

My Journey towards 21C

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By Ian Fogarty

If it takes a village to raise a child, what does it take to “raise a teacher”? It is an ongoing process, an evolution of sorts due to a number of influences. I appreciate the people who care enough to give both positive and negative feedback like fellow teachers, administrations, and students. Teachers allow me to bounce ideas, encourage me and sometimes laugh at me, with all the best intentions. I have had wonderful administrations who run interference when I was trying something innovative. But mostly it has been my students who have helped to guide me. Of course, I love the comments like, “It was hard, but it was good for me” or “It is my lowest mark and the one I am most proud of.”- But equally important, and more difficult to hear, the, “I just can’t learn from you.”- Those are the ones that made me rethink what I was doing and it is those comments that help guide my journey towards 21C.

During my teacher training, my instructor asked me if science was knowledge or a process. Of course I said that it was process and knowledge was just a side benefit. But, I did not really understand what I was saying - much less practice it. In my first classes, I was a great lecturer, giving high end, fast paced content, finishing courses with two weeks to spare. I’m not sure my heart believed my head when I told myself that the students who struggled were somehow defective, because I was doing a great job teaching.

Slowly, I began to realize the content in my physics and chemistry

classes is- only paramount to a handful of my many students. How am I going to ensure that the brains of ALL students grow in my class? What about the other students? In addition to content, I need to teach skills, and the skills presented in the 21st Century framework were as close as I could find. Late at night, as I lay awake pondering how I would teach 21C skills in addition to content, I realized that it was not WHAT I teach, but HOW I teach. Finally I understood what my instructor was trying to say. I had inherited customs that did not agree with my beliefs and slowly I started to re-evaluate what I was doing and why. My job is not to give ANSWERS, but rather to ask QUESTIONS and then find interesting ways for students to work through those questions. It is not the final answer that is important but rather the process. Educate from the Latin e-ducere meaning “to lead out of.”

This path less travelled has made all the difference. Now, my students do most of the work after I set the foundation. I am less concerned with ensuring that every student has learned the exact same thing and I cannot tell you as precisely as I used to what the final exam will look like. I used to believe that because I lectured to every student and gave the same exam to every student, that I was able to measure their common learning. The realization that I was wrong gave me the freedom to take short detours, make responsible exceptions and personalize learning for students with particular needs and desires.

There is still a long way to go, and I can see some challenges looming in the not too distant future. Not only is this thing called teaching the most important paid work in the universe, but it is also so exciting to watch eyes light up when a concept makes sense, to see kids giving up lunches to learn and to watch a kid mature into an

adult. I am blessed to be a teacher. I thank my community for helping to grow as a teacher and more importantly, so do future students.