CLASSROOM TEACHING

It's Eerie - But We Can Predict the Future of Education

Like those drivers heading toward the jam, our students begin the journey full of optimism. We can see exactly where the bottleneck is. We know what's ahead. The question is - will we wave them through into the same fate, or will we clear the road so there's no traffic jam to start with.

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Education often starts with a bang and ends with a fizzle, that can change.

If you've ever driven on a divided highway, you've probably seen this: on the other side of the median, traffic is barely moving, one lane open, a police officer waving one weary driver through at a time. You watch the congestion snake back for kilometers, four or more, and think, *I'm glad I'm not over there*.

Then, minutes later, you pass the end of the backup and see cars just now heading toward it - drivers smiling, chatting, maybe singing along to the radio - completely unaware of the traffic nightmare ahead. But you know. You've seen what's waiting for them. You can predict their future.

The same is true for education.

What John Hattie named "The Jenkins Curve" makes it heartbreakingly clear. In my study of 3,000 K-12 teachers from five U.S. states, I asked two questions:

1. What grade level do you teach?
2. What percentage of your students love school?

The results create a map of decline. Imagine 100 bright-eyed children entering kindergarten - nearly all of them loving school. By the end of second grade, 82 still love it. By sixth grade, that number has dropped to 65. By high school, half of the original group still loves school - but many of those are hanging on for sports, friends, clubs, and performances, not the joy of learning itself.

And when I ask today's teachers how many of them loved learning in school when they were 17 or 18, the number is almost always the same: fewer than one in ten.

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We have all witnessed the three sad transitions - captured in *The Jenkins Curve* - a curve no educator ever desired and none would design on purpose.
From **wonderlust** to **wonderlost**.
From **resilience** to **defiance**.
From **mastery** to **disastery**.

Our ability to predict is not a gift - it's a warning. The only question is: will we keep waving discouraged students into the jam...or will we clear the road ahead.

So, what are we to do? Will we rewrite the story entirely?

We can't help but smile when we watch toddlers learn. They begin with wonder, press on with resilience, and finally master the task at hand. This is no accident - God wove this learning formula into us from birth. Our calling as educators is to protect it, to keep wonder plus resilience alive until it blooms into mastery. Let's make it our motto: **W + R = M.**

W. Edwards Deming taught, *"A bad system will beat a good person every time."* The problem isn't our students - it's the system. And in Dan Heath's newest book, he reminds us that the way to fix what's broken is to **identify the constraint and replace it.**

So - what's the constraint draining the wonder and resilience from students?

It's the **chapter-by-chapter teaching method**, reinforced by weekly quizzes, that has become the default. The root of the problem? We've confused the textbook with the curriculum. Wrong. The **table of contents** is the curriculum; the rest of the book is just one method of teaching - chapter by chapter.

John C. Maxwell says, "You don't change the future by fighting the old; you change it by building the new." It's time to build the new.

Look up the sign language for "boredom" and perform it as you say the word - you'll feel exactly what students feel under the current system.

Clearing the Road for Wonder, Resilience, and Mastery

1. Give Students the Map

Start the journey by handing students a numbered list of the key concepts to be learned for the year or semester - clear, specific, and measurable. This is not a syllabus. The syllabus is what's to be taught. Key concepts define what's to be learned.

When the goal is a skill rather than pure content, use the free **Dichotomous Rubric** at CrazySimpleEducation.com in place of a key concept list.

2. Make Students Co-Architects

Lead students into true partnership in deciding the order in which concepts will be learned and how they will be learned. Student creativity, choice, and community must be visible everywhere. Draw on every resource - your teacher's guide, your own experience, your colleagues, the power of Artificial Intelligence and of course the genius of our students. We know creativity + choice spark wonder, and when learners pursue their own ideas, resilience follows. Students inevitably connect their personal passions to the content - and that is where mastery blooms.

3. Measure Progress in Ways That Motivate

Assessment should be a checkpoint, not a choke point. Nearly every week, give a quiz on a **random sample** of the key concepts. Think of learning like a four-day journey: after Day 1, am I 25% of the way there? After Day 2, halfway? These quizzes do the same for mastery when wonder, creativity, and choice are the norm. By the end of the first quarter, do I know 25% of the content? By semester's end, 50%? And by year's end - 100%? Progress becomes visible, tangible, and worth celebrating.

4. Celebrate Like Champions

When choice and creativity replace the chapter-by-chapter grind, students naturally help each other, just like teammates on the field. So, we add up the *total correct* answers for the entire class. Traditional finals end with students celebrating alone - teachers not invited. But when athletic teams win, coaches and players celebrate together. Post class totals throughout the year, and when the team hits its highest mark yet - *an All-Time Best* - teachers and students cheer together. Because in the new game of learning, we're all on the same team.

The toddler sequence of **wonder + resilience = mastery** is available to every school. It's time to relegate the chapter-by-chapter boredom to the history of education textbooks - right alongside the dunce cap and inkwell.

Dr. W. Edwards Deming taught that the number of people needed to transform an organization is the square root of the total people. If a district has 250 teachers, just 16 - plus representatives from administration - can lead the transformation by ensuring all the elements of **W + R = M** are in place. This happens through purposeful staff development and classroom visits with those sixteen teacher-leaders.

Deming also taught that there are only two types of problems: **common** and **special** - and that roughly 96% of our problems are common. Common problems are built into the system, and it is the responsibility of top leadership to fix them. The Jenkins Curve is clear proof that U.S. educators face a common problem - and I suspect Australia's curve would look strikingly similar.

My hope in writing this is that a few years from now, we will hear stories of remarkable educational improvement from Australia - and from anywhere educators have decided to replace the constraint on the divided highway of learning. In those places, **W + R = M** will be alive and well... and the only "wonderlost" left will be the 4% we are still reaching for with all our heart.

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