

From Receivers to Producers: A Principal's Perspective on using the C3 Framework to Prepare Young Learners for College, Career, and Civic Life

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The morning the film crew from the Los Angeles County Office of Education arrived on our school's campus, we all experienced a momentary feeling of "oh my goodness, why have we agreed to do this?" The task before us was simple in description but complex in reality and weighty in importance: capture on film a first grade model civics lesson in which six- and seven-year-old English Learners encounter a close read of a grade-level social studies textbook, identify its key features (such as topic and main idea, text boxes, and author's purpose) and apply their civic learning in a real-life setting. The lesson design incorporated appropriate language scaffolding, high-leverage pedagogy, structured student talk, student use of technology, identification of appropriate supplemental sources, student interviews of a community member (e.g., a parent, teacher, and one another) and an end product demonstrating student ability to "explain the need for and purposes of rules in various settings inside and outside of school" (C3 Framework, Table 9). All in a typical day's work? Perhaps for some ... but while other primary grade classrooms at Lake Marie were focusing on the mechanics of literacy for the day, it felt like a stretch for us to implement inquiry-based instruction and ask these young learners to grapple with compelling questions at the civic level. In watching the students adjust to the film crew while encountering their first close read of the text, I found myself holding my breath.

The Looming Questions

Theoretically, this small piece of new territory for elementary schools across the nation rests on a bigger plane of education and purpose for learning: moving young learners beyond mere content and into civic engagement. The new paradigm of instruction requires a rather staggering shift in thinking and practice--one that may indeed stymie some but yield a new

generation of thinkers and learners. As the principal of a pre-K-6th grade elementary school, I encounter many questions about such instructional shifts. Many of the questions ride the wave of excitement surrounding the Common Core State Standards. Specifically, how will we know our students have reached a new level of mastery? How will we assess them? Will my school crash and burn as

I attempt a pacing guide that might differ for each class and yield results beyond our existing tools of measurement? And when layering in The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards, I face, perhaps, an even greater consideration of how I will lead the charge in developing civic proficiency and interdisciplinary literacy among the new generation.

Rethinking the Teacher's Role

Perhaps the answers lie in the process of rethinking the role of a teacher, letting go of traditional methods and initiating a not-so-gradual transfer of responsibility for learning to the learners themselves. Notice, I do not suggest the transfer of responsibility of learning from the teacher to the learner, for in this setting, *all* are learners, teachers included. The task and life-long goal of learning rests squarely on each of us. And so we face the reality of the first obvious and rather startling change. If teachers are no longer intended to serve as sages on the stage, filling students' heads with pre-constructed knowledge, classroom life as we know it will become largely



First graders at Lake Marie Elementary in California interview Principal Michael Long for their civics lesson on rules and laws in society.

Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Office of Education with permission of Lake Marie Elementary School, South Whittier School District.

unscripted. Such unscripted learning, in turn, might lead to uncharted areas for teachers and, collectively, learners may need to learn navigation skills that differ greatly from yesterday's memorization and regurgitation skills, which were geared toward the accountability of standardized achievement. Indeed, a host of questions and "what ifs" will likely continue to plague the current generation of teachers until they face a few learning cycles under a much different and greater job description for teachers.

Moving from Receivers to Producers

As I walk the halls of my school and ponder the changing needs of our students, I realize now more than ever that teachers can no longer look forward to a controlled day of expounding beloved content because twenty-first century learners must do so much more than passively receive an education. Yes, some teaching will always need to be direct and explicit and there will always be a need to conquer certain information through rote skills. But today's students will be expected to produce much of their own learning,

something that will require educators to serve more as diagnosticians, facilitators, and capacity builders than the instructors of yesterday. Moreover, that learning may be loud, messy, unscripted, and not always predetermined. Teachers must diagnose student learning needs and interests, guide the learning process as students encounter new information, and cheer them on to produce authentic demonstrations of learning and thinking—and not just the standard five-paragraph essay. Come to think of it, does the real world even require a five-paragraph essay ... ever?

