

A Suggested Approach for Reducing the DE-Professionalizing of Teaching

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The work of highly trained professionals is characterized by decision-making in the best interests of the clients they serve. The more rigid and prescriptive the work of teachers becomes, the less likely it will be that they can make the individual decisions and modifications that serve the wide assortment of differences that our students bring into the classroom every day. And although “big data” and “high-stakes testing” are popular buzzwords of education policy makers these days, the only data that anyone pays attention to is standardized achievement scores. The advent of the Common Core State Standards, high-stakes testing, and the overwhelming abundance of Internet-based data has resulted in actions now being taken to add more and more standardization to the profession of teaching. Some states are even recommending full time classroom audio and video recordings of all teaching activity so that supervisors can monitor how precisely teachers are following the script. And recent proposals in 17 state capitols and the U.S. Congress would require schools to post all instructional materials online, including books, articles, hand-outs, and videos. Advocates say the measures will give parents more insight into teaching and learning, while opponents say they would place additional burdens on teachers to standardize everything they do. What is becoming of one of the world’s oldest and most respected professions?

Curricular Enrichment Infusion

Whether we like it or not, decisions about curricular prescription and standardized testing are not going away; and state department of educations and ministry-driven decisions will continue to be made by people far removed from what goes on every day on in highly diverse classrooms all over the world. The infusion process described here is something teachers can do by following a few of what we have found to be very creative and enjoyable steps to make their classrooms more enjoyable and engaging places for learning. [Caution: Administrators should be assured that attempts to enrich the curriculum will not result in “dumping” any of the required material! Remember, their main criterion for success is rises in standardized test scores].

An initial activity is for everyone to review in the curricular infusion process is to go over the following four basic rules of brain storming.

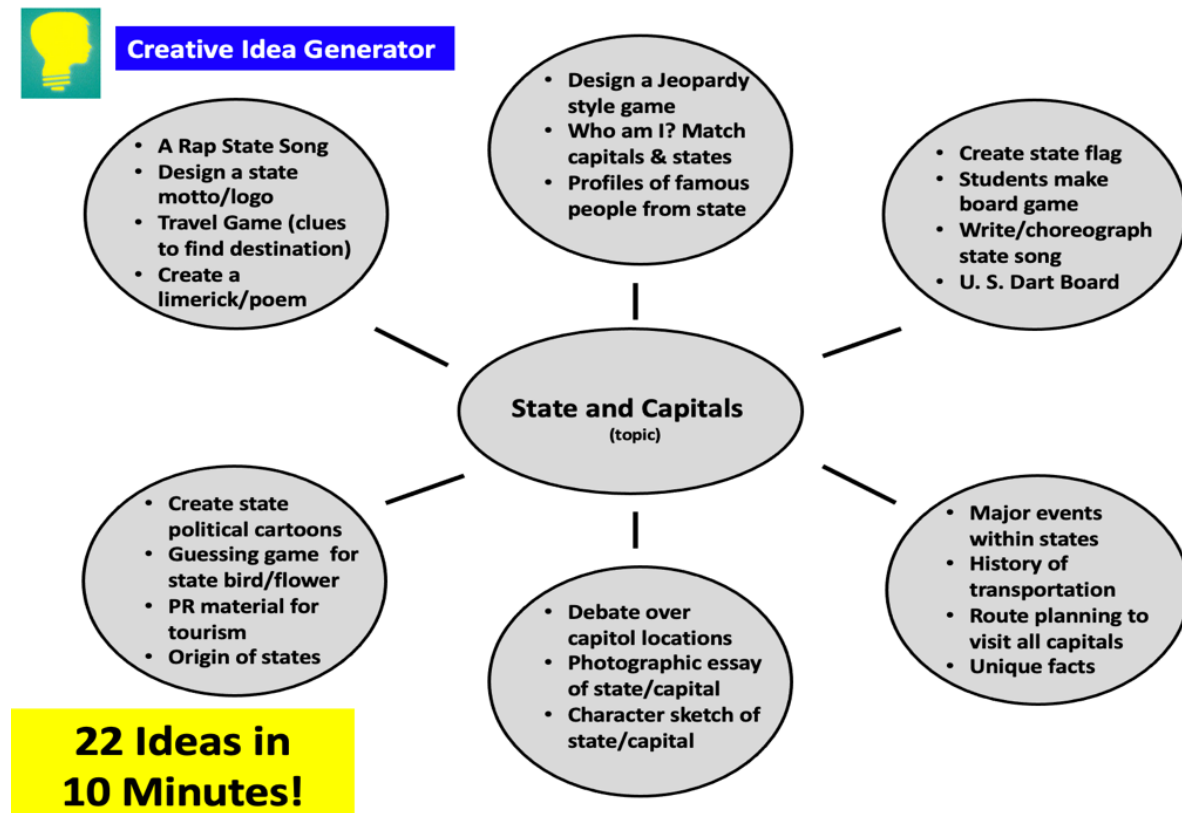
1. Deferred judgment—evaluation is ruled out (both criticism and praise).
2. Freewheeling is welcomed (Wild ideas are encouraged...You are more likely to find creative ideas by being wild first and “taming down” the idea second).
3. Quantity is wanted (Typically the later ideas are more imaginative).
4. Combinations and improvements of ideas are sought (hitch-hiking / piggy backing).

