

Applying the ENGAGING Framework in Constructivist Classrooms: Interviews with Master Educators – Part I

An Interview with Richard T. Ognibene, Jr., 2008 New York State Teacher of the Year

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[Editor's Note: This is the first in a set of articles about ways in which master teachers apply the constructivist framework described by author Paul Vermette (2009) in his book, *ENGAGING teens in their own learning: 8 Keys to Student Success*. The authors are graduates of Niagara University's teacher education program, which employs constructivism as its theoretical foundation. Articles describing how other master teachers apply the framework will appear in subsequent issues of *JPACTe*.]

Abstract

The authors describe the work of Richard Ognibene, Jr., 2008 New York State Teacher of the Year, in his secondary chemistry classroom. The authors use Vermette's (2009) "ENGAGING framework" to analyze Ognibene's work and his application of constructivist theory.

"Teaching is an art, a science and a passion. It is the noblest profession in the world because teachers provide hope for our future. That is why I was drawn to teaching and that is why I stay. I can't imagine a better way to spend my life. I love the excitement of knowing that if I do my job well I will change people's lives for the better."

Richard T. Ognibene, Jr.
2008 New York State Teacher of the Year

Introduction

For the past sixteen years, Richard T. Ognibene Jr. has made Chemistry and Physics meaningful and relevant for his students at Fairport High School in Fairport, New York. For his dedication and commitment to teaching, Ognibene

was named the 2008 Teacher of the Year by the New York State Board of Regents. The New York State Teacher of the Year Award, now in its 40th year, is awarded to “an exceptionally skilled and dedicated teacher,” of which Ognibene is a prime example.

Hands on experiments, projects and group collaborations are major components of Ognibene’s science courses. From electrolysis to oxidation, Ognibene’s students learn the advanced concepts of Chemistry and Physics within a caring, safe and fun environment. One of Ognibene’s greatest educational assets is his unconditional love for his students, and his ability to thoughtfully and intentionally show this affection everyday.

To systematically examine the cognitive and affective instructional strategies that make Ognibene so tremendously effective in the classroom, we turn to Vermette’s (2009) ENGAGING framework to provide us with a common conceptual language. In his book, *ENGAGING teens in their own learning: 8 Keys to Student Success*, Dr. Paul J. Vermette sets forth a framework of teaching meant to provide teachers with a coherent structure for engaging today’s heterogeneous population with powerful and meaningful classroom learning experiences. Vermette provides eight fundamental components (the ENGAGING framework), as a synthesis of his work in promoting student motivation and achievement in the classroom. These components include:

Entice effort and build community
Negotiate meaning

Group collaboratively
Active learning and authentic assessment
Graphic organizers
Intelligence interventions
Note-making
Grade wisely

Careful examination of Ognibene's practices in light of this ENGAGING framework provides the insights outlined in this article. Ognibene not only "thinks with" the elements of this ENGAGING framework, but shares strategies for their implementation, taken from his own classroom. This article is divided into eight sections describing Ognibene's approaches to teaching. Each section is titled according to Vermette's eight-part framework.

Entice effort and build community

Vermette (2009) asserts that all teachers have an innate set of strategies to help them connect with their students. From chatting in the hall between classes, to attending football games to chaperoning school dances, teachers know that developing a positive rapport with students goes a long way in enticing effort and fostering student achievement. In his text however, Vermette states that the most effective practitioners actively work on building relationships with teens *during* instruction, a process which he refers to as "building community."

This aspect of teaching is so essential to Ognibene's practice that he purposely includes affective planning throughout the year, reminiscent of the "Dual Objective" approach to cooperative learning as explored by Kline and Vermette (2008). In his own words, Ognibene says that teachers must love their students

both *unconditionally* and *unabashedly*. Building relationships is both invariable and intentional, and doing so begins from the first minute of the first class on the first day. To begin the year, each of Mr. O's students receives a "Dear Student letter" that introduces them to Ognibene's family, his interests and his course. As their first assignment, his students write "Dear Mr. O" letters back to him, a simple task which not only provides considerable insight into his student's lives but provides a starting point for future conversations. Within the first ten weeks of school, Mr. Ognibene also calls each one of his students' parents with a similar welcoming message, sends home "good news" post cards and makes sure to learn his students' names as early and as aggressively as possible. It is these sorts of interventions that provide the foundation for meaningful student-teacher relationships.

