Professionals Against Improperly Labeling Active Learners
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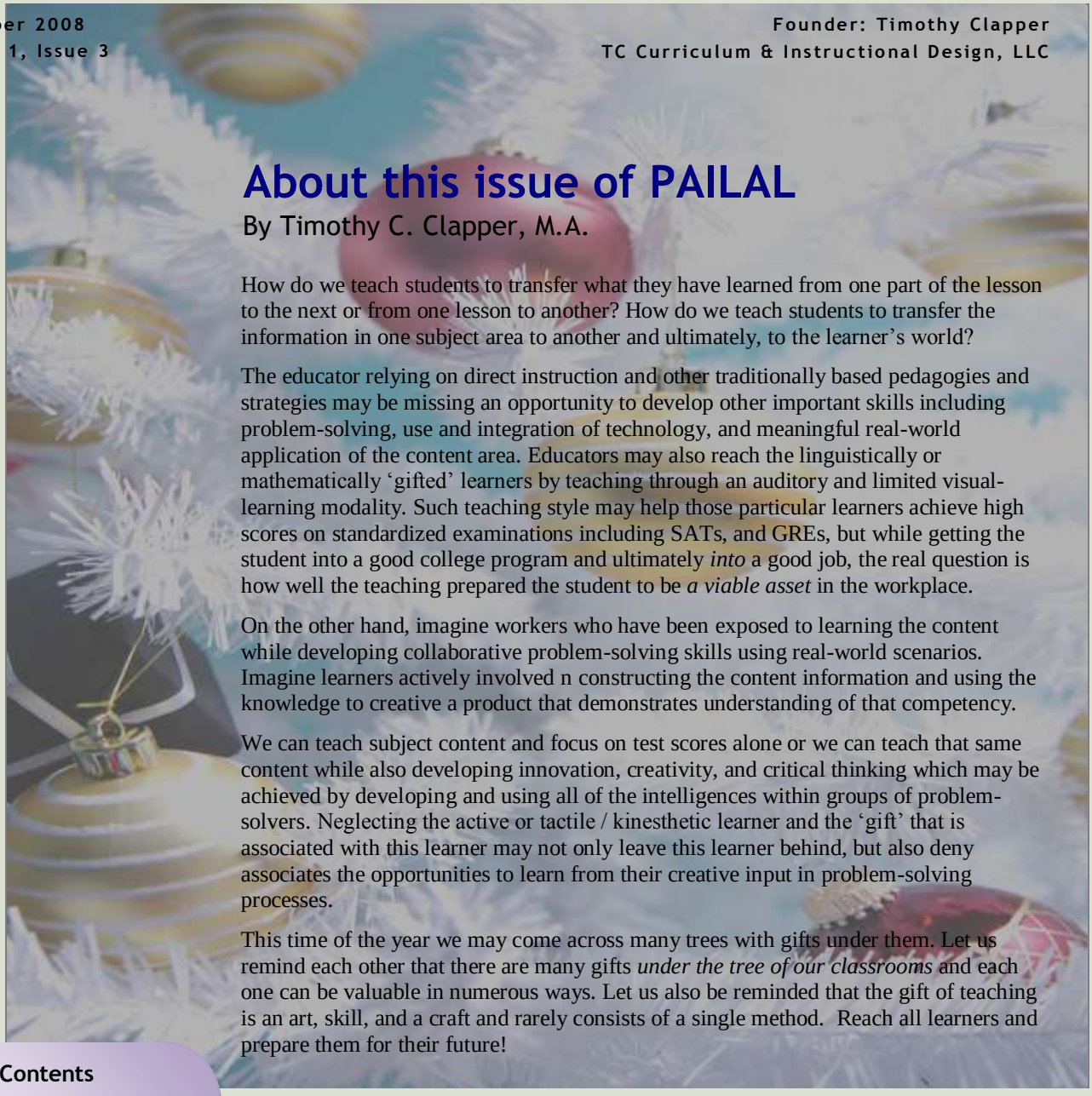

About this issue of PAILAL

By Timothy C. Clapper, M.A.

How do we teach students to transfer what they have learned from one part of the lesson to the next or from one lesson to another? How do we teach students to transfer the information in one subject area to another and ultimately, to the learner's world?

The educator relying on direct instruction and other traditionally based pedagogies and strategies may be missing an opportunity to develop other important skills including problem-solving, use and integration of technology, and meaningful real-world application of the content area. Educators may also reach the linguistically or mathematically 'gifted' learners by teaching through an auditory and limited visual-learning modality. Such teaching style may help those particular learners achieve high scores on standardized examinations including SATs, and GREs, but while getting the student into a good college program and ultimately *into* a good job, the real question is how well the teaching prepared the student to be *a viable asset* in the workplace.

On the other hand, imagine workers who have been exposed to learning the content while developing collaborative problem-solving skills using real-world scenarios. Imagine learners actively involved n constructing the content information and using the knowledge to creative a product that demonstrates understanding of that competency.

We can teach subject content and focus on test scores alone or we can teach that same content while also developing innovation, creativity, and critical thinking which may be achieved by developing and using all of the intelligences within groups of problem-solvers. Neglecting the active or tactile / kinesthetic learner and the 'gift' that is associated with this learner may not only leave this learner behind, but also deny associates the opportunities to learn from their creative input in problem-solving processes.

