
Passive Aggressive Retaliation Against NCLB

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This action research is part of an ongoing research agenda focused on improving student learning regardless of the confines of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) best practices recommendations. After four years of developing a conceptual approach to the required curriculum, and modifying delivery strategies to accommodate diverse learners, nearly all students were achieving state performance levels. Building level politics ensued, resulting in an increase in the number of students identified as English Language Learners or as needing special services based on their Individualized Education plans. The conceptual teaching approach was retained with the new influx of diverse learners. This research reports the results of the conceptual teaching methods, compares the results to direct instruction teaching methods, and discussed the social and political variables that were confronted along the way.

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CLB and District mandated End of Course (EOC) testing has pressured teachers into following lockstep direct instruction as the predominate method of content delivery. As one of those teachers in the 2002-2003

school year, I was asked to follow the district's established curriculum with accompanying vocabulary and concept lists plus I was asked to adhere to prewritten individual unit tests, four quarter EOC essays, two semester EOC standardized exams as well as the schedule of dates I was to perform them on. These dates and materials were to be shared by all of the instructors for my course (biology). On the surface the course seemed to be very well planned, but problems began to present themselves early on. The ability for student differentiation, pacing changes, and monitoring and adjusting the lesson when teachable moments presented themselves was lost when the pressures of timing to meet the unit deadline approached. In order to maintain the pacing to teach the lists of vocabulary terms, direct instruction was pounded out like the cadence of a marathon runner's individual footfalls. After the first testing results were posted I saw the need to evolve to a different style of curriculum delivery as a response to the initial poor scores that I felt were not a true representation of what my students could potentially learn; nor to what degree I knew I could teach. My hands in the classroom had been artistically tied from those

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personal adjustments that in my previous years of teaching had stimulated students. I had become a drone.

It is at that recognition that I began to reinvent the lessons that I was teaching. I felt that if I could vary the instruction I would be able to achieve a higher level of student learning. I began to use concept learning strategies in an attempt to break the format of direct instruction and rote memorization, and have continued to implement concept teaching for the last five years. My efforts have been rewarded with climbing student achievement as evidenced by the resulting EOC test scores. In my district the EOC test scores were the evaluative tools used by the administrators and district advisors to determine if we were adhering to the curriculum and indirectly to determine the quality of *teaching* in the classroom. Regardless of the argument of adequate teacher assessment the EOC data was held up as the measuring stick of success. The school wide achievement goal was that all teachers were to try to have eighty percent of their students passing with a 'C' or greater on the EOC exam. Sounds like a winner? It was a battle.

PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE V. MALICIOUS OBEDIENCE; AS A MATTER OF CHOICE

I felt that there was a very limited number of directions that I would be able to go to fix my instructional dilemma. If I continued the lock step direct instruction, I would be guilty of Malicious Obedience, knowing that the final result would be contradictory to the achievement that NCLB was 'designed' to promote. This was malicious because I would knowingly cause this harm, and obedience because I in theory would be following the model, but not with the true expected outcome. This

would have been at the expense of the students in my classroom, whose attention spans didn't match with long direct instruction and note taking. I instead became passive aggressive because I tried to comply superficially with the curriculum and pace, while instead developing a lesson style that I felt would have the greatest long term effect on true student achievement.

The battle began with the desire to try teaching the material in a different sequence in order to link the content into a larger picture that grouped the topics and terms conceptually. This would mean that my kids would be learning a greater amount of material because I would not be able to cut things out, only add. Otherwise, during the testing my kids would come have come up short on their test scores. I decided to over compensate. This way I would be able to get the lists of required words into their minds and satisfy the district and EOC goals, but I would surround these "loose" words in a series of concept maps, word associations, relationship webbing, cross-curricular exploration, color, body memory, authentic applications, and humor. I would not participate in the marathon of direct instruction and I would tailor the appropriate curriculum into a clearer progression that provided connections and growth that could be added to and cycled back through repetitively.

