

# Reflections and Recommendations of “An Old Worn-out Dean”

by William E. Klingele

As I approach the autumn of my career I have had the opportunity to reflect on the last half-century of public-school education in the United States. I began by reevaluating my days as an underprepared junior high school English teacher and then pondered the past thirty years as a teacher educator—twenty years as an administrator in two colleges of education, ten years as dean.

On bad days, I reconsidered more than fifty reinvented versions of the educational wheels I have seen. It was discouraging to discover that in virtually all aspects of education we seem to be riding on the wheels of fifty years ago. Perhaps this lack of progress in education provides support for a recent comment by a university administrator: “We don’t need any more worn-out deans; we should be recruiting young, ambitious, aggressive, and inexperienced individuals to provide our leadership.”

On good days, I reconsidered how much better the teacher-education program in which I now work is compared to the one in which I enrolled so long ago. I perceived that some students—and therefore teachers—have made progress. I observed certain practices of these teachers who were making progress. Comparing these practices to various attempts at reinventing the educational wheel, I concluded that perhaps today’s educational wheels contain some new and improved components—the practices of many successful educators.

This old worn-out dean has spent three years sorting out the working components of today’s educational wheel that appear central to the role of effective educators. Without question, I know much less now than I did when I was young and inexperienced. Yet I am convinced that I have identified a few educational practices and recommendations that can help educators hang in there until we find additional solutions to our educational problems in the new century.

So it is with confessed humility that I offer the fruits of my reflections about experienced educators: a few practices and recommendations that could prove helpful to the young, ambitious, aggressive, and inexperienced.

## To Educational Administrators

In my career as a college administrator and teacher educator I have attended more than 300 meetings where the focus was on “what we can do to teachers” to improve education. I often thought that I could answer that question in a public-school second and save many people hours of time and effort, and taxpayers a lot of money. The answer to that question is obvious—nothing. Furthermore, living as we do in a popular culture of T-shirt expression, administrators attending these meetings should be required to wear T-shirts that say “Administrators Do It to Teachers.”

Solutions to the problems of American education will appear only when practitioners (classroom teachers) are substantially involved in the efforts. What other field has the opportunity to utilize almost three months a year (June, July, and August) to employ key personnel in an effort to solve the very problems that are viewed as critical to the future of the field? The efforts and financial support of corporate America, government, allied professions and organizations, the schools, and the public in general would do well to substantially involve teachers in school reform.

## To Teacher Educators

After decades of working with teachers and teacher-education students, I have concluded that

---

*William E. Klingele is a professor and former dean in the College of Education at the University of Akron, Akron, Ohio.*

teacher-education programs at the pre-service level should concentrate on teaching students how to teach. The majority, if not all, of the pedagogy can be delivered in the school setting. Programs that require students to take twenty to thirty semester hours of education courses focusing on teaching about teaching should be eliminated. I have never heard a teacher practitioner disagree with that suggestion. Teaching about teaching has a place in in-service and advanced-degree programs. Pre-service programs, however, should focus on “doing” the instructional process—preparing, designing, delivering, and assessing instruction.

### **To Teachers and Teacher Candidates**

Observing, evaluating, and working with public-school teachers over three decades has enabled me to identify the ten most important practices of effective teachers. I have read many volumes of research that support these practices, but observing some teachers use them—and others failing to—convinced me they are important. Obviously, this list of practices required for effective teaching is not all-inclusive, but it can serve to represent ten of the most important.

---

*The three most important considerations in real estate are location, location, and location. The three important considerations in teaching are organization, organization, and organization.*

*The real estate practice.* Real estate experts commonly emphasize the three most important considerations in real estate as location, location, and location. In similar fashion, the three important considerations in teaching are organization, organization, and organization. All components of the instructional process require the practitioner to organize. Delivering instruction from the “hip pocket” has no place in teaching. We all have

---

*I never met a student who couldn't do something, perhaps one thing, better than most other students, or didn't have an area of interest that was more intense than most other students.*

experienced it at some point in our education, and it doesn't work. The effective teacher organizes preparation (characteristics of the learners and the curriculum), organizes design (courses, units, and lessons), organizes delivery (set induction, strategies, activities), and organizes assessment (evaluation of the student).

