

Simple Strategies for Inspired Learning with At- Risk Students

I was a high school teacher for many years. My first twenty-five found me in the math classroom and I cannot say I had any special ways of dealing with at-risk kids other than my basic philosophy of making every student feel special. This philosophy evolved because so many of them seem to really dislike math. I decided that I would try to change that belief, but eight years of hating a subject might be an uphill battle. If I couldn't change their feelings about math at least I could get them to like my class.

Each day I positioned myself at the door so that I could greet each student as they entered. I looked to find something unique and personal to say to each one and I was amazed to see how their faces lit up. As simple as that action was, it began to change the way my students felt about class. They became more open to learning because they knew I saw them as people rather than just students.

I'm still using this strategy as an actor in a play that I helped write called, "High School BULLY". I was not in the first two performances. I sat in the audience observing the reaction of the students around me. As the play ended, I stood up and said, "Goodbye" and "Thank you" as the students filed out. The look of surprise on their faces reminded me of how important that interaction is to all at-risk students. Now as the actor in the show, I do the same thing. As the students enter, I greet them at the door.

That way, when I step on stage as the main character, I already have them on my side. They are more inclined to get involved and it's ok, even cool, to participate. It's a simple strategy that any teacher can use, any time, every time. It works.

I learned more about teaching and learning when I studied with motivational speaker Tony Robbins. He is probably the best teacher I've ever seen. Like most professional speakers, Robbins employs methods that are highly effective in terms of connection, understanding, and retention. Professional speakers are out of business if they can't produce results. That's not always true of the teaching profession. Watching him helped me learn how to present content that I didn't think teens were learning. I created a course for my school based on those observations and it taught me even more about how to relate to at-risk (or 'at-promise students', as one of my instructors at the first Anthony Robbins Foundation Youth Leadership Conference called them).

*"If you're
willing to learn,
your life is
limitless."*

~ Vera Wang

A key component of that training was learning about the importance of recognizing and honoring learning styles. All the subsequent speakers I have heard since then support the intent and content of the *Strategies for Success* course I had created. Teacher

training does not really prepare a teacher to adapt their teaching to the learning styles of their students. I encouraged my students to learn about their own learning styles using a very simple survey. The students were amazed and empowered by learning more about themselves. The motivated students found the results interesting but those students with poor self-esteem found the results to be truly life changing. There is a direct relationship between confidence to learn and self-esteem. Once they knew what their primary learning style is, their confidence began to soar.



The Game-Boy Intervention Strategy

Kevin was an at-risk student who was always in trouble because his classroom experience was not activating his learning style. He knew he was a hands-on learner and after learning his personal learning style, he developed his own strategy for staying out of trouble. Instead of fidgeting or getting up, he carried a broken Game-Boy in his sweatshirt pocket. If he felt the impulse to move, he played with the broken toy. Gaining confirmation and understanding of his learning style changed his life. Other students also reported the positive impact of knowing their learning styles. It always amazes me when the simplest of strategies (when shared with students) create possibilities where none had previously existed.

The other component of the learning style revelation is that the students felt “safe”. When students feel safe and nurtured, free from ridicule and bullying, supported and valued by the teacher and each other, they are not in the fight/flight mode that keeps them tense. The feeling of safety transforms their

moods into calm, curious and ready to learn. Team building activities were scattered throughout the semester so students had a chance to bond with each other in a variety of groups and manners. The range of students ran the gamut from autistic students with teacher aides to honors students- from ninth graders to seniors. The bonding experience gave all students multiple opportunities to connect and be recognized based on their own abilities.

Nearly 85% of the students took the course, many of them at-risk. All of these simple strategies are readily available to any teacher in any classroom. New teachers gain credibility by providing students the respect, recognition, and tools to be successful. The stories about those who came before them and benefited from this transformational experience was especially inspiring. It provided an epiphany to those who experienced challenges in school because once they knew what was possible; they realized that the only thing standing in their way was their own outlook and determination. Once empowered with the knowledge of how they learned, they became willing to engage in whatever course materials offered. Materials focused on “real life” issues had special appeal and eager student participation. As designer Vera Wang recently said, “If you’re willing to learn, your life is limitless. “

About the Author

Marianne Douglas is a high school teacher who believes that the fastest way to a student’s brain is to know what their learning styles are. Marianne chronicles her strategies in a very informational website at:

www.StrategiesforSuccessCurriculum.com