This time of the year we may come across many trees with gifts under them. Let us remind each other that there are many gifts *under the tree of our classrooms* and each one can be valuable in numerous ways. Let us also be reminded that the gift of teaching is an art, skill, and a craft and rarely consists of a single method. Reach all learners and prepare them for their future!

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Did You Know?

Thomas Edison said that success is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration" Does this describe a passive classroom?

Did You Know?

Teachers can use the multiple intelligences to help create optimal conditions for active learning and teach the learner many skills important in life beyond the content alone.

Skills for the 21st Century Require Active Learning
By Timothy C. Clapper, M.A.

Educators viewing the Social Studies or English 21st Century Skills Map (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008a), are unlikely to find rote learning outcomes. They are also unlikely to find passive and rote examples of ways of applying the information that is being constructed in the classroom. Instead, educators will find examples of lesson activities that incorporate critical thinking, creativity, innovation, and also ways that the information is likely to transfer across other themes (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2008b).

In 1991, the United States Secretary of Labor convened a commission of experts for the purpose of determining which skills would be required in the 21st century and evaluate how well schools were equipping students with those skills (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991). Their findings include:

> Despite sincere, well intentioned efforts to respond, the schools, lacking clear and consistent guidance, continue with the system and methodologies they inherited from a system designed nearly 100 years ago for the needs of business organizations that are quite different (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991).

"So what can I do with this information now?"

As a result, the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) recommended changes in the education system including developing thinking skills, basic skills, and personal qualities (U.S. Department of Labor, 1991) required for success in the workplace. Our education system in the United States progressed from a system of teaching basic reading skills to enable people to be able to read the Bible as well as Puritan belief in the necessity of literate citizens for a functional political society (Webb et al, 2007, p.117) to a system responsive to the needs formed by the industrial revolution. Few major transformations have emerged to match the technologically-based service industries of today. The past one hundred years also brought us closer to understanding the various concepts and theories of learning but unfortunately whether through a focus on accountability, or diverse ideological conflicts, few schools incorporated what we have acquired through educational research (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007). Since the SCANS report some seventeen years ago, the requirement of the workforce has also created the need for workers to be innovative and technology (or *digital*) literate. Unfortunately, the education system in the United States still includes a reliance on passive means of instruction delivered in a traditional format that fails to conform to the recommendations of the SCANS commission or years of educational research while also placing high disregard for the needs of the active learner.

The United States Army Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC) is a leadership and citizenship development course taught in just fewer than 2000 high schools. This character development course underwent a major transformation at the turn of the century including lesson plans that are state of the art in multiple dimensions including meeting SCANS recommendations, addressing all three learning styles and several intelligences, while emphasizing critical thinking and authentic application. Each phase of the lesson plan's four phases include learning activities that help leaner's transfer existing and developing knowledge to the next phase of the lesson. Ultimately, the final phase includes a culminating project or activity and encourages transfer beyond the classroom by asking, "So what can I do with this information now?" Such authenticity is often missing from many lessons in mainstream education today. Educators developing their lesson plans should ask themselves how they can help the learner make sense of what is being learned and incorporate activities that make them use the information in new ways similar to ways they may need to incorporate these skills in their work environment.

Skills for the 21st Century Require Active Learning con't

In other words, 'don't just show me the math formula; help me learn how I can use it authentically' by perhaps incorporating the formula into a useful, innovative project. Graduates with high SAT, GRE, and GMAT scores are impressive, but if they cannot move into the global economy after graduation and be creative and innovative beyond just being productive, we may continue to lose our competitive edge.

Educators choose to make the difference. Although the JROTC lessons plans have been fully developed and are very much complete, it is still up to the JROTC instructor to implement the lesson plan and the suggested active strategies. Likewise, the educator of content subject areas are often told which standards, objectives, and units must be taught. The method of instruction and strategies that are used are often determined by the educators themselves.

Educators may elect to lecture, have students read along using passive learning strategies, or instead may incorporate strategies that involve the learner in the same fashion expected of them in the workforce. Rarely does one person in a business problem-solve by themselves, so why would we teach learners to perform this function alone in the classroom?

Educators can make use of technology and integrate it into the lessons. Have students develop a presentation, a brochure, a collaborative Wiki, a talking storybook, and then have them present it, explain it, defend it, or do something with it to show that they can transfer what they have learned to other disciplines or to the community. More and more interactive whiteboards are showing up in the classrooms. Get them into the learner's hands as they brief and defend their concepts using hyperlinks from supporting information on the Web. This is where they turn into *integrative* whiteboards because they are integrated into the lesson and are not merely a projection devise for the instructor. Watching dazzling technology is not the same as producing a project and using technology to engage with the lesson (March, 2006).

While appealing to all three learning styles and multiple intelligences, the main focus should be on getting the learner *actively involved* in their own learning through collaborative problem- and project-based activities. As mentioned, in many cases it is up to the educators to choose whether to select activities which expand the subject or they can elect to cover the material and have the students memorize data and formulas for the test. Educators choosing to create understanding while tying in the content skills with soft skills such as communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving may be preparing the learner for the 21st century in ways they never experienced themselves.

"Involve the learner in the same fashion expected of them in the workforce"

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