*The “you are what you were when” practice.* Effective teachers recognize that students are all products of time, place, and culture. They are representative of broad differences as a result of events impacting their world, nations, states, regions, local communities, and homes at the time of their formative years. That background makes them considerably different from their teachers. They are also inherently different from each other. Recognizing such differences is paramount to all components of the instructional process.

*The “accept students for what they are and not for what you want them to be” practice.* Recognizing student differences, effective teachers accept students for what they are—and not for being like their teachers. This is not to abandon acceptable standards, school rules, or principles of a democratic society. It is to recognize and accept differences in students as a foundation for implementing the instructional process.

*The Will Rogers practice.* Will Rogers never met a man he didn't like. In similar fashion, my experience has led me to believe that I never met a student who couldn't do something, perhaps one thing, better than most other students, or didn't have an area of interest that was more intense than most other students. Through observation, investigation, or simple inquiry, effective teachers discover the special skills, talents, or interests of students and capitalize on them as the focus for teaching the content of the prescribed curriculum. This could be described as the poor teacher's version of multiple intelligences. It often involves teachers tossing textbooks aside and using materials associated with students' skills and interests as the primary resources for learning.

*The John Dewey practice.* Whether identifying objectives, designing learning activities, or preparing for student assessment, effective teachers concentrate on what students will be doing. They use verbs that are active in the objectives and learning activities that are authentic, and they assess students in authentic, nontraditional ways. In the fashion of John Dewey, these teachers and their students are “doing education.”

*The active-learning practice.* Effective teachers have their students actively involved in the learning process. The three most common student answers to the nightly parental question “What did you do in school today?” are: 1) “Nothing,” 2) “I don’t know,” and 3) “Just a bunch of junk.” When students actively participate in their learning, for example, working together in groups on experiments and inquiry or investigative activities, talking to one another about what they are doing, alternative positive and descriptive answers to the nightly questions begin to occur. Learning can be pleasant; it can even be fun. How students learn may be just as important as what and how much they learn.

*The associate-and-relate practice.* Effective teachers take the time to associate key terms and concepts with the familiarities and personal lives of students. At the end of a lesson on the concept of closure, I demonstrate to my students the association practice. I ask students, “What does Lady Godiva at the end of her ride have in common with us at the end of our class today?” After a brief discussion about who Lady Godiva was, and a few attempts to answer the question, I conclude, “Much like Lady Godiva at the end of her ride, we too have come to our close—clothes.” Thereafter, closure is referred to as the “Lady Godiva factor”; students never forget it.

*The “set the table for learning” practice.* Our educational forefathers and foremothers (e.g., Madeline Hunter) have documented the importance of what is known as “set induction” for many years. Frequent observations of teachers and student teachers, however, will identify very little implementation of the concept. Effective teachers design experiences that attract the students’ attention, relate the lesson content to their lives, identify the past, present, and future content in perspective, identify the reason for learning the lesson of the day, and establish for students what they should be able to do (again in the John Dewey fashion) as a result of the lesson. I am convinced that teachers who design and deliver set induction have fewer class-management problems and more and better learning outcomes. Initiating a lesson without set induction is comparable to serving a formal dinner without setting the table.

*The “be yourself” practice.* Teachers too are people; they must be themselves to be effective. Most teachers learn that lesson from experience. Beginning teachers often struggle with it after being educated to believe that they should be

---

*The three most common student answers to the nightly parental question “What did you do in school today?” are: 1) “Nothing,” 2) “I don’t know,” and 3) “Just a bunch of junk.”*

actors, speechmakers, or salespersons. Education textbooks tell us, for example, that we can sell content better with enthusiasm. Well-prepared teachers will work from a well-prepared plan, refer to it, step aside, and deliver it in their own words, in their own style, and as their own person.

*The “what works for you” practice.* There is no one best way to do anything in teaching. Over the past twenty years many states have attempted to adopt endorsements of one particular system for teaching, teacher evaluation, and teacher education. All have in time been abandoned. Effective teachers are acquainted with several ways, and regardless of the legislated way will prepare, design, deliver, and assess instruction in their way. Teachers have submitted fake lesson plans to supervisors for years. This one-way approach only serves to reinforce this practice. The prescribed way only becomes a distraction.

### **To the American Citizenry**

I have never met an American who wasn’t an expert on the schools. Everyone has been there and everyone knows the problems; most have the solutions. There are, however, a few considerations that may be worth noting, even for all the experts.

*Focus on the student.* If administrators have to wear T-shirts inscribed with “Administrators Do It to Teachers” to reform meetings, then everyone else should have to wear T-shirts inscribed with “It’s the Student, Stupid.” The focus of educational reform is on schools and teachers. Perhaps redirecting efforts toward students in schools would make sense. To transfer an unruly, partial-attending, nonsupported student from a public school to a voucher school because it is supposedly better only shifts the problem to another location. The new location is less likely to be capable of providing adequate education to this student than the public school from which he came. Too many difficult students in the voucher school may require transfer back to the public school—which may be perceived as much better now because the difficult students are not there.

Unquestionably, public-school education, especially in the cities, needs significant improvement. With some obvious exceptions, however, changes to facilities, curriculum, teachers, and resources will not facilitate significant improvement. Ask the citizens of Kansas City. Efforts to solve the social, personal, psychological, and health problems of students, whether inside the school or out, may be a much better investment.

*Interagency education.* Problems and solutions in American education are more dependent on what occurs outside the schools than what occurs inside the schools. Educators can overcome few of the external factors affecting the success of students. Classroom teachers cannot realistically be charged with solving students' social, personal, physical, psychological, and emotional problems, the solutions of which are prerequisite to learning expectations. Teachers are not social workers, psychologists, security officers, or health-care professionals; they are experts at teaching.

Educators cannot be held solely accountable for external factors affecting learning but should be a significant part of interagency solutions to the problems. Community agencies representing health care, security, social work, and related educational agencies and organizations must also become part of a unified solution. Successful models of interagency collaboration exist throughout America. Transferring this success to the mainstream of the schools may make sense.

*Expert Involvement.* Because we are all experts on the schools, we are all capable of contributing to school improvement. I have often thought that if every student had just one support person from outside the school to support him or her in all aspects of learning, acting in the student's best interest, we would see far more success in the public schools. Why can't many of us be the education agents or support personnel for students in our communities?

It is difficult to identify anyone who is not in some way directly related to students. As parents we are most interested in their education. Businesses rely on students for their existence both as employees and as consumers. Higher education relies directly on the success of the public schools. Community agencies, health care personnel, and allied organizations work directly with students outside schools. Why can't they work with them inside schools? Such experts can and should contribute to student learning directly, and therefore school improvement indirectly. Those who spent just a half day a month volunteering in schools would understand the problems of the schools much better, and equally important, they could successfully contribute to student and school improvement. School personnel for their part cannot wait for experts to volunteer but must take the lead in recruiting volunteers and in designing and implementing the programs.

Since 1983 and the publication of *A Nation At Risk*, national interest in the schools has been broad and keen. Corporate leaders have become involved in school reform as never before. Politicians rarely neglect to stress their views of American education in their speeches. It appears that we are all focused on the schools, setting standards and planning reform.

We can all have a role in determining the future of education in America. School administrators, teachers, teacher educators, and all the public experts must step forward and implement the components of the education wheel that have supported our travel thus far as we continue to test new ideas in hopes of improving the reinvented wheel of education. I'm not too old and worn out for that. Perhaps what I have perceived to be the autumn of my career can be, in reality, the harvest.