NCLB: HOW DID WE GET TO THIS POINT OF DIRECT INSTRUCTION AND CLOSED DOOR TEACHING?

From the perspective of a classroom teacher the changes that were made in the January 2002 wake of the NCLB Act, where standards and testing became paramount, were not the intended goals of the initial Act. The standards-based reform was



cloaked with improving state curriculum and content alignment with proof of implementation of academic standards K-12. Yet beneath the surface the legislation held an accountability measure of "continuous and substantial" progress that was tied with consequences when deemed lacking. Should the school fall short of Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) expectations, they would be identified as a failing school where the potential penalty could be the loss of administration and teachers. With this language, the responsibility for learning has largely been shifted into the laps of the educators. This accountability approach in turn led to the use of student test scores as the evaluation tool for effective teachers. This is a blessing in disguise for the passive student who sits in the classroom every day not unlike the early stages of an academic coma, content to "let you go ahead and try" to teach them. Students do not pensively sit seat-on-edge waiting to hear about the wonders of protons. At times a teacher is pleasantly surprised when a student appears with pencil in hand. That at least gives the impression that they are there to work. This blanket approach to all students achieving alike blatantly ignores inherent differences of students whether socio-economic, natural ability, or previous academic foundation.

An additional problem inherent in NCLB is accountability. I have watched students that seem to be unable to pass the EOC be removed from a class to try to prevent the student from bringing down a teacher's average. Cheating on tests and supplying materials that are near copies of the EOC have all been attempts to reduce the liability the teacher feels. The pressure causes some frustrated teachers to shut their doors and take drastic measures to prevent the scores from appearing low. By removing the

failing or D-average students either by cheating, discipline, or re-categorizing them as a modified, English Language Learners, or an Individual Educational Plan student, the scores will look artificially higher. No, not every teacher does this, but given the high stakes for the teacher as well as threats that include merit pay or job loss, some feel pressured to tip the scales in their favor.

HIGH STAKES TESTING - AT A PRICE

Score pressure is also impacted by the content list that seems to grow with every year. The idea that they have to hit it hard and pound it in is reinforced by expectation to get through all of the material and retain it until the EOC high stakes exam. Naturally I asked myself the question, "How am I going to get all the way through this?" It seems faster and to the point to laundry list the terms on an assembly line, spooning out each student their share. This lends itself to direct instruction for fear that any other way would leave gaps in the student information, resulting in the loss of best teaching practices. Oddly enough, it seems safer to spell it out in full so that there is no room for misunderstanding. Yet the reason that we as educators are effective is because we inject personality, exploration, unique talents and experiences and present this using a variety of styles from our bag of tricks so that our student's don't lose the interest. I can only teach by their grace - they have the ability to shut the whole lesson down if they so desire. Poor test results deepen the feelings of insecurity in the teacher. It is no surprise that the teacher then engages in defensive posturing that prevents them from challenging themselves and trying something that is new and inventive. They have to stick to the old school techniques that they feel safe



with. Fear of job loss, personal shame of low scores (my district publicly posted them during in-service days) beats you into submission. A truly innovative teacher seldom is motivated by failure, but rather by success and joy of that triumph. When using high stakes testing and lock step assembly line teaching, the time spent during the year to prepare for the tests penalizes the student by requiring them to learn more in less time. When taken into account the ISAT, Idaho Standardized Achievement Test, the four quarter EOC essays, The two semester standardized EOC exams, the twelve mandatory standardized unit tests, and the current press for standardized labs, the loss of instructional time is a staggering 68 days. That's 39.5% of the classroom days based on a 172 day calendar.

It seems that rather than a top down approach to improving schools, we should be looking more closely to where the "rubber meets the road", in this case, where teachers instruct students. Additional resources and education promoting successful teaching strategies, as well as the development of a culture of student responsibility and participation seems more appropriate. Empowering teachers to become master teachers seems a more worthy goal.