According to Alfie Kohn (2005), with our current obsession with test scores and standardized tests, we have begun to send a disturbing message to our students. As Kohn explains, "when some capabilities are privileged over others, and a broader approach to education is sacrificed, we begin to look at students differently...some kids – namely, the high scorers – are prized more than others by the adults." In valuing some students more than others, some states cheapen the value of all students, in that the students begin to see themselves as valued only conditionally. "They learn that their worth hinges on their performance," a reality that has crippling and debilitating effects on all students. In short, he states that the solution to our high stakes educational system lies in what he

calls 'unconditional acceptance.' "It's about the countless gestures that let them know we're glad to see them, that we trust and respect them, that we care what happens to them," he writes. It is the unconditional respect demonstrated in developing the 'whole child' that will truly make a difference in students' lives. It is this type of love and support provided by Ognibene everyday, which makes him irresistible to his students and well respected by the school community.

Negotiate meaning

To Mr. Ognibene, the purpose of science class is not (and has never been) to memorize random, detached scientific tidbits, but rather to use class time as a forum for all students to synthesize essential scientific concepts. In accordance with Vermette's ENGAGING factor of "negotiating meaning," for learning to be relevant and valuable, students must develop their own understanding of important ideas by examining each principle for its applications and meaning in the context of their ever changing cognitive schema.

Mr. Ognibene helps his students negotiate meaning through the structure of his class, which he describes as a combination of lecture, exploration and collaborative practice. He provides students with ample opportunities to abstract the fundamental scientific principles from what they are studying by allowing students to test, evaluate and adapt their understandings to fit new classroom experiences. Indeed in this classroom, having the "right" answers is not valued nearly as much as the thinking required to address and change preexisting

misconceptions. Unlike the traditional chemistry classroom where information is disseminated, Ognibene helps students determine what they already know and then challenges them to find and evaluate evidence to support their claim. As Ognibene explained, for one student, this might require a series of reflection questions, while for another it might require that he place more emphasis on the "big picture," foregoing detail for the sake of comprehension of the larger concept. In any case, it is the process by which students generate their own beliefs and defend them with evidence that they are able to make meaning of essential scientific understandings.

Group Collaboratively

The set up of Mr. Ognibene's classroom is strategically designed to foster group collaboration. The desks in this class are clustered in groups of three, thereby naturally supporting the collaboration necessary for building classroom community. Vermette (2009) states that collaboration is an essential component of motivating teens because it offers students a forum for thinking critically about the ideas they are studying. It makes it safe for students to 'play' with new ideas by gaining the insight of others as they support or refute their original thoughts. Through this process, students can grow in and deepen their understandings of the concepts they are learning as they simultaneously build classroom community.

In his lessons, Mr. Ognibene can very often be heard saying things such as "Talk with your neighbors about..." or "Your group is responsible for..." thereby continually taking the focus off the individuals in the room and intentionally putting that focus on the collective "we." From the first day of school, collaboration is explicitly stated and foreshadowed with a "Personal Treasure Hunt" in which the students search for unique (and unknown) facts about their peers. They 'hunt' for everything from left handedness to someone who has seen all three "Spiderman" movies, thereby learning more about their fellow students and developing relationships that will facilitate learning. Students in this class then interview their peers and report their findings to the class, all in the effort of developing a safe and supportive learning environment, which will have long lasting implications in the quality of future learning.

Active learning and Authentic Assessment

Reminiscent of Dweck's (2006) notion of the "growth mindset," Vermette (2009) explains in his text that active learning in the classroom requires that students and teachers view learning as the result of deep and intentional thinking, demonstrated in some visual or audible way through formative assessment.

This takes several forms in Ognibene's class, one of which is the active collaborations that are in place from the first day of school. When class is operative, he expects students to help each other understand the scientific concepts they are learning. "There are 30 of you and one of me," he says, an

adage which not only innately builds community but provides the sort of authentic learning experiences necessary for deep understanding. In his own words, another common active learning strategy he uses are "labs, labs, labs." To Ognibene, there is tremendous power in not hearing or reading about chemical processes but actually carrying out scientific experiments with the intention of personal analysis and reflection. In his Chemistry and Physics classes, labs are of equal importance and weight as tests. Ognibene ensures that all activities, homework, labs, tests and open notes quizzes are formative and views every learning experiences as an opportunity to better guide his instruction to meet the needs of his students.

