What 21st century teaching, learning really means

By Valerie Strauss

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In this interview with education journalist John Norton, published on the website Education Week Teacher, Nussbaum-Beach describes the transformation she believes must take place in teaching and learning practices if elementary and secondary schools are to remain relevant in an era when information and communication technologies will continue to expand exponentially.

Q) Help us understand the shift you say must take place in teaching.

A) Well, we live in a connected world, with the Internet and powerful digital technologies literally at our fingertips, so it would be foolish not to integrate those things into the learning experience. But when I talk about the shift to 21st-century teaching and learning, I am not talking primarily about changing the tools we use. I’m talking about transforming the way most teachers teach today—either because they were taught to teach that way or because the accountability system makes them believe they have to teach that way. Instead of thinking that I am “The Teacher”—the knowledge-giver who stands up front in total control—instead of that traditional pedagogy, we need a 21st-century vision of teaching, where there is less teacher talk and more student talk, where what I’m doing is thinking about how I am going to pull the most out of these kids; how I’m going to enable these students to be empowered; how I can make sure that I create a classroom that’s free from threat and stress, where they’ll be willing to take risks.

Instead of me having all these preconceived ideas of what they should doing, saying, and producing, I have to be open to what I find in each student. I have to discover—and help each student discover—their talents and interests and create a learning environment where they can use those gifts and passions to learn from a position of strength.

Q) But “passion” is not a word we’re used to hearing when we talk about the learning process in school.

A) I know passion-based learning may seem like a crazy kind of term. Some people hear it and think about learning that’s out of control—that it’s all about what students want to do and not about what they need to do. A lot of critics will say kids don’t even know what they want to do. They worry that we’re going to take learning and shortcut it to the point that people aren’t truly deep learners. That’s not what I’m advocating in any way, shape, or form.

But I think one of the things we’ve done is we’ve trained the passion out of our students from the 2nd grade up. I think kindergartners and 1st graders and some 2nd graders still have it, but after that, forget it. It’s gone. Another way you might want to describe it is a “sense of wonderment.” Really looking at the world with wonder and bringing a sense of wonder to certain things that we just want to learn everything about.

So I think passion is a great word, and it fits with the ideas that I’m trying to convey. If it causes people to step back and to think, either from a positive or a negative place, at least they’re thinking.

This personalization of learning—giving students more control—is frequently criticized as an abrogation of the teacher’s responsibility to direct the learning process.

What I’m envisioning is that I am still the teacher in the room—as the decision-maker, I am in control of the outcomes that I want to happen around core content or the affective domain. The difference is that I am going to allow these kids to pick and choose the areas they are most passionate about. I’m going to use an “appreciative” strategy that says students learn best when we have them work from their strengths to accomplish the outcomes, rather than having to work from their weaknesses. Which means that as a teacher, I’m going to have to be a master of the curriculum. I’ve got to know exactly what I want the end result to be in order to allow these kids to approach what we need to learn from their own passion or their own personal interest.

Q) What does it mean to have students “work from their strengths”?

A) If we support teachers with the right working conditions, they will have the time to develop deeper relationships with their students. So, just like a parent, they will come to understand each student’s strengths—what their interests are, but also how each of our students learns best. That’s what I mean by “strengths.” Good teachers have always had this capacity, but we’ve stolen so much time away from them in our obsession to “cover the curriculum” that it can be much more difficult to accomplish. One of the chief ways teachers gain this insight is through ongoing informal classroom assessments. That kind of assessment also takes time and is more difficult to accomplish in the helter-skelter rush to “be accountable.”

Whenever you use a one-size-fits-all assessment or instructional approach, some people are going to be allowed to work through their strengths, and others are going to be forced to approach that objective through their weaknesses. The potential to have students work from their strengths really comes alive in the 21st century because new technologies and Web tools allow us to manage and express knowledge and information in many different ways. We find ourselves being able to work through content, solve problems, and apply what we know using tools and approaches that favor our strengths, even if our strengths aren’t well-suited to the old paradigms of schooling.

I was watching some video from British elementary schools recently. These are films promoting advanced teaching skills. In one clip, we see the teacher talking to her class about collaborating on a project. “Find the partner you need,” she says. “Some of you are picture-smart or word-smart or number-smart. Help each other.” She’s focused on getting students to recognize their strengths and also collaborate so they can help each other become stronger in other “smart” dimensions too.

Q) When you describe the passion-based approach in your conversations with teachers, what’s the reaction?
A lot of teachers say, “Well, it’s not going to work, because the students I have are just not self-directed. I have to tell them what to do and what to say and what to think.” And that’s true to a certain extent, because we’ve trained that into students. But with skillful teaching, we can un-train them.

Teachers who have made this breakthrough often talk about how risky it feels at first. But there is ample evidence out there that students can become confident learners again.

