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Dramatic Strategies To Improve Student Learning

The Crunch Is On

Every principal knows the emphasis that the Ministry of Education is placing on improving literacy skills. The goal is to have 75% of students scoring at Level 3 or better in the provincial assessments. In the past few years in-servicing of teachers has proceeded at a feverish pace. Money has cascaded down to OFIP (Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership) and Turn-Around Schools. Senior administrators at every board have been reminded of their responsibilities in this era of accountability.

Yet, across the province, we still seem to be stuck. Not enough students are able to make the leap from Level 2 performance on the EQAO assessments to the competencies required of Level 3. A variety of strategies has been used to rise above this plateau, most of them falling under the category of *differentiated instruction*. Much of teachers' in-servicing throughout the province has been directed at showing them how to teach to the different learning styles in their classes, in an effort to reach every student, particularly those who are unengaged or are stuck at lower levels of achievement. However, as we visit schools, we do not see the fruits of this effort obvious in teacher practice. One principal put it succinctly when she said, "My teachers have been in-serviced to death on this but they can't get it started consistently in the classrooms. They know what to do, but they just don't know *how*."

A New Strategy

What if, the answer to *how* is a dramatic one? We are not talking here about putting on *Cats* or having kids *hang from the ceilings* by playing impromptu improv games. We are talking about using specific drama activities as a deliberate teaching strategy to engage the kinesthetic learners in a classroom and help them gain a knowing that they cannot get from auditory or even visual techniques. Why could this be useful? Let's look at the make-up of the average elementary school classroom. In *Teaching Students to Read through Their Individual Learning Styles*, Marie Carbo et al. indicate that almost all children are kinesthetic learners when they enter school. Any kindergarten teacher knows this and programs

accordingly. However, in the average junior level classroom the breakdown is roughly as follows:

- 40% Kinesthetic Learners - they learn by doing it.
- 35% Visual Learners - they learn by seeing it.
- 25% Auditory Learners - they learn by hearing it.

When students leave elementary school, 30 per cent of them are still primarily kinesthetic learners, which is strikingly similar to the provincial drop out rate in high school.

Yet most of elementary instruction in literacy is auditory first, visual second and no kinesthetic. When children cannot learn in the learning style most effective for them their motivation is drained, they experience frustration and even shame. They may act out, but more often, they just sit there, unengaged and waiting for recess. The research on engagement is also clear: there is no lasting learning without it.

On the other hand, when simple drama games and techniques are embedded in lessons, kinesthetic learners begin to achieve because:

- they are engaged;
- the activities give them a *cognitive peg* that allows them to have better, intuitive understanding of what they have to do to accomplish an academic task; and
- FUN replaces FEAR.

Why Fun Is Important

Fun is essential because the right brain cannot be engaged without it and the comprehension skills we are trying to teach (making connections, predicting, etc.) are not left-brain skills. If you want to be frustrated, just try *drill and kill* techniques to make students inference. The most powerful effect of using drama activities for learning is its ability to reduce the fear factor in learning. We have all had experiences that trigger anxiety and even a fear that feels paralyzing. Kinesthetic learners, who are being asked to learn in a style that is

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extremely uncomfortable, also experience fear in a similar way. It is not hard to see why. The consequences of not succeeding include disapproval from teachers and parents, ridicule from peers, low grades, missing recess, detentions and the like. In his book, *One Small Step Can Change Your Life: The Kaizen Way*, UCLA professor Dr. Robert Maurer describes brain research indicating that situations which require massive change- change that we feel is too hard - trigger one of the most primitive areas of the brain to stimulate a fearful *fight or flight* response. So all but the most courageous of kinesthetic students take mental *flight* and pretend to learn, perhaps achieving despite the difficulties, but never reaching their full learning potential. We all know where those who *fight* end up - outside the principal's office, often during the literacy instruction period.

Dr. Maurer points to other research findings that having fun stimulates the cerebral cortex, which is responsible for imagination and higher thought. When one has fun in an activity, there is no fear, even if it is associated with a topic that might cause fear if revealed in an auditory fashion. Thus, drama activities make learning as interesting and achievable for kinesthetic learners as it is for high achieving auditory learners.

A New Approach to Differentiating Instruction

This research is borne out in the work we are presently doing in schools. Repeatedly, teachers are amazed to see previously unengaged students who hated writing literally run back to their desks to write a paragraph after playing a drama game. In addition, we are seeing students who for the longest time just did not *get* making connections suddenly begin to do so at Level 3 and 4 capacities. Having seen this, teachers are ready to use these techniques in the context of their daily lessons, differentiating their instruction with ease.



How can principals deal with the accountability crunch and get all of their students achieving higher? Help your teachers make the dramatic changes necessary so that they can actually start teaching in the way that many of their students learn. Do not be afraid of the fun. It is part of the deal.

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*Ed Dixon is an educator with 25 years experience and is currently a principal on leave from the Simcoe Muskoka CDSB. He is completing PhD studies at OISE where his research is focused on education and drama. He is also the director of The Literacy Through Drama Project, an endeavour that helps teachers use drama techniques to improve student achievement. More information can be found at [www.literacythroughdrama.org](http://www.literacythroughdrama.org).*