



Curriculum Connections

Promote a challenging environment creating an extraordinary community of learners

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From the Director . . .

The summer seemed to fly by this year with so many curriculum and instruction projects underway. Many thanks to those of you on the Science Curriculum Improvement Team who spent so many hours developing a new unit of instruction for your grade level to be piloted later this year. Work also progressed at the Middle School in language arts, family and consumer sciences and technology education. At the high school level, social studies teachers continued their work, and a group of language arts teachers revised the 9th grade curriculum.

We began the school year with an exciting and inspiring Convocation. As we move through the year together, I will try and remind us all of the lessons Larry Bell shared with us. As teachers, we have the power to touch the lives of our students each and every day. Larry's haunting reminder that "On your worst day, you are some child's best hope" should set the tone for all of our interactions with students. While it is true that they will test us, they also rely upon us to be their "best hope" for whatever problems they bring with them as they walk through the door. We must all be mindful of the awesome power we have as teachers to reach and teach every child every day.

The professional development days were highly productive at all levels. Lesson design, study skills, technology integration and reading assessments were among the issues explored in some depth at each level. I know from my own experience that if I don't try something new within a few weeks of learning it, I forget about it or forget how to implement it. If you haven't done so already, I urge you to take a few moments and review a strategy or two that you learned last month and make a plan to implement it in your classroom.

I wish you all a terrific beginning to the school year! From what I have seen so far, we are off to a great start. Please let me know what I can do to support you and your work with our students, whether it's a second pair of eyes in the classroom, team teaching or just brainstorming!

~ Linda

CAPT News

Our 2004 CAPT (Connecticut Academic Performance Test) results are in, and the news is very good! Last year's tenth graders outscored their ERG G peers in math, science and reading in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding the state goal.



The percentage of Plainville students achieving at the proficient level was higher than either the state or ERG G average in all four disciplines. In mathematics, 82% of our students were deemed proficient. In reading, the level was 84%. And in both science and writing, 88% of Plainville students scored at the proficient level or higher. We should all be proud of our students and of our individual contributions to their success. CAPT is a culmination of many years of education, and it is gratifying to see our students so successful.

CMT News

Students in grades 4, 6 and 8 will be taking the Connecticut Mastery Test in September. This will be the last administration of the CMT in the fall. Beginning in the 2005-2006 school year, CMT testing will move to the spring, and we will test all of our students in grades 3 through 8 in math, reading and writing. Science testing in grades 5 and 8 will follow in the spring of 2007.

We will have our first look at Generation 4 when we pilot one or more portions of the test in each grade in the spring of this year.

Best Practices in Instruction . . .

In *Classroom Instruction that Works*, Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering and Jane Pollock describe nine research-based strategies for increasing student achievement.

The strategies are tried and true methods of instruction that most of us use in one way or another every day. What Marzano's work does, however, is to inform us of how to make the most of the strategies. In prior newsletters we have discussed the first eight strategies. This month we'll take a look at the final strategy: **Cues, Questions and Advance Organizers**.

Cues and Questions

Research shows that activation of prior knowledge is critical to learning of all types. Marzano makes 4 generalizations from the research around the issue of Cues and Questions:

1. Cues and questions should focus on what is important as opposed to what is unusual
According to the research, most teachers tend to structure questions around information that is interesting or unusual rather than around the information that is key to understanding of the topic. While we think this might pique students' interests, the research indicates that it is the volume of information a student gains about a topic that engages their interest and makes them want to learn more. Thus, questions designed to help students gain a deep understanding of the content will increase their interest.
2. Higher level questions produce deeper learning than lower level questions
Questions that require students to analyze or evaluate information produce more learning than those that ask them to recall or recognize information.
3. Waiting briefly before accepting responses from students has the effect of increasing the depth of students' answers
Students need to have the time to formulate their answers – particularly to those higher level questions.
4. Questions are effective learning tools even when asked BEFORE a learning experience
Establishing a "mental set" with students before they begin a learning process is valuable to help them frame the learning.

Classroom Practice in Cues and Questions

Cues are straightforward ways of activating prior knowledge. Drawing on common experiences, teachers can provide students with a preview of the learning they are about to experience. Reminding students of a story they read earlier as a precursor to a lesson on flashback or irony and then using that story as an example of what the students should look for in the upcoming story, is an example of using cues to establish a context for learning.

Eliciting Inferences

Use questions that ask students to make inferences. For example, after reading an article about the Revolutionary War, a teacher might ask some inferential questions, like: "What people are usually involved in a war?" or "What happens to cause a war?"

Analytic Questions

Sometimes we can ask questions that require students to analyze and/or critique the information. For example:

- How is this information misleading?
- How could the information be corrected or improved?
- What is an argument that would support the following claim:...?
- What are some limitations of the argument?
- What are the assumptions underlying the argument?
- Why would someone consider this to be good (or bad or neutral)?
- What is the reasoning behind the author's perspective?
- What is another point of view?

Advance Organizers

Marzano makes four generalizations from the research on advance organizers:

1. Advance organizers should focus on what is important as opposed to what is unusual
2. Higher level advance organizers produce deeper learning than the lower level ones
3. Advance organizers are most useful with information that is not well organized. For example, they work better as preparation for a field trip where the information is more randomly presented than for reading a chapter in a textbook that is well organized with headings and subheadings.
4. Different types of advance organizers produce different results. There are four general types of advance organizers: expository, narrative, skimming and illustrated. All are powerful, but the expository type is the most powerful

Classroom Practice in Advance Organizers

Expository

These organizers simply describe the new content. For example, a vocabulary list and a list of terms or concepts to be learned during a lesson

Narrative

These advance organizers present the information to students in a story format. For example, telling a story of a time you were in a tornado prior to showing a film or reading an article about tornadoes.

Skimming

Having students skim an article prior to an experience helps students to organize their ideas. For example, prior to a field trip to a planetarium students might be asked to skim star maps of the northern and southern hemispheres.

Illustrated or Graphic

Giving students a word web prior to reading a textbook or article on the topic helps them to begin to think about the topic before they read.