



## Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”  
[www.wsascd.org](http://www.wsascd.org)

### ‘Critical Questions’ Series August 2011

#### Where Are The Instructions?

*“I never teach my pupils, I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn,” Albert Einstein.*

One night in early May, my 21-year-old son John and I began work on a website using an open-source software called Word Press to promote my new book *Navigating the New Pedagogy: Six Principles that Transform Teaching*. I had consulted with a few web design specialists about pricing, but I opted instead to try and design a site myself so that I could make modifications when I pleased.

Within a matter of minutes that evening, I had opened an account with Host Monster, secured a domain name, and downloaded Word Press to their server. When I opened Word Press, though, despite its claim of being user friendly, I was confused.

“Where are the instructions?” I asked aloud. I have experience using Blackboard for online teaching; it just came with extensive training.

“Let me take over for a while,” John responded, and he scooted his chair before my PC. With John in the lead, Word Press slowly revealed itself. He’d add one feature. Delete it if it didn’t work. When John had a question, he framed a word search on Google and usually found a document that answered it. My turn came to take over. Through a process of trial and error, we worked together to have a simple, multi-page website posted by 1 a.m.

Where are the instructions for today’s technology? My iPod didn’t come with any; neither did my new iPad. For our students, their technology world (so central to their lives) is largely instruction-less. Today’s youth experiment and tinker with cell phones, video games or their Facebook pages until they construct their own understanding of how it functions. When stumped, they may turn to a friend. Nonetheless, they are typically engaged throughout the process.

In contrast, our schools are places that often come with instructions; knowledge is dispensed. Students are often told math concepts rather than discovering these ideas for themselves. Science lectures deliver concepts; experiments reinforce rather than enlighten. Students are given traits of quality writing instead of analyzing authors’ styles to discover the techniques for themselves. Our schools often fail to engage students in the thinking/problem-solving skills that they do so well.

In my time conducting professional development for Spokane Public Schools, I have had the good fortune to observe many of the best and brightest teachers in our district. To a fault, each of these teachers used analytical/exploratory strategies whenever possible in their classrooms. In my book, I refer to this as “Turning Bloom’s on Its Head.” In this strategy, teachers create activities – often collaborative ones – where students need to analyze and evaluate then synthesize what they learn into meaningful knowledge and comprehension. In other words, they use higher level thinking skills to create understanding. Since the traditional method of teaching is to use lower level thinking skills in order to access the higher level ones, these strategies are essentially “Turning Blooms on Its Head.” This is exactly what students do in their daily lives.

Colleague John O'Dell uses these strategies regularly in the high school social studies activities he assigns. When he taught the concept of political action committees (PACs), for example, he opted to build student understanding using a discovery activity. Rather than explain the power of PACs, he had students research politicians' campaign contributors for the largest donors, investigate them, and compare and contrast the donors' interests with the politicians' voting records. Students then had to draw conclusion about how campaign money impacts the political system. In other words, students used higher level thinking skills to build comprehension of this important concept. Students also built a deeper understanding than had they just read the information in a text book.

"This kind of instruction is real. It's engaging," O'Dell explained. "When I do these activities, I validate students' ability to think. Kids like to feel smart and do activities that are meaningful. We need kids who can think about information and make sense of it."

One Spokane Public Schools middle-school science activity quantified how powerful this instructional method can be. One set of classrooms taught the physics concepts of falling objects using the traditional method: read the text and do a few activities. A second set of classrooms employed hands-on experiments using coffee filters and balls dropped below motion sensors; students had to create a hypothesis, test it using this science apparatus, and then revise it if necessary after conducting their experiments. In other words, students had to construct their own understanding using their skills of analysis and synthesis. On district assessments measuring the concept of falling objects, classrooms that used these constructivist strategies scored on an average 25-percent higher than those that used traditional teaching methods.

If we are having trouble engaging students in our schools, it may be because we are not playing to their strengths. Teachers are lecturing or demonstrating to students who often have experience figuring things out for themselves. By turning traditional teaching on its head, we not only engage students in constructing their own understanding, we get them engaged in school as well.

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Halstead's new book *New Pedagogy: Six Principles that Transform Teaching* is available through major online booksellers. He will present a workshop entitled "Empowering Students through Transparent Assessment Practices" at the October WASCD/OSPI conference. Visit his website at [The New Pedagogy.com](http://TheNewPedagogy.com).

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