While student findings during these laboratory experiences are not new contributions to the field of chemistry and physics, the inquiry-based nature of these investigations help students to actively process their developing understanding through their personal meaning making and reflection. It is not the activity itself that makes these labs “active” but rather the integration of students’ new ideas with their preexisting conceptions. Vermette (2009) states that learning becomes personal when students’ experience provides them with the evidence they need to change or defend their understanding, in this case it is the “minds on” nature of the labs which makes them powerful looks for facilitating student analysis and meaning- making.

Graphic Organizers

Utilizing graphic organizers as means of enhancing student achievement is an essential component of Ognibene's unit packets, which he uses to guide and record student progress throughout a given topic of study. These unit packets organize all the essential components of each topic in a logical and linear way, ensuring that all students have a format and outline to record their developing understanding. Vermette (2009) explains that while graphic organizers may appear to “simplify” ways of thinking about complex relationships, they are extremely valuable tools which allow students to "regularly examine information, record thinking and to document relationships."

As the Chemistry and Physics topics become increasingly complex, Mr. Ognibene's unit packets ensure all students (even those who may be absent or excused for another obligation) will remain privy to all essential understandings.

Intelligence interventions

As Vermette writes in his text, in today's classroom, "diversity is the norm, so differentiated interventions (many based on Multiple Intelligence Theory) have also become the norm."

Reaching and inspiring all students to invest their energies into the science they are studying requires that Mr. Ognibene use multiple modalities of instruction and diverse problem solving opportunities. Ognibene purposefully incorporates every intelligence throughout the course of a unit, relying most assertively on the

verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, body-kinesthetic and interpersonal intelligences. Unit packets provide his verbal-linguistic learners (as well as linear-sequential students) a documented record of their evolving understandings. Since students solve problems (logical-mathematical) in groups of three during the last 20 minutes of class each day (interpersonal), students have the flexibility to rearrange their seats, stand and walk around the room (kinesthetic) while they refine their skills. While Ognibene's typical class is a combination teacher lecture/student investigation, there are also several yearly projects, which challenge students to use their strongest (and weakest) intelligences.

Note-making

One of the most fundamental aspects of traditional schooling and the traditional "learning" process is the act of taking notes. The act of note taking is the means by which educators, for hundreds of years, have ensured that their students have a tangible record of what they have "learned." The student is then to take these notes home and "study" (commit to short-term memory) until the test. However, since the completion of guided notes is a byproduct of teacher thinking, not student thinking, the act of note taking, in and of itself, is done for the benefit of the teacher, not for the benefit of student learning. Vermette (2009) provides an alternative to this process with his notion of "note making," which can inspire idea generation and guide the conceptual clarifications necessary for deep understanding. Note making (as opposed to note taking) is a way for

students to "document their own actual thinking about difficult content and includes their insights, their confusions, their developing generalizations and, eventually, their (new) schemata." (p.11).

In Ognibene's science classes, note making is primarily achieved using labs, which are all constructed response type questions. By having his students draw pictures of the experiments they are completing, describe what they are thinking and compare and contrast what they are learning to the concepts they already know, his students must demonstrate their own understanding of the important content they are learning. Mr. O will also give his students "open notes quizzes" in which students must take what they have learned and apply it to diverse situations, thereby allowing them to "make notes" and fostering conceptual growth.

Grade wisely

According to Ognibene, the currency we deal with in school is grades, not money. Therefore, the considerations an educator must mull over when designing an effective grading system and determining individual grades cannot be understated. In Mr. O's science classes, tests have equal weight to labs, homework, class work and other assignments that lead to the students' overall understanding of the material they are learning. Coming from the perspective that "success begets confidence which begets success," Ognibene is quick to point out that while this is a framework for grading, an effective grading system

must provide the flexibility necessary to match the heterogeneous student population. In this whole-child approach to grading, more than just numerical scores determine his students' final marks, but he includes other factors such as attitude, effort and individual growth. It could be said that Ognibene does not calculate grades, rather he determines grades as a means of fostering success and providing motivation. Vermette's framework for best practice echoes this sentiment in stating that a teacher's grading scheme should actively seek to get the most students to do the most work as often as possible, all the while building classroom community. "Grading wisely" will allow every student to experience success as often as possible. It will eliminate self-defeating competition and support students in their continuous growth.

References

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