

The other day I was leading a training with one of our Sacramento high schools and came upon a really interesting discussion and question.

The group was 9th grade English teachers, a very thoughtful team of good learners.

I opened with this quote from Bruce Joyce and the following writing/discussion prompt.

“Our study groups also begin to realize that sometimes the objective is to virtually eliminate dispersion in a distribution. For example, instructors of pilots wish to teach so effectively that no one crashes during training and, even better, that everyone learns to fly. Driver education has parallel objectives. Some instructional objectives need to focus on certain objectives for all students, such as ensuring that all students learn to read and can write serviceable prose, are knowledgeable about citizenship and how to participate effectively in the society, and so on. Educators who think from this point of view can generate intensive instructional initiatives and conduct informal studies that determine if they are able to achieve “total” effects like these.”

Prompt: How might this apply to our intentions with Grade Nine? What might be some skills/knowledge/processes/attitudes we want ALL students to possess? Do you believe this is possible?

The discussion was fascinating.

In all our High School projects, we focus on Grade Nine as the pivotal year. We supply students' with literacy tools, skills and confidence for high school success, and stress how much what we learn in English is applicable to all their classes.

We create a culture of adults taking pride in teaching Freshmen, knowing how consequential this year is. In some respects, they become almost 9th Grade specialists. I push the envelope by stating that anyone can teach Seniors, it is with Freshmen that we have to place our very best teachers.

Yet I don't know that the teachers had really considered what do we want/expect ALL students to learn in Grade Nine? The concept of NO distribution was a new thought, and a provocative one.

So many English standards are really processes (vs. content knowledge), ones you don't "master" per say (e.g., reading analytically, writing with persuasion, etc.). However, it was interesting to consider are there skills we feel are within grasp of "mastery" for all? Can we say ALL freshmen will leave the 9th Grade Year able to _____?

Teachers spoke a lot about student attitudes, but less about specific skills. Some were not sure of the supposition at all, "When you say all students, do you mean ALL students?"

It created some important reflection and conversation.

I advanced that we can, and should, project an expectation that ALL our freshmen will be able to comprehend basic text and have command of basic comprehension processes--that we can put most any text in front of them and they will have the tools to make meaning from it, deploying any number of comprehension strategies we teach and they practice daily.

Most teachers bought in, believing they are that powerful. I believe they are... They just had never considered the idea in that light.

What a concept, huh?