PUTTING THE 'MASTER' BACK IN THE MASTER TEACHER

My incremental approach led to large learning dividends. I began trepidatiously with small, nearly unrecognizable steps. My initial fear was that my perspective could be wrong and that the majority of teachers knew better. I started by identifying a concept concerning osmosis and diffusion that I knew I could use to

apply methods of concept teaching as an independent variable to the expected outcome of learning the material, evaluated by future increases in the EOC scores. In the previous 2002-03, and 2003-04 school years I had presented osmosis and diffusion by relying heavily upon direct instruction. The data from the corresponding EOC scores indicated poor retention by the students each year even though I had targeted osmosis and diffusion as a goal of improvement the second year of direct instruction. I would use those two years as my comparison to determine if there was any change. It was necessary in this experiment to avoid direct instruction so that I could clearly evaluate the difference. Instead I taught the material by grounding it in an overall theme, and used student interest to develop a laboratory model that they would manipulate to establish the 'rules' of fluids across any semi-permeable membrane. I gave each of them the challenge to adjust concentrations of solutions in which cell would be placed, and to establish three different methods of measurement that they would use to determine whether the solution was hypertonic, hypotonic, or isotonic. They all subjected the cell model to five different common substances of the student's choice and predicted swelling or shrinking of the cell.

This challenge was active, dynamic, real, and effective. The previously problematic EOC scores were compared to the experimental groups' scores resulting in a success, doubling the percent correct from 41% initially, to 86%. Following that initial success I became more courageous, replacing segments of lessons with its conceptual counterpart. The test results were astonishing to the point of looking suspiciously too high. Fellow teachers who



initially jeered me for "having too many colored pencils to be teaching a high school class" were now looking at me differently. It took three years to convert the remaining curriculum material into this framework.

Student perceptions - Three evidences of preference

First, students of today generally have an experience that sticks in their minds about learning. At the start of the year I survey the students the first day to ask them questions about their styles of learning. I'm not limiting them to determine if they auditory or kinesthetic, but rather I ask them to think of a time when they have been successful in the past at learning and to describe that situation/learning tool. I also ask them for their interests. I expected to see some kids in tune with direct instruction and felt that I might have to persuade them to try a different approach. For the 263 students surveyed, the results were:

- 69% want to be taught using models, manipulatives, and big picture devices
- 16% asked for sounds, alliterations, mnemonics, and repeating tools
- 12.3% preferred lecture (5.9%) and notes (6.4%)
- 1.7% asked for worksheets

This information supports conceptual formulations where instructional strategies attempt to make sense of the small pieces of information by showing in models or diagrams how the little things fit together. It is easier for them to remember when there is a pattern or exposed purpose. The MOST effective connections are those that are made by the student themselves and not presented to the students as a lesson. It is essential for the student to bring their perspectives to the table because it is more powerful when formulated individually

and creatively. The retention is far beyond what I anticipated.

Secondly, during the last week of school while reviewing for the mandated testing, my students were playing a game we created together called "Pass the Torch" where they were given a question to answer as an individual, but they had a short response time limit. Following elapse of the time the opposite team as a group has the opportunity to steal the point. One of the other biology teachers in the building had an absence where a substitute could not be found, so I was assigned their class load to join with mine. It was a large group of 60-70 students per period. I threw them in the game together and soon the humor of the situation presented itself and I realized that I, if a master teacher, had better monitor and adjust this new situation. It became apparent that these teams were unbalanced.