**Q) Can you give us an example of how you might teach using a passion-based approach?**

A) Typically what I do is I try to construct my course or unit under some big umbrella that I already know is going to be very interesting to kids where they are right now in their development. So if I’m working with middle schoolers, then one unit I might do is around skateboarding. And so the first thing I do is I sit down and I think about the many aspects of skateboarding. So I might come up with skateboarding parks; people who skateboard; marketing the designs, clothing, boards; maybe some of the laws that try to control skateboarding; the lifestyle that goes with skateboarding; the extreme versions of the sport; the physical attributes. So I’m kind of brainstorming. And when I look at my list, I pick something, say the laws, and I ask myself what typical kinds of content, coursework, fits with this—civics education, debate, history, etc.

Next what I do is actually align different threads of investigation with the standards. Then I go into the classroom with the kids and say, “OK, this is what we’re going to learn about—we’re going to think about skateboarding in all kinds of different ways. So let’s brainstorm.” I do a concept map with them, and then I look at the things they’re most interested in.

There are going to be certain things that I will teach, because I know there will be state-mandated testing and I want to make sure they do well. So that will be a whole-group thing that I do in a more typical teaching style. But then there’s going to be other pieces that they totally own.

**Q) What if you’re teaching history or literature? Skateboarding is not going to be a workable umbrella there.**

A) In some instances, passion-based learning is letting kids come up with something they’re really passionate about that can be related to the curriculum, and allowing them to work within that space. And in other instances, passion-based learning is finding out what the students are passionate about within a circumscribed field—within the specific elements of the curriculum that the state says we have to teach in such-and-such an area.

So when teachers say to me, “Oh, you don’t understand high-stakes testing—I just can’t do that right now,” I say, “Oh, yes you can.” It’s not about ignoring the testing, the core curriculum, or the standards. It’s about allowing them to pick an entry point they’re really excited about.

If I’m teaching the Civil War, there might be some boys who are really into the gore of people getting wounded and the kind of medicine that was practiced on the battlefield and in the field hospitals—what happened with amputations and how they did that and so forth. That’s not necessarily something that’s going to be tested, but they can address the larger learning goals as they learn how their passionate interest relates to everything else going on in the Civil War. It’s also interdisciplinary: there’s the language use, the construction of sentences, the persuasive argument, the problem solving, the way they’re going to share what they learn with the rest of the group, and what they themselves are going to learn from other kids’ sharing their particular interests. It’s all workable to meet curriculum objectives.

When I was leading a small school in Georgia where we used this teaching approach, our students had to perform well on the state accountability tests if we wanted to remain open. So we would devote three weeks or so before the test to look at what we were learning through more of a multiple-choice, facts-based kind of lens. Our kids did great on the tests and then we got back to the kind of teaching and learning we all loved.

**Q) If you were going to create an assessment system that really honored passion-based learning, what would it look like?**

A) It has to be performance-based and competency-based. As teachers we have to realize that the outcome—the product that’s the outcome of whatever we set up to be the objective of the learning—is the assessment. Instead of relying only on multiple-choice and paper-and-pencil tests, where everybody has to fit into the same box, we need to be able to do things like create portfolios. The digital and Web-based tools that we have today make electronic portfolios very easy. We can take different artifacts and things that kids are doing that prove mastery of the objectives and build a portfolio that displays and documents their learning.

Often what I do is bring students into that process. I say, “OK, this is the objective we’re trying to accomplish. What is the project that you’re going to choose that will show me at the end of our unit whether you have mastered it?” Even in elementary school we can get them to start thinking about that—which they could do, what they could produce that’s going to show me they learned the material and concepts they needed to learn.

Once the teacher matches the objective to the outcome, artifact, or product that you’re going to get—once you say, “OK, this is what’s going to prove mastery, this is how I can assess it”—then teachers really have some concrete pieces of work that they can analyze, work that students have helped select with the level of teacher guidance that’s appropriate for the age group and tasks involved. I’m all for data-driven teaching and learning. Data can be hugely helpful to us, but it has to be data that tell us about the breadth and depth of what students are learning, in the context of what we want them to learn. In my example, I can decide I’m going to look at growth over time, analyze their electronic portfolios, and find the data I need to tell me whether and to what degree my strategies are working and what I need to do next.

**Q) Any final thoughts for teachers interested in exploring this approach?**

A) When your teaching practice is passion-based, you’re working very hard as you backward-design lessons and assessments and personalize the educational experience for each child in your care. But here’s the thing: You’re doing what you really need to do to make sure nobody falls through the cracks, and you don’t one day sit back and look over your career and think, “Oh my gosh, there were all those kids that I didn’t prepare for this world that awaited them, and they’re not successful because I didn’t do what I needed to do.”