

Building Thinking Classrooms With Peter Liljedahl

Webinar Facilitated by the Arizona Department of Education

Research findings

- 80% of students were not thinking. 20% were thinking but only 20% of the time. Students were busy but not required to think.
 - Slacking - Slackers don't care that you see them being off-task.
 - Stalling - Students who stall, do care.
 - Fakers - Fakers care but hide behind a facade of on-task behavior.
 - Mimicking - Mimicking is not a thinking or learning behavior. It's a production behavior. It's what students produce in exchange for praise, gold stars, and grades.
 - It is so effective in the short term. If I mimic now, I'll be productive now.
 - It is 100% ineffective in the long term. 100% of students who mimic will struggle. Mimickers don't grow. They stay constant.
 - As time passes, mimickers stay constant but the curriculum demands increase. The demands exceed the student's ability.
- Students are a product of their teachers. Teachers are a product of their students. Who we are as teachers is entirely dictated by who our students are as learners.
- Classrooms look more alike than they are different. Practices look more alike than they look different. This has been true for 170 years.
 - This is where I Do, We Do, You Do comes from.
 - This is where mimicking comes from.
 - Students don't listen to what we say. They listen to what we do. If what we do is I Do, We Do, You Do is that we want them to mimic.
 - These are institutional norms. This is how we were taught and what the system expects of us. In many ways, teachers don't feel like they have a choice. It has become synonymous with teaching.
- Norms needed to be broken in order to get students thinking.
 - The norms prevented students from thinking.
 - Breaking norms didn't teach students to think. They liberated students to think.
 - Normative practices emerged from conformity and compliance.

Tasks

- If we want students to think, we need to give them something to think about.
- Tasks are not all that we need. They are necessary but far from sufficient.
- They're like pebbles on a beach and can be found everywhere.
- Low floor - everyone can start.
 - Equity is not a practice. Access will help us start to achieve equity. Low floor tasks create access.
- High ceiling - every single student will be challenged, which is where the learning happens.
- Novelty - thinking is what we do when we don't know what to do.

- Low floor, high ceiling, and novelty can be brought into the content. We spent 95% of time in a thinking classroom doing curricular thinking tasks - straight up tasks out of the curriculum.
- We spend 5% of our time doing non-curricular thinking tasks.
 - 4 - 6 experiences with non-curricular tasks before shifting to curricular tasks to build a culture of thinking.

Visibly Random Groups

- Strategic grouping and self-selected groupings are highly ineffective for getting students to think.
 - 80% of students are unlikely or highly unlikely to offer an idea.
- 100% of students are likely or highly unlikely to offer an idea after a few weeks in visibly random groups even though it might not lead to a solution.
- If we can't get students to enter the task from a thinking perspective all is lost.
- Groups of three are optimal. Young and vulnerable populations start in groups of two. They haven't learned to collaborate or trust.
- Groups of two are optimal for class sizes with less than 15 students. Groups of two are next to groups of two.
- Diversity is a strength. Diverse groups ask each other better questions and have more empathy for each other.
- Community starts to form. Empathy is unlocked. Kids have a tremendous capacity for empathy. Real collaboration doesn't begin until they care as much about their partner's learning as their own learning.
- "My teacher thinks we're all capable. Otherwise they wouldn't do random groups." Our actions can show them that we believe in them.

Vertical Non-permanent Surfaces

- Erasable surfaces - risk is a barrier to thinking. Erasable surfaces allow students to be imperfect. Students can jump right in.
- Vertical surfaces
 - All have the same orientation or access. When the surface is horizontal someone always has a privileged position.
 - We can see each other's work. Knowledge mobility occurs.
 - I'm a better teacher. I can see if kids have got it. I can intervene now.
- It's not that standing is no good. Sitting is so bad.
 - Sitting students feel anonymous. When they feel anonymous, they disengage. They don't have equal access to learning.
 - Standing removes anonymity. It gives everyone access.

Where do we start?

- First toolkit - tasks, visibly random groups, and vertical non-permanent surfaces
 - Do all three together at the same time.

- This is about changing the kids. The environment is different enough that students can start to think. Where thinking is valued, necessitated, and supported.
- Second toolkit - five practices in any order.
 - This toolkit is all about the teacher.
- Third toolkit
- Fourth toolkit

When students aren't thinking, everything we teach is difficult. When they're thinking, anything is possible. Building a thinking classroom is about building a culture of thinking and pointing it at content. Not a fancy, dressed up version of content - just straight content.