In this light, while educators can and must set the learning before our students, they cannot necessarily control the process or outcomes. Take, for example, Dimension 2 (Table 22) of the C3 Framework, which outlines the following indicators: By the end of 5th grade students will "*Generate questions about multiple historical sources and their relationships to particular historical events and developments.*" The indicators that follow, detail an even meatier task of using "*information about a historical source, including the maker, date, place*

of origin, intended audience and purpose to judge the extent to which the source is useful for studying a particular topic." Gone are the days of students passively reading the standard textbook passage with the end goal of preparing a summary or performing well on a culminating chapter test. Twenty-first century learners must actively seek information and apply critical thinking skills to navigate and evaluate the validity and relevance of that information in a way previously reserved for higher education. The kicker here lies in the reality that once the students have evaluated validity and relevance, they must reflectively produce something of value with this information as they continue in the learning quest.

Unknown Territory

Part of the risk in acknowledging the burden of responsibility for learners to know how to access, navigate, and use information leads to the unsettling conclusion that as much as they cannot know and memorize the vast, ever-growing body of information before them, neither can we. To follow this path of thinking, leads to the admission that in their

quest for knowledge, they (and along with them, “we”) might end up in unknown territory. Yet, is this not the very nature of how our nation was founded? While our forefathers envisioned and fought for something greater, not one of them could truly predict the results of where, what, and who we are today. So it goes with the learning of our students as we envision what we hope they will learn and produce. But in our continued fixation on testing and accountability, might we become so focused on designing a tool for measurement that we curb the learning? Sadly, as we move forward in implementing the Common Core State Standards and the C3 Framework, the “but how do we assess and who’s going to pay for it” questions surface faster than the more important discussions of learning potential and the amazing possibilities of the unknown territory ahead.

Where Do We Go From Here?

About midway through our first grade model lesson in which I was the subject of an interview on rules and laws in society, I reluctantly handed over my new iPad to six-year-old Johnny. His response to my hesitation was classic. “Don’t worry, Mr. Long, I get it. I won’t drop it, just watch. I’m going to press this button and ask the questions.” And with that, Johnny floored me with his ability to proceed, in spite of the fact that he had never interviewed a soul in his life, never filmed with an iPad, and had never shown an ounce of concern about the importance of rules in society. It was duly noted that the same student who had yet to sit still in class and finish one written assignment or worksheet was fully motivated to produce his own learning. And he did so with confidence, doing what even I did not know how to do just three years ago. In fact, the kids that day rose to every expectation

we had for them, not without struggle, but with joy and eagerness. They independently navigated and evaluated text, consulted outside sources, interviewed a community member, relied on technology and incorporated it into a final presentation of the importance of and reasons for rules and laws in our society.

Like other school administrators, I bear the tremendous weight of the responsibility to provide an education for hundreds of students at a time. In my quest to set the stage for learning at my school, I regularly fight test performance anxiety, because until now, this has been seen as the measure of our success. Now, for the first time I find myself on the precipice of letting go, seeking a new measure for success and trusting that my students will embrace the new paradigm of thinking and producing. The first grade classroom’s response to learning is only one sign of the great

continued on page 350

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FROM RECEIVERS TO PRODUCERS

from page 344

potential for the learners at my school. If I am not careful, they might actually contribute something wonderfully unexpected to their larger community.

In an attempt to diagnose learning needs and provide something different than anything previously done at our school, I interviewed a group of incoming fifth graders. I soon found these discussions veering into unknown territory far outside the realm of my comfort zone. The students shared their desire to use the fine arts emphasis at our school to make a statement to the rest of the student body and community at large. Their idea rests on the notion of addressing a civic problem or communicating an important message through a yearlong, documented endeavor culminating in a community unveiling. I have recently finished writing and securing a grant to work with a resident artist for guidance on this project, and believe the project has the capacity to grow a life of its own. What will happen if the students take unexpected action and learn something incredible—something that does not match what I planned? I must release my fear of budgets and permanent facilities damage (think kids gone wild with paint) and time away from test preparation. I must release the notion that the bulk of the learning in a subject comes from a textbook. I must present them with compelling questions, high expectations, opportunities to grow, and unboxed space to practice unique expression. Even more importantly, however, I must require the students to answer the question everyone seems to be asking, “So where do we go from here?”

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