The process begins by small groups of teachers coming together around a specific subject area (Math, Reading, Science, etc.), and selecting a curricular unit or topic within that subject. The main questions they should ask is are (1) How much of “learning” the topic depends upon memorization? The second, and most important question is (2) What are some of the ideas we can come up with that will make this topic more enjoyable and engaging. A planning form called the *Creative Idea Generator* is used to facilitate the process and one or two persons should serve as white board or flip chart recorders. For example, a teacher in a Math group covering the times tables came up with what he called a game. He simply asked students who could (in 10 minutes) come up with the most ways and the most original¹ ways to make the number 24. He put two examples on the blackboard [$23+1=24$, $22+2=24$, etc. and $6 \times 8 \div 2=24$] to give them some ideas about the type and range of possible answers. Needless to say, the students became much more excited and interested in math than simply memorizing times tables.

The example summarized in the figure below is from a group of Social Studies teachers who brain stormed ways of making learning the names of the U. S. states and their capitols more fun and interesting. Over the next couple of years some of the teachers that participated in this infusion workshop sent me examples of activities pursued by their students as a result of their training in the infusion process. A favorite example was one group of students who researched unique aspects about each state so they could prepare a series of five matching quizzes. I learned something I didn't know about my home state of Connecticut—this state is where the Frisbee was invented. Another group of students studied why and how capitol sites were selected. Did you know that when a French officer standing along the bank of the Mississippi River (following the time of the Louisiana Purchase) was asked where the capitol of Louisiana should be located, he planted his red baton in the mud and said “The capitol shall be here and be called *Baton Rouge*.”

¹ Original in the sense that no one else came up with the same idea.

The most important thing to remember from these two examples is the research that students needed to carry out the open-ended questions that were raised by their teachers. Virtually all follow-up discussions with teachers using this process said that they saw more creativity, engagement, and enjoyment in learning that brought true excitement to regular curricular coverage of topics in their classrooms.



What I like best about this curricular infusion process is that it gives teachers an opportunity to use their creativity in a professional way; and this in turn has resulted in much more creative and investigative activities on the parts of their students. We are losing many good teachers because they feel their work has been regimented to the point that they feel more like clerks who passes out work sheets than highly trained professionals. As mentioned above, advanced career professionals differ from assembly line workers in that their work requires decision making in the best interests of their clients. And it is the kind of joy and excitement in teaching that I have seen in teachers when they are given opportunities such as the two examples

mentioned above. Teachers do not always need to be at the bottom of the food chain when it comes to deciding what goes on in their classrooms!

If we hope to reignite the passion, love, and joy in teaching that seems to be disappearing from our classrooms because of over-standardization *we need to focus on things teachers can do* that are not designed to radically change the prescribed curriculum. Rather, teacher participation in gentle and evolutionary steps that can make any topic more interesting and engaging will help to stem the DE-professionalism that is taking place in our noble profession. Curricular enrichment infusion is a relatively easy and enjoyable process that will make our classrooms more enjoyable and engaging place and make our teachers feel more like professionals who are contributing to the profession rather than just receiving information from “above.” Topdown proposals for change may have some advantages but the teachers carrying out the day-to-day job of making learning more effective should have a part in how this is done.