

The Next Big Thing in Pedagogy

Just when you thought it was safe to go into the classroom with active learning as the latest thing (even though it's been around since the early 90s), along comes a newer paradigm.

With *The Creative Workforce* (Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales Press, 2008), Erica McWilliam has become a major spokesperson for an even newer pedagogical approach she calls the meddler-in-the-middle. According to McWilliam, a new pedagogy was needed because "the high ground of 'guiding' [can] too easily collapse into passive childminding and worksheet distribution. 'Guide-on-the-Side' then becomes a high moral-ethical excuse for the teacher to step out of the main game of teaching and to sit at the margins of the physical, mental and emotional activity that is so vital to learning" (87). The meddler-in-the-middle, McWilliam's solution to passivity, "positions the teacher and student as mutually involved in assembling and disassembling cultural products." Meddling, she continues, "is a re-positioning of teacher and student as co-directors and co-editors of their social world" (88). Meddler-in-the-middle teachers, according to McWilliam, demonstrate several traits:

- "focus on using content to create new knowledge, not on memorizing content"
- "have clear strategies for helping their students 'know what to do when they don't know what to do'"
- "are good at setting up experiments"
- "help kids fail without shame"
- "are capable users of digital technology, but they do not rely on it to do the teaching for them"
- "have a good understanding of the culture of all kids"
- "invite noise, uncertainty and argument as part of the fun of learning" (108-9).

The meddler-in-the-middle approach, then, was developed in order to foster creativity in learners, to shake them out of their passivity, and to push them toward higher order thinking; in the revised Bloom's taxonomy, "Creating" sits atop the pyramid. As true meddler-in-the-middle-ism necessitates both an engaged instructor and student, the approach demands much creativity on the part of the instructor to get away from the sage-on-the-stage lecture (Paradigm I) at one extreme and pure group work (Paradigm II) at the other.

How can the meddler-in-the-middle work in your discipline? That will demand an openness on your part to try something new and, of course, a little creativity.

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