Classroom Q & A with Larry Ferlazzo - Kristina Doubet and Jessica Hockett - 08/08/2016

http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2016/08/response_starting_the_new_year_by_building_relationships.html

Q: What are the best ways to start a new school year?

A: Most teachers begin the school year with mixed feelings of excitement and dread. We welcome the chance to "re-set" with fresh faces and high hopes. But the pressure to make sure all students master rigorous standards is daunting, and it's no secret that the clock starts ticking on day 1. Our students, too, are both eager ("I get to see my friends!" "Maybe I'll 'get' math this year!") and anxious ("What if I'm an outsider again?" "What if I never understand this English stuff?"). Accordingly, the best course of action for beginning the academic year – for teachers and for students - is to allow excitement to propel us through angst. We can accomplish that through the following four practices.

1. <u>Get to know students, let them get to know you, and help them get to know each other</u>. This is not new and it's not rocket science. Most teachers attempt some sort of activity to get to know students on Day 1. But if those attempts are superficial or simply an "exercise," they can backfire. Kids at all grade levels can smell insincerity from a mile away. Therefore, choose an activity that *you* would actually want to complete -- and complete it yourself first to model for your students. Then devote time in class for students to complete and share their results. When students see their teacher's responses to survey questions - or graph of personal interests, or "primary source" artifacts - they are more likely to invest in return. And if the teacher carves out class time for these tasks, students a) recognize it's important to the teacher, and b) develop bonds with one another as they work. Further, full-class sharing of responses sets a collaborative tone for the rest of the year.

2. <u>Set the expectation for flexible grouping</u>. If we want our classrooms to be a collaborative space, then collaboration needs to start early and among *all* students in the class. Chances are, students will have learning needs, interests, and strengths in common with many of their peers and will benefit from working with them throughout the course of the year. Set the tone by asking students to work in a different grouping formation each day of the first week of school to establish flexible grouping as "the norm." Here's a 5-day example:
   - Day 1 – Students line up according to birth date (month/day) and the teacher divides them into partners or trios
   - Day 2 – Students receive a playing card and form "same suit" trios
   - Day 3 – Students use the same playing card (or a new one) to form "like number" quads

- Day 4 – Students form "four corners" groups by reporting to the area of the room that corresponds to their favorite food: pizza, burgers, tacos, or smoothies; they subdivide into trios or quads
- Day 5 – Students line up in ROY G BIV order according to clothing color. The teacher "folds" the line to give students a partner from the opposite end of the spectrum

In each grouping configuration, students should have a genuine task to complete with a concrete outcome produced. This sets the stage for authentic community-building, with the "players" working interdependently toward a common goal.

3. <u>Practice routines and interactive instructional strategies in non-academic situations</u>. Routines for getting into groups, moving furniture, retrieving and returning electronics/supplies, securing make-up work following an absence, and responding to signals for noise control and transitions are best practiced as "dry runs" before being used during instruction. Likewise, engaging students in interactive activities in a "content-free fashion" during the first week of school sets the stage for content-based uses of those strategies in the coming weeks and months. For example, after students move into one of the instructional groupings described in Point 2, they could complete a "matrix" graphic organizer finding similarities and differences among group members. This introduces the logistics of the strategy in a stress-free manner so that groups will have more success when using a matrix to compare and contrast content (e.g., different biomes).

4. <u>Collaboratively establish classroom rules, norms and routines</u>. With student input, develop a list of guidelines for behavior during in-class group work and independent tasks, as well as for online interactions (both at home and in school). Post these in a prominent place and periodically prompt students to revisit them to see how they are "holding up." If possible, engage students in a group task *before* asking them to develop the guidelines. This way, they use their own experience to craft parameters that build on what went well and anticipate or alleviate what went wrong.

Each of these approaches take time—time, a teacher might argue, that could be used for teaching "real" content. But consider this: An up-front investment in a solid start to the year can actually *buy back* time back later in the year. If students begin the year knowing how to work in groups, expecting to interact with all of their classmates, and being familiar with complex but worthy strategies, they'll get down to the business of learning more quickly and efficiently than they would if these tasks were dropped on them "cold." The first weeks of school are the perfect time to set the tone for ongoing, collaborative and worthwhile learning.

[Bio on following page]

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