THINKING ABOUT TEACHING TO THE EDGES

Thomas MacLaren School is unusual in its commitment to the belief that "The best education for the best is the best education *for all*" [emphasis added], and to the expansiveness of the complete subject in perhaps the central sentence of our mission statement: "*All human beings* can know truth, practice goodness, and create beauty" [emphasis added].

If we are to live out our mission and vision, then, it is incumbent on us to find a way to give an excellent education to all the students in our charge. Teaching to the edges helps us do that. A set of instructional practices built on the idea (and plenty of evidence) that when we plan on the front end for our students "at the edges"—gifted students, English Language Learners, students with disabilities, students in need of a challenge, students with particular strengths and struggles—we actually do a better job of teaching *all* our students.

At MacLaren, teaching to the edges IS…

- A means of making our classrooms highly engaging for all and of helping all our students become more awake and alive to the world.
- Universal, Tier I instruction, across grade levels and subject areas.
- A means of removing barriers in the classroom so that all students have greater access to the curriculum.
- A set of shared and agreed-upon MacLaren practices.
- Proactively designing ways of challenging, accommodating, scaffolding, supporting students rather than reactively trying to fix things that did not work.
- A meaningful response to the question all teachers ask ourselves at some point: "I taught it; why didn't they learn it?"
- Equipping teachers to do our jobs: effectively lead students in wonder and rigor.
- Infused into how we think about teaching, pedagogy, mission and vision, and the curriculum as a whole.
- Ongoing through shared planning at the direction of lead teachers.
- Lived out in the classroom.

And at MacLaren, teaching to the edges is NOT…

- Busywork, an extra, "more to do."
- A change to the curriculum.
- An attempt to make everything we teach somehow particularly relevant to our students or reflective of their personal stories.
- Catering to individual "learning styles."

We focus our efforts on four areas:

1. Learning goals
2. Formative assessment
3. Lesson planning
4. Materials (presently, our focus is on using a shared set of graphic organizers)

Learning goals

- Learning goals are a means of setting a specific goal for a given lesson, with the understanding that students who know (and take ownership of) the goal they are working toward are better equipped to be the agents of their own education.

- In a standards-based education, learning goals are often a recitation of the standard: "Students will explain how people, products, cultures, and ideas interact and are interconnected in the Western Hemisphere and how they have impacted modern times" (*Colorado Academic Standards: Sixth Grade Social Studies, Standard 1, History*).

- But at MacLaren, our content-rich curriculum is more than a litany of the standards, and our pedagogy is often at odds with the sometimes-mechanical nature of SMART goals—many of our learning goals will *not* be measurable!

- "Appreciate the beauty of symmetry" is a distinctly *un*measurable learning goal, but that might be precisely the right goal for a fourth-grade math lesson on symmetry at MacLaren.

- Similarly, it might be counterpedagogical to share the goal of the class or lesson with the students from the start: some lessons will begin with a question, a problem, an anchor task that springboards the class into the learning goal—it is very possible that a teacher might not actually communicate the goal until halfway through the lesson.

- It requires care and forethought and conversation with lead teachers to develop meaningful MacLaren learning goals for students to pursue, and it requires intentionality on the part of teachers to follow up on the goal with the students, to frequently return to it and help the students to consider their progress toward the goal. (Clearly, this will look different for kindergarteners than for twelfth graders.)

- In addition, it requires a certain shift in mindset on the part of teachers to move away from naming the *activity* of a given lesson to actually knowing and naming the *goal.* Activities are those tasks that the class will complete during the lesson: "Read and discuss the Hundred Years' War." Goals, on the other hand, are the end result of that activity: "Understand the causes of the Hundred Years' War."

- Note that MacLaren learning goals are typically written in the form of a meaningful verb and its object—e.g., *Learn A, Know B, Understand C, Enjoy X, Appreciate Y, Develop greater mastery of Z.*

- The point of learning goals is not simply to write something on the board so that we can check a box. We need to name the goal to our students, reinforce the goal throughout the lesson, assess our students' progress toward the goal (and hopefully have a Plan B in the event that they are not making adequate progress!), and work to hand off ownership of the goal to the students themselves. It is a long-term process. We name the goal to ourselves, then to the students. We first own it ourselves, then work (within the individual lesson, yes, but also across the years) to hand off ownership to the students. In the end, we expect to see students who are better and better equipped to take responsibility for their own learning.

Formative assessment

(First, see "Thinking About Assessments.")

Some examples of formative assessments, ranging from *less* scripted/planned/mechanical to *more* scripted/planned/mechanical:

- *Pepper:* Teacher cold-calls individual students and asks questions related to what was just taught. (Note that one danger of Pepper is that it is only calling on one student at a time and can give a misleading impression of generalized success to the teacher. It can also be difficult to be truly random in our cold-calling—little teacher-tools like popsicle sticks are helpful in that regard.)

- *Show me:* Teacher asks the class to make visible their understanding or lack thereof. This is often stronger than Pepper in that it is more inviting of participation and more supportive of No Opt Out.

  o This might be general: "Give me a thumbs-up if you feel confident with this material, you could teach it to someone else, and you're ready to move on, and give me a thumbs-down if you still have questions or confusion."

  o It could also be much more targeted: "Hold up one finger if you think this statement is true, and hold up two fingers if you think it's false." Or "Show me with your fingers how many distinct clauses there are in this sentence."

- *Systematic observation:* Teacher circulates and observes / listens to students working alone or in groups and records where the class is with a particular concept or skill.

- *Group work:* Teacher assigns pairs or small groups that work together on a problem and report to the teacher what they know and where they are confused.

- *Warm-up/Entry ticket:* Students complete a short task that reviews the content taught the previous day.

- *Exit Ticket:* Students answer a handful of questions at the end of class or at the end of the day.

  o This might be done in the manner of an immediate skill check ("Multiply these fractions. Flip up your white board when finished."), in a more reflective mode ("Write 1-3 sentences about what you learned in History today."), or, in the Lower School, as an actual ticket to exit the classroom ("As soon as you have handed me your Exit Ticket showing that you have correctly proven these three words, you may line up for recess.")

Lesson planning

- As noted above, much of the work of teaching to the edges happens in the course of working in teams to develop lesson plans that anticipate barriers to access and mitigate them. As such, our lesson planning should consistently incorporate these principles.

- Many teams have well-developed lesson plans, which do NOT need to be rewritten. But some teams may want to write plans from scratch. Either way, in light of thinking about teaching to the edges, all teams need to review the following checklist when planning upcoming lessons and/or units. (A much more detailed version of this checklist follows as a standalone tool. Note that it is NOT intended to be an actual checklist that teachers write on; instead, it serves as a tool for guiding teachers through the process of lesson planning.)

  - € Learning goal

  - € Anchor task

  - € Agenda of activities

  - € Materials for teaching to the edges

  - € Students on the edges

  - € Formative assessment

  - € Homework

Graphic organizers

- Graphic organizer are tools for organizing information and ideas. By integrating text and graphics, they show relationships and connections between concepts, terms, and facts. They can be used in all grade levels, across content areas, and can be helpful tools for both strong students and struggling students.

- At MacLaren, we use a set of shared graphic organizers that is housed on the G drive by subject. By having a consistent set of learning tools that can be used in a first-grade history class, a seventh grade science class, or a tenth-grade Humane Letters class, we hope to habituate our students to recognizing them immediately and understanding how each can help us to organize knowledge and processes.

- Note that these are by no means required for any class! Lead teachers are free to assign them as needed and if helpful during shared planning.

- (A detailed list of MacLaren graphic organizers follows as a standalone sheet.)