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## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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### ‘Critical Questions’ Series April 2011

## What is Quality Teaching?

Nearly every day I read something, observe a classroom, have a conversation, or spend time in reflection, which then causes to me to see the answer to the question: “What is quality teaching?” in yet a new way. My life as an educator began in 1962 when I started “Miss Becky’s School,” the summer after my freshman year in high school, which means I have been doing this for about fifty years. So, in this short article I can’t take you down the winding path that would explain how I have come to define quality teaching, but I would like to invite you into the thoughts that are rattling around in my head in the spring of 2011. I am now working with a high school as a school improvement consultant and thus have the opportunity to define, in practical terms, what quality teaching is and ways to bring about more of it.

There are two thinkers, Richard Elmore and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who are currently in my mind as I help this high school refine their focus on quality teaching and learning. I am fortunate to be working with building leaders (administration, instructional coach, and teacher leaders) who are willing to invest the time to observe, listen, talk and then act upon new and refined ideas about quality instruction.

First, we are spending time digging into *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* by Richard Elmore. Study the three figures below for a minute and think about their implications for improving instruction.

Figure 1. <http://egusdsecondaryed.pbworks.com/f/PA+ROUNDSD.ppt>.

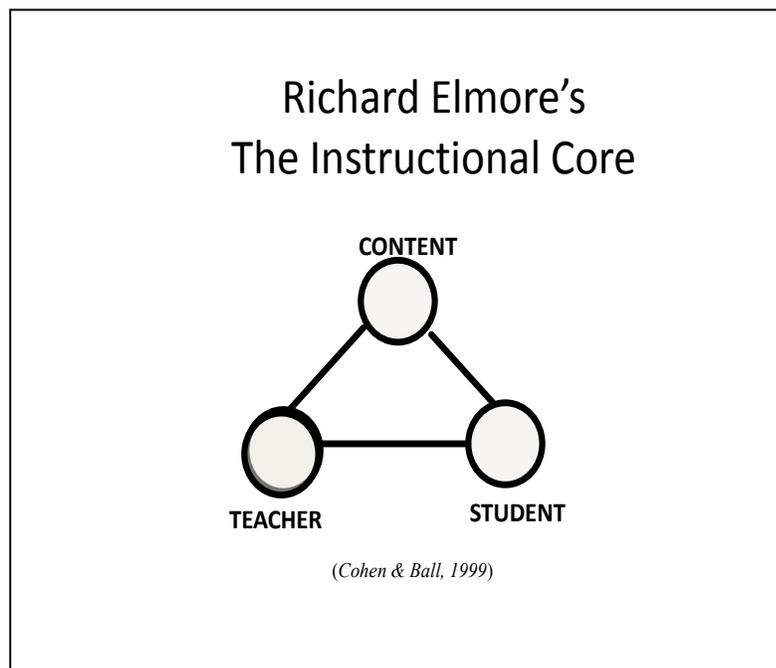


Figure 2. <http://egusdsecondaryed.pbworks.com/f/PA+ROUNDS.ppt>.

### Traditional Balance of Attention

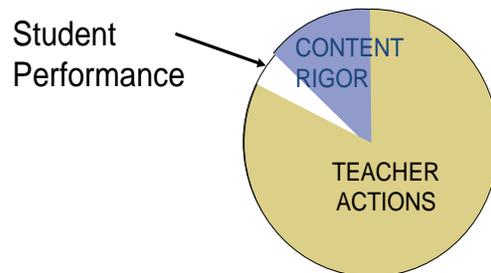


Figure 3. <http://egusdsecondaryed.pbworks.com/f/PA+ROUNDS.ppt>.

#### Task predicts performance

What predicts performance is *what students are actually doing...the instructional task is the **actual work** that students are asked to do during the process of instruction-not what teachers **think** they are asking students to do or what the official curriculum **says** that that student are asked to do...*

First, Elmore argues that to improve instruction one must focus on the “Instructional Core,” (figure 1). However, one cannot just focus on an element of the core; all elements must be addressed. That is, one must simultaneously work to improve the teacher’s skills and knowledge, the students’ level of engagement and participation in learning, and the rigor of the content being taught.

Elmore also notes that in most attempts to improve instruction, we have not focused enough attention on the content *or* the role of students (figure 2).

