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OF NOTE

A Case for Talking about Sex with Teenagers

Let's Talk about Sex-in English Class, by Andrew Simmons

Andrew Simmons, a teacher, writes compellingly and persuasively about braving sex talk in the literature classroom. Ultimately, Simmons says, "If students don't have literature to help them think about unhealthy relationships and why physical pleasure plays the role it does in human life, they risk getting their clues from inferior sources." He cites various features of contemporary teenage life, including the age-old experiences of relationships and burgeoning identities, as well as new forms of engagement with the culture such as Disney movies, Snapchat and Twitter. Educators will find Simmons' argument familiar in some ways and provocative in others. In lively prose - writing, for instance, "High school students have sex lives. They throw themselves into relationships like lemmings." - Simmons advocates for a courageous, inclusive approach to studying with teens what is ostensibly "adult" literature. The topic is expansive and encompasses educator's widest purposes: windows and mirrors, human development, social-emotional development and ultimately, being prepared to live in this world. Above all, Simmons writes, "To be bolder, braver, smarter and safer, [students] need to be able to talk and write about their reality." Though novice teachers should not take on this topic without proper guidance, this article will give high schools and English departments alike a jumping off point for profound considerations of our approaches to student learning around sex and sexuality.

Meghan Tally, American School in London

The Atlantic Monthly, February 4, 2015

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ARTICLES, BLOGS, AND OTHER MEDIA

Real Work Leads to Real Learning

Habits of Mind: Why college students who do serious historical research become independent, analytical thinkers, by Anthony Grafton and James Grossman

From both experience and research, educators understand the importance of student attention and engagement. In "Habits of Mind," Anthony Grafton and James Grossman, from Princeton and the American Historical Association respectively, urge us to reach for attention and engagement through a specific discipline - history - and a specific assignment - student-conducted research. They begin by delineating current trends in thinking that undervalue the humanities for not guaranteeing job prospects after college graduation. The authors then cite research and experience that present things differently. Their work has shown them that when students are involved in serious historical research they bind the pursuit of meaning to analytical thinking skills. Learning to understand the past is an art that can be taught alongside the skills of forming arguments, debating, weighing evidence, mastering datasets and determining what matters. The authors know that doing well-sourced historical research, with the support of a strong, mentoring teacher, makes specific contributions to a learner's toolkit: the scholarly ability to differentiate between a weak argument and a strong one, to identify a research question that matters personally and academically, to differentiate between evidence and opinion, and to construct and test a hypothesis. Though the article focuses on college students, it details needed skills for independent, analytical thinkers of many ages. Grafton and Grossman argue for history, for engagement in research and more so, for helping build habits of mind that will last our learners a lifetime.

Elizabeth Morley, The Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, University of Toronto, Canada

The American Scholar, Winter 2015

How to Spell Learning

How Spelling Keeps Kids from Learning, by Luba Vangelova

Readers who recognize the frustration of the different sounds of "ough" in the words *enough, through, cough, dough, ought* and *bough* are familiar with the difficulty of teaching literacy in English, given its status as one of the most irregularly spelled languages in the world. Beginning from that familiar struggle, Luba Vangelova adds a new angle to the well-worn subject of international test score comparisons. She argues that schoolchildren in English-speaking countries must devote much more time and effort to spelling idiosyncrasies than students learning languages with stronger connections between their spoken and written forms (such as Finnish or Korean). This effort comes before most children are developmentally ready and results in a high failure rate during crucial academic years. More significantly, the time dedicated to the various spelling rules and exceptions in English could be used for other subjects, like math. Vanglova chronicles potential efforts to streamline early reading instruction through a simplified phonetic system and includes an interesting suggestion that necessary reform in spelling could informally rise out of the shorthand used in texting. Though the solutions are not clear, the article prompts engaging discussion on the opportunity cost of teaching children to read and write at earlier and earlier ages, and how we think about spelling in those early years.

Michael Arjona, The Walker School, GA

The Atlantic, February 9, 2015

Missing the Forest for the Laptops

Can Students Have Too Much Tech? by Susan Pinker

Susan Pinker is a developmental psychologist and columnist known for her advocacy for face-to-face contact, so (perhaps predictably) she questions technology as a "policy-making panacea." Pinker's article invites us to consider the ways in which increased technology in the service of learning can be meaningful at best and superficial or counterproductive at worst - particularly for underprivileged students. She points to evidence of "drive-by education" when policies and provisions for laptops have backfired and "adults distribute ... laptops and then walk away." In such cases, laptops can interfere with students' abilities to focus on and complete their assignments amidst a barrage of distractions, including social media. The worthiness of an investment comes directly from its "perfect" suitability to a task, Pinker argues. She reminds us that only the right tools and the right training for teachers produce better results for student learning. Simply automating a task without innovating leaves students vulnerable to the mainstay distractions of the digital age without enriching their skills and understandings. While Pinker focuses on public schools and public money, her admonition is nonetheless instructive in the independent sector: high-tech solutions aren't worthy in themselves but require thoughtful selection, implementation and professional development. Pinker also illuminates the disparity between students with more and less supervision, encouraging our thinking about how we provide support for our students as they use various machines.

