

Teachers' Most Powerful Role? Adding Context

MindShift

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By Shawn McCusker

During a recent unit on World War II, Courtney Wilhelm's U.S. History class conducted a leader's conference. Students explored broad topics such as economic and political philosophies from the perspective of European leaders from the 1930's and 1940's. When that activity was finished, the students were asked to respond to current global issues from the perspective of their leader, and the topic of the Russian annexation of the Crimea came up. Wilhelm was able to draw parallels between Crimea and Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia. Each of the students was able to connect their expertise on a past leader to gain insight on today's world, and Wilhelm was able to use her expertise on both history and current events to take the lesson to a new level.

In classes where students connect ideas from the abstract to real-life events, the role of the teacher — as Wilhelm illustrates — [moves from being a distributor](#) of information to one of nurturing students as they collect, evaluate, and process information into unique learning products. The [students' role consequently moves from that of a receiver](#) of the teacher's knowledge to that of a researcher, curator, and creator. Products of student creation and individual

expressions of learning become important parts of the learning process that are shared, evaluated by classmates, and built upon by the teacher.

For some, these changing roles might signal the end of an era where the teacher serves as a content expert. It may seem as though the teacher no longer carries the sole responsibility for content delivery, bringing into question the need for them to master their entire field in order to teach. Why must teachers spend their entire career mastering the information in their chosen field if this responsibility will ultimately fall to the students in class?

It's here, in these seemingly disjointed moments, that the expertise of the teacher is crucial to uniting the class's learning.

In reality, however, the converse is true. As students delve into content within any unit, especially where *they're* given choices in selecting their topic, natural gaps will occur in their understanding. There will still be a need for context and background knowledge as they work to research and process their sources. It's unlikely that, even when given guidelines to narrow the possibilities, students working independently will all end up focusing in the same place. When students work in groups, or as individuals, their products will be varied, and often — at first glance — seem disconnected, dissimilar, and separate.

And it's here, in these seemingly disjointed moments, that the expertise of the teacher is crucial to uniting the class's learning. Teachers need to create the dynamic that transforms individual moments into a broader experience where the class benefits from the complete range of learning that has taken place. And this can happen in different ways such as discussions, class blogs, back-channels, or any number of sharing activities, as the teacher solidifies the learning mosaic created by the class.

Teacher as Conductor in the Classroom Orchestra

One analogy for the role of the teacher in an abundant economy of information is that of the conductor. The conductor stands before the class and uses the individual performances of the students to produce a broader more powerful work. At various times during the group's "concert," the conductor may call attention to the work and talents of different individuals. Throughout the lesson, different sections of class work are highlighted, helping to set the overall tone of the lesson. The smaller contributions of the students are melded into the greater whole. Soloists may have a moment to shine, but the work is constructed from the entire group. The conductor may never play a single note, but his understanding of each small part of the larger work makes a far more powerful product possible.

In real life, an orchestra led by someone with knowledge of only one instrument, or by someone who lacks an understanding of the talents of its members, will not be capable of reaching the same potential as one led by an effective conductor who is an expert in the field of music and who is highly aware of the group's talents.

This is also true of the classroom teacher in the new economy of information. Group work can be assigned and completed, but the classroom teacher must unite it together into something more. They must recognize the potential of the individual work that the students do and unite it together into a greater and more powerful work. When information is available in abundance, teachers will still be subject matter experts, but their true value will lie in their ability to facilitate and share the expertise of their students.

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