to help them recognize the value of the content and stimulate their interest in learning it... You want to convince them, in that initial meeting, that learning in your course, if they put in the effort, could change their lives for the better.” In the words of teaching expert Ken Bain, the syllabus should be “an invitation to a feast,” telling students the kinds of questions it will help them answer and the kinds of intellectual, physical, emotional, and social abilities it will help them develop.

- *Orientation* – Lang wants his improved syllabi to make crystal clear the larger organizational framework of the course – the units, the logical progression, recurring topics and themes: “Students should be able to pull out their syllabus in any class period and use it to help identify where the course has been, where it stands now, and where it is headed.” It’s also helpful if students know the readings, when assignments are due, and the dates of quizzes and exams – although there needs to be flexibility for unexpected events (in Lang’s part of New England, three major snowstorms this winter have caused major disruptions in academic plans).

- *Transparency* – “Why are we doing this?” is a perennial question from students. During class discussions, are students supposed to take notes on what their classmates say? Are they accountable for those insights, and for seemingly casual comments made by the professor? And more broadly, what is the thinking behind quizzes? Cumulative final exams? Participation grades? “The rationale for all of those decisions might be clear enough in *your* mind,” says Lang, “but how often do you answer those questions for your students? If they never hear answers, they might see your course practices and assessments as hoops to jump through or boxes to tick instead of opportunities to learn and improve.”

[In response to an e-mail request, Lang provided an exemplar syllabus for a course entitled “Aquinas’s Search for God: Faith Meets Philosophy” taught by Professor Joe Incandela at St. Mary’s College: <http://sites.saintmarys.edu/~incandel/370Syllabus.pdf>.]

“The 3 Essential Functions of Your Syllabus, Part 1” by James Lang in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 27, 2015 (Vol. LXI, #24, p. A25-26), <http://bit.ly/1AvF6r5>; Lang can be reached at lang@assumption.edu.

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6. Ten Children’s Books About African-American Heroes

“Too many teachers still view books about African Americans as relevant only in February or as an occasional addition to a set curriculum,” says Terry Meier (Wheelock College) in this article in *The Reading Teacher*. When this happens, books by and for black Americans are separated from the larger literary tradition, with its recurring topics, themes, metaphors, and visual images. As an antidote, Meier does an in-depth analysis of ten books about the childhood lives of highly accomplished African-American men, all suitable for read-

alouds for grades 1-4, drawing out some common themes and suggesting classroom activities.

Here are the books:

- *Words Set Me Free: The Story of the Young Frederick Douglass* by Lesa Cline-Ransome, illustrated by James Ransome (2012)
- *More Than Anything Else* (Booker T. Washington) by Marie Bradby, illustrated by Chris Soentpiet (1995)
- *Howard Thurman's Great Hope* by Kai Jackson Issa, illustrated by Arthur Dawson (2008)
- *Coming Home: From the Life of Langston Hughes* by Floyd Cooper (1994)
- *Malcolm Little: The Boy Who Grew Up to Become Malcolm X* by Ilyasah Shabazz, illustrated by A.G. Ford (2013)
- *My Dream of Martin Luther King* by Faith Ringgold (1995)
- *Float Like a Butterfly* (Muhammad Ali) by Ntozake Shange, illustrated by Edel Rodriguez (2002)
- *Ron's Big Mission* (Ron McNair) by Rose Blue and Corinne Naden, illustrated by Don Tate (2009)
- *Jump! From the Life of Michael Jordan* by Floyd Cooper (2004)
- *Barack Obama: Son of Promise, Child of Hope* by Nikki Grimes, illustrated by Bryan Collier (2008)

“‘The Brown Face of Hope’ – Reading Engagement and African-American Boys” by Terry Meier in *The Reading Teacher*, February 2015 (Vol. 68, #5, p. 335-343), available for purchase at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/trtr.1310/abstract>; Meier can be reached at tmeier@wheelock.edu.

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7. An Untapped Source of Material for Character Education

In this article in *The Boston Herald*, Boston teacher Peter Sipe says that every Friday, he and his sixth graders read an obituary. “For a teacher, obituaries are useful classroom texts,” says Sipe. “They offer short history lessons, excellent vocabulary (for example, *ephemeral* and *posterity*), and align well with the new Common Core standards. But the greatest value of the obituaries we read is this: They’re fine examples of how to live. We’re not merely reading life stories; we’re learning about lives worthy of emulation... Obituaries provide character education with real characters.”

How does Sipe decide which individuals to feature every Friday? By putting this question to colleagues, friends, civic leaders, elected officials, and businesspeople: “If you could pick one person from the past whom you wish kids would learn about in school, who would it be?” Students have read about a beloved family doctor, a civil rights activist, a businessman who gave his riches to the poor, and other unsung heroes of the community. On deck for the coming weeks: a firefighter, a judge, and a rowing coach.

“Obituaries Teach Life’s Lessons” by Peter Sipe in *The Boston Herald*, February 28, 2015,

<http://bit.ly/1AR2Iv3>; Sipe can be reached at psipe@hotmail.com; this article springs from a research project he did through the Boston Athenaeum's [Mudge Teacher Fellowship](#).

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8. Short Items:

a. A how-to guide for flipped classrooms – This link <http://bit.ly/1FEaTKR> has a lively combination of information and videos on shifting curriculum content to homework and using classroom time for interaction and small-group work.

“Flipped Classroom Toolkit: Which Tech Tools Are Right for You?” by Jon Bergmann and Aaron Sams in *Edutopia*, February 25, 2015

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b. TED Talks on diversity – The editors of *Educational Leadership* recommend these TED talks addressing issues of biases, autism, and narrow thinking:

- “How to Overcome Our Biases? Walk Boldly Toward Them” by Verna Myers – www.ted.com/talks/verna_myers_how_to_overcome_our_biases_walk_boldly_toward_them
- “How Autism Freed Me to Be Myself” by Rosie King – www.ted.com/talks/rosie_king_how_autism_freed_me_to_be_myself
- “The Danger of a Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

“Screen Grabs” in *Educational Leadership*, March 2015 (Vol. 72, #6, p. 9)

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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 others very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 44 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).

Subscriptions:

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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
Edutopia
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
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 Journal of the Learning Sciences
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