Meghan Tally, American School in London

The New York Times, January 30, 2015

A Dream Deformed

America's Elite: An Hereditary Meritocracy

In this editorial briefing from *The Economist*, we are reminded of the strange mix of wealth, access and opportunity as it relates to our forming of the American Dream. While we still believe that people can make it in America as long as they have "talent, perseverance and gumption," the facts do not support our optimism. As the lead in says, "The children of the rich and powerful are increasingly well suited to earning wealth and power themselves. That's a problem." This short piece points to tensions between high achievement by America's elite and how this achievement is in part due to access to the best schools and enrichment growing up. While the children of the elite used to secure positions of wealth and power through birth, today they are combining familial access with their own high achievement at America's top colleges and universities. As independent schools struggle to create access for all students, coupled with serving those who can support these programs in our schools, we must ask what we are actually accomplishing. Though this editorial offers no easy answers, it is provocative and would serve as an excellent classroom catalyst for deep discussions about economic class - what it meant and what it is coming to mean.

Eric Temple, Lick-Wilmerding High School, CA

The Economist, January 24, 2015

BOOKS

Craft of the Art

Teach like a Champion 2.0: 62 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College, by Doug Lemov

Teachers at independent schools are often skeptical of "techniques" for teaching; they prefer to consider teaching an art rather than a craft. But a decade of research on cognitive development and instructional effectiveness offers the potential to help beginning teachers hone their craft and those at the top of their game get even better. Author and school leader Doug Lemov offers sixty-two techniques of small and actionable ways to improve teaching, along with descriptions for implementation and an accompanying CD to help readers view the techniques in action. Lemov has collected these techniques by studying teachers whose practices yield consistently strong results in student achievement. The book is organized around four core teaching challenges: checking for understanding, creating an ethos of academic rigor, developing content knowledge and building a culture of power and joy. Lemov's sample of highly effective teachers work in urban public school settings where there is an impetus to improve student learning and use instructional time efficiently. While student performance might be assessed in different ways in most independent schools, instructional expertise is nonetheless a similarly scarce and vital resource. Independent school educators would benefit from selecting techniques, perhaps one or two a year, that hold promise for improving teaching in their discipline and context. Lemov's message is that all teachers, even great ones, can improve by implementing small changes aimed at overcoming weaknesses and building on strengths.

Pearl Rock Kane, Klingenstein Center, NY

Jossey-Bass, 2014

The Purpose of Public

Reign of Error. The Hoax of the Privatization Movement and the Danger to America's Public Schools, by Diane Ravitch

With clear evidence and thoughtful arguments, Diane Ravitch defends America's public school system, examines the impact of the charter school movement on it, and proposes alternative solutions to its difficulties. Addressing the widely acknowledged connection between educational difficulties and poverty, Ravitch proposes that simultaneous solutions be undertaken to address both issues. Likewise, she criticizes a privatization movement that, in her view, attempts to fix schools without dealing with the underlying problem of poverty. She emphasizes that, on the whole, charter schools and public schools achieve the same results when they educate similar populations of children, and she criticizes what she says is the lack of oversight of the charter movement, since it is granted public money. Because education is a public good, independent school educators need to understand the intricacies of the relationship between different school types. How public schools and charter schools fare impacts the independent school world, and in a climate critical of public schools, it is beneficial to hear the other side of the argument. A comprehensive picture can help educators work together to provide the best school environments possible for all children.

Molly Jane Layton, Klingenstein Program, MA 2015

Alfred A. Knopf , 2013

One-Person Schoolhouses, One and All

Don't Go Back to School: A Handbook for Learning Anything, by Kio Stark

Self-described independent learning activist Kio Stark has written a book - a manifesto, really - to challenge conventional modes of learning and credentialing. At a time when more American students are homeschooled than enrolled in independent schools, Stark's focus on independent learning has no agenda for reforming schools. In fact, she and the speakers in her collection seem to believe that our notions of school are so fundamentally tired that self-teaching is the only way to proceed. Furthermore, the book makes the argument that our current environment is ripe for precisely this kind of approach: we can all be one-person schoolhouses. Stark's "handbook for learning anything" is comprised of short, often pithy stories of self-motivation and "grit" in action. In it she tells the stories of "self-taught" successes in journalism, film, arts, entrepreneurship, technology and sciences. Usefully, her synthesis near the conclusion, "How to be an Independent Learner," reads a bit like an action plan, with the exception of "Get a Job." If you're looking to awaken yourself (or your colleagues) to the DIY, web-based present, pick up this book.

Ted Graf, Latin School of Chicago

Greenglass Books, 2013

To submit comments or suggestions, or to request that the newsletter be sent to a colleague, contact Cynthia Uejio, Operations Manager at klingbrief@tc.columbia.edu.

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