Ask yourself why you became a teacher...

If you are like most teachers your answer will have general themes of “making a difference in the lives of students” or “enjoyment when seeing students learn”. 

Michael Fullan says “Teaching at its core is a moral profession. Scratch a good teacher and you will find a moral purpose”. With the very best of intentions we venture into our classrooms each day determined to make that difference.

What would you do if you knew that some of the things that we do in our schools, often unintentionally, are counterproductive if learning really is our key goal?

We are in the business of learning

Students are mirror images of who we are in our classrooms. We create a culture by our actions, the words we use, what we consider important and what we do and do not give attention.

What sort of message do we send when we do some of the following?

- Teach without finding out what they already know
- Are overly concerned with only answers to questions
- Use the word ‘work’ without referring to ‘learning’
- Pack away the ‘work’ and never talking about it again
- Always ask for hands up in the classroom
- Display only final copies and finished artworks on our classroom walls

Are you ready to be the lead learner in your classroom?

John Hattie talks about things that have the greatest impact on student learning in his book “Visible Learning for Teachers”. He advocates that practices that allow teachers to see themselves through the eyes of the learner have the greatest effect on student growth. So, how can we be sure that we send a message that student learning is our key goal?

Seeing ourselves through the eyes of our students

SETTING THE SCENE FOR SUCCESS

Find your starting point - Take the time to assess your students’ current understanding, interest and skill level. Graham Nuthall says that 50% of what we teach, students already know. When we assess our students prior to learning, we can get rid of things we don’t need to spend time teaching and we can plan lessons appropriate to their learning needs.

Share the learning intention with your students - Think about this as the non negotiable or enduring understanding of your lesson/unit of learning. When you share this purpose/learning intention with your students studies suggest that they are 85% likely to achieve the target.

Below is an example of learning intentions for the Stage 3 HSIE unit - GOLD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POOR LEARNING INTENTION</th>
<th>STRONG LEARNING INTENTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We are going to learn about GOLD.</td>
<td>We are going to learn about the impact that the discovery of gold had on Australian culture, population and political structures.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Pedagogy should at its best be about what teachers do that not only helps students to learn but actively strengthens their capacity to learn” — David Hargreaves, Learning for Life, 2004

“...if I had to reduce all of the educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach him accordingly”. Ausubel 1968

Resources:
BOOK The Learning Powered School-Pioneering 21st Century Education Guy Claxton
ARTICLE Why Teachers Must Become Change Agents Michael G. Fullan
BOOK The Hidden Lives of Learning Graham Nuthall 2007

More information:
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HOW2Learn website

Provide success criteria — When students are given the ‘keys to success’ it is like providing them with a road map for learning. We make it very clear what they need to do to create a high quality work sample. We can do this by providing ‘the steps for success’, rubrics or marking criteria. We can model our expectations and show quality samples (examples created by other students or those samples found on websites such as the Assessment Resource Centre) from which they can create independent examples of their learning.

MAKING THE LEARNING OBVIOUS

Be a learner yourself — risk taking and mistake making are important processes in learning.

Be fallible — make mistakes in front of your students (and talk about them).
Share your own learning frustrations and challenges.
Tell them when you do not know something and help them find the answer.
Talk about how new learning is tricky and does require persistence.
Explain to them that learning is about figuring out what doesn’t work as well as what does.

Using the word LEARNING not work — ‘Put your work away’, ‘Get on with your work’, ‘Bring your work to me’, ‘Let’s mark your work’. Do these words sound familiar? We use the word ‘work’ 98% of the time and the word ‘learning’ only 2% of the time in classrooms. That’s what the studies say! Make an effort to put the word ‘learning’ back into your vocabulary.

When we use the word ‘work’ instead of ‘learning’ we can send the message to our students that we are only concerned with the answer or the final product and less concerned with how they found the answer and what they learned along the way. Also we can program them to think of school as toil, drudgery and hard yakka if we use the word ‘work’. Think about it—what do you think of when I say the word ‘work’?

Create walls that reflect the learning journey

Think about your classroom walls. Is there evidence of the learning journey? Think about displaying some of the following:
• Rough drafts alongside final copies
• Ways that did not work
• Different ways of getting to the same answer
• Our mind maps
• Questions we have about this topic

Salvage reflection time — If we do not take the time to reflect on important lessons, we can send a false message that we do not really care about their learning. In the busyness of a day we can rush onto the next event and never talk about a lesson again, ever! Reflection is an opportunity for students to mull over what they have learned, hear opinions, methods and ideas from others, and find others ways to get to the answer, clear up misconceptions, make links with their learning and draw out the enduring understandings.

Reflection can take various forms such as a knee to knee chat with a buddy (whilst you eavesdrop!), recording in a learning journal, putting your page on the learning wall, post it notes of things ‘I found tricky today’, collecting ‘questions I still have’...

MORE ON BUILDING A LEARNING CULTURE IN NEWSLETTER 3...