The way one evaluates whether there are improvements in the three elements of the “Instructional Core,” and student learning, is to analyze the task that students are actually doing (Figure 3). Susan Perkins Weston on the Prichard blog sums up what Elmore means by increasing the level of tasks kids do in classrooms,

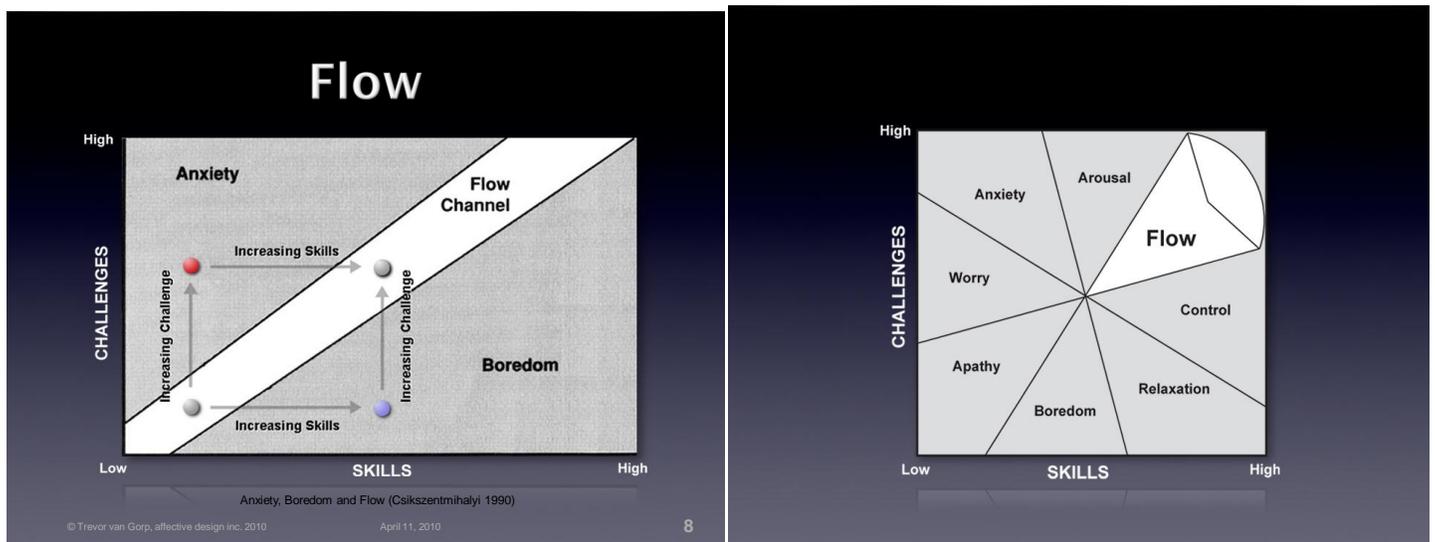
An Elmore catch phrase is that "task predicts performance." I think I understand that. If you ask me to peel vegetables, that's only going to give me a small step toward becoming a competent cook. If you assign me to walk around the block daily; that will never get me into shape for a marathon. And, if you give me worksheets and drills and lists of facts to remember, that isn't going to equip me to analyze demanding texts, build strong arguments from credible evidence, or tackle serious math and science challenges effectively. <http://prichblog.blogspot.com/2011/01/in-teams-and-with-tasks-richard-elmore.html>

I have had many conversations with the school's leadership team to get clear about these ideas and we have visited classrooms to test Elmore's theory. Now, the leadership team has begun to think about how our reading and observations can be put into action in the next round of school improvement strategies.

The other thinker we are spending time with this spring is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. Csikszentmihalyi's work addresses the emotional challenges caused by increasing the demands on both school personnel and students. The connections between Csikszentmihalyi and Richard Elmore are also very explicit. For years Elmore has argued that if we are going to ask teachers to dramatically increase student performance, we must provide significant professional development.

Since we are increasing the demands on teachers and students, we must also increase the skills of those asked to perform at higher levels. We need to provide the skills and knowledge training for both adults and kids and not just expect them to know how to reach higher levels of achievement. We want both our school personnel and students to be in the "flow channel" at the highest level. If we expect that, we need to be mindful of what happens if there is too much demand without increasing skills and also what happens if there is not enough demand.

Figure 4. <http://www.slideshare.net/trevor.vangorp/design-emotion-flow4>



(We can see the area where flow occurs. Too much challenge or skill and we'd move out of flow. Too little and we wouldn't care enough to keep going.)

This is merely a snap-shot of the deep work of Elmore and Csikszentmihalyi. I encourage you to read the original work and enter the conversations around this work that can be found on the internet.

Rebecca J. Downey, Technical Assistance Contractor  
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The original texts:

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. New York: Harper and Row, 1990.

Elmore, Richard. *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning*. Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2009.

A start on the internet conversation:

Richard Elmore:

<http://egusdsecondary.pbworks.com/f/PA+ROUNDS.ppt>.

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/leadership/elmore.html>

<http://prichblog.blogspot.com/2011/01/in-teams-and-with-tasks-richard-elmore.html>

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi:

<http://www.slideshare.net/trevor.vangorp/design-emotion-flow4>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fXIeFJCqsPs>

<http://www.performancecoachingandtraining.co.uk/blog/tag/mihaly-csikszentmihalyi/>