The difference was that the conceptually taught students were more instantaneous with response and had a flexibility of application. Also, they had better mastery of the vocabulary because they had more of a working knowledge of the meanings of the words. The following day as I passed out the standardized EOC testing material, the students made remarks that demonstrated that they had felt empowered by their knowledge and felt very prepared to handle the exam. They recognized that the traditionally taught students were less spontaneous to answer and seemed to struggle with the bigger picture of the processes. The students remarked that I had taught them with cool 'tricks' of the brain that had paid off. Actually, rather than tricks, they had been taught with a strong and proven teaching method, building foundations that would help them to retain information due to their conceptual understanding of the material. I



believe that students that are taught hand signals, seven second linking intervals, color, rhythm, overviews, and brain activation stimulators have more connection with the lesson.

Thirdly, time on task and student preparedness has improved with individual students. Seeing their positive test performance as proof of their learning thus propelled them to learn more willingly. Included in Figures 1, 2, and 3 are past student's work developed by the students to clarify in their minds Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection. In these figures the students are asked to frame the idea into as few of words as possible so that the simplicity helps to keep the four parts of Natural Selection clear and discrete from each other. I don't present a concept, they present their idea to the class so they can evaluate if the diagram justly represents the concept. With each individual's representation being evaluated they are making the concepts in their minds more and more concrete. The repetition and lack of words helps all of the students in the academic spectrum. After the confidence of the student grows they become more and more creative and less shy to attempt a concept clarifier. They get faster as the semester progresses after seeing their labor rewarded.

Because of this confidence and individual buy in, homework and projects are completed at a higher percentage than prior. It is noticeable in the reduced frequency of students that are empty handed when assignments are due. I see that, although conceptual strategies are not new to teaching, the students are more in tune with my objectives because they become enthusiastic when they have more information rather than less. It is as if the mandated curriculum is so stark that it loses

their interest; so by expecting to teach whole concepts the interest levels build. It is a rich lesson. By expanding across the curriculum into history, future predictions, economics, social issues, and everyday life, the interdisciplinary nature adds the flavor to keep them interested

OUTCOME DATA

The student scores have had consistent gains, surpassing my expectations, and the expectations of the administration. The greatest increase occurred after fully integrating the use of a concept foundation, while spiraling the information, layer upon layer, adding depth and breadth to create a more complete, overall picture. This shift not only 'covers' the required curriculum, but it is learned in a more relevant fashion. The data below (see Table 1) compares the scores and tracks them through the years of modification. It also shows how the district and fellow teachers were scoring to allow the comparison between my growth and theirs.

ADMINISTRATION AND INSTRUCTION

While organizing the curriculum to have a foundational concept to branch off of, I realized that the semester sequence was not best suited for this format. Currently, I am to start the year teaching the difference between living and nonliving things using Cell Theory and then branching into cells and organelles. After that, the curriculum jumps to Genetics, followed by Evolution and then back to single celled organisms at the beginning of the second semester. In my scheme of planning it seemed random to teach the initial basics of the cells and then jump away to other themes, only to return to cells later. I looked at that issue and changed the sequence to teach cells and



Figure 1. Using Words and Pictures

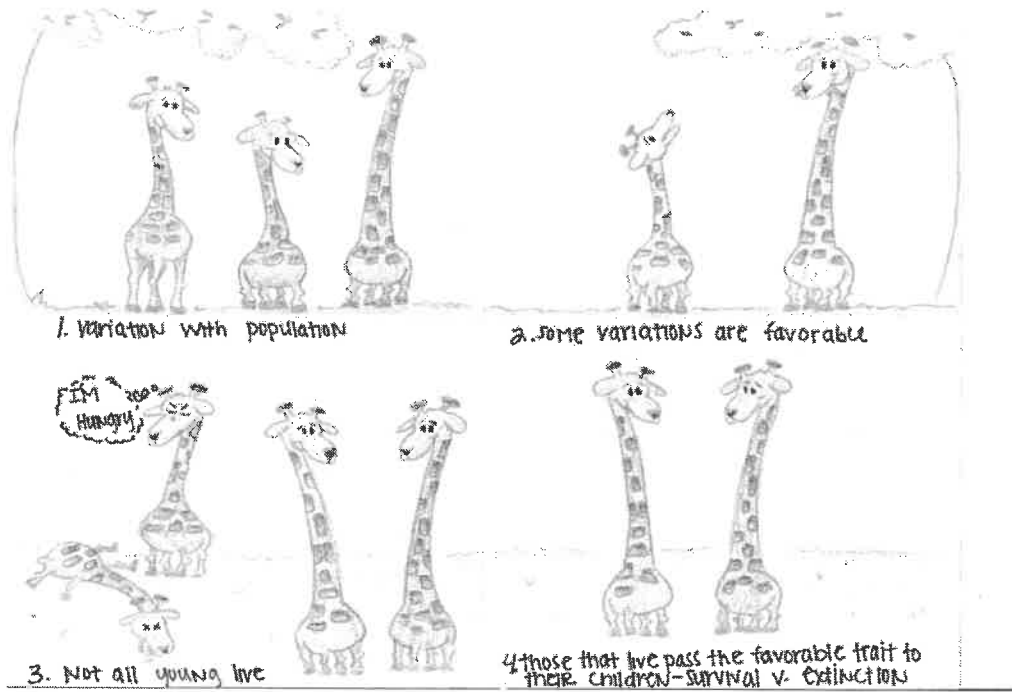


Figure 2. Using only Pictures

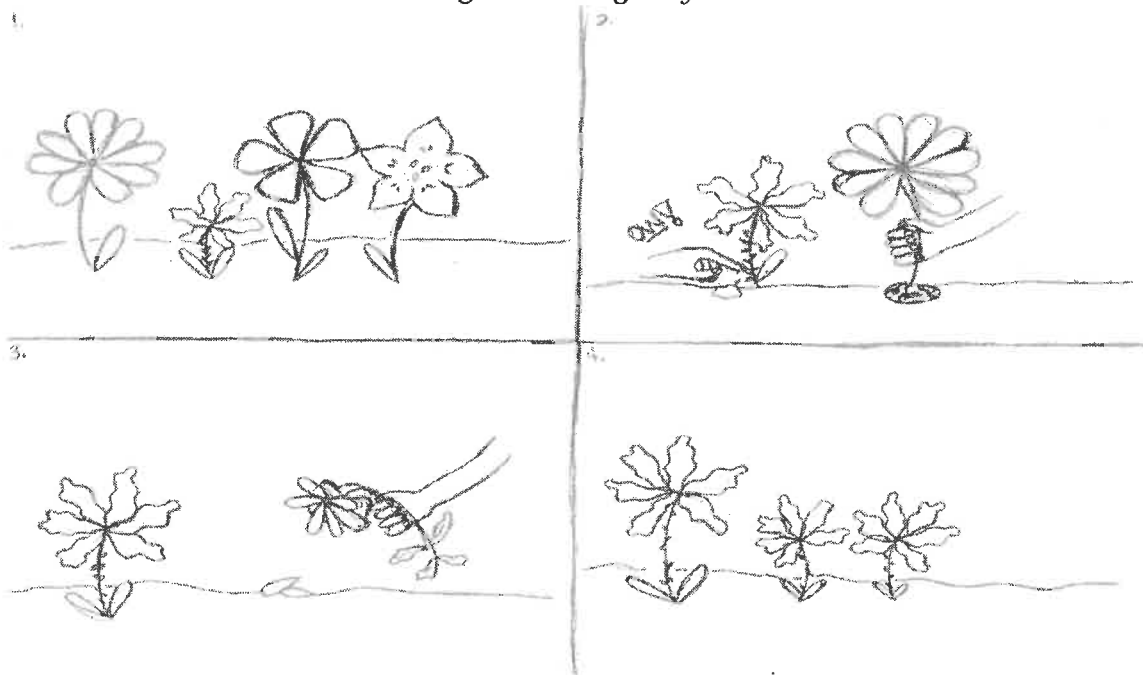


Figure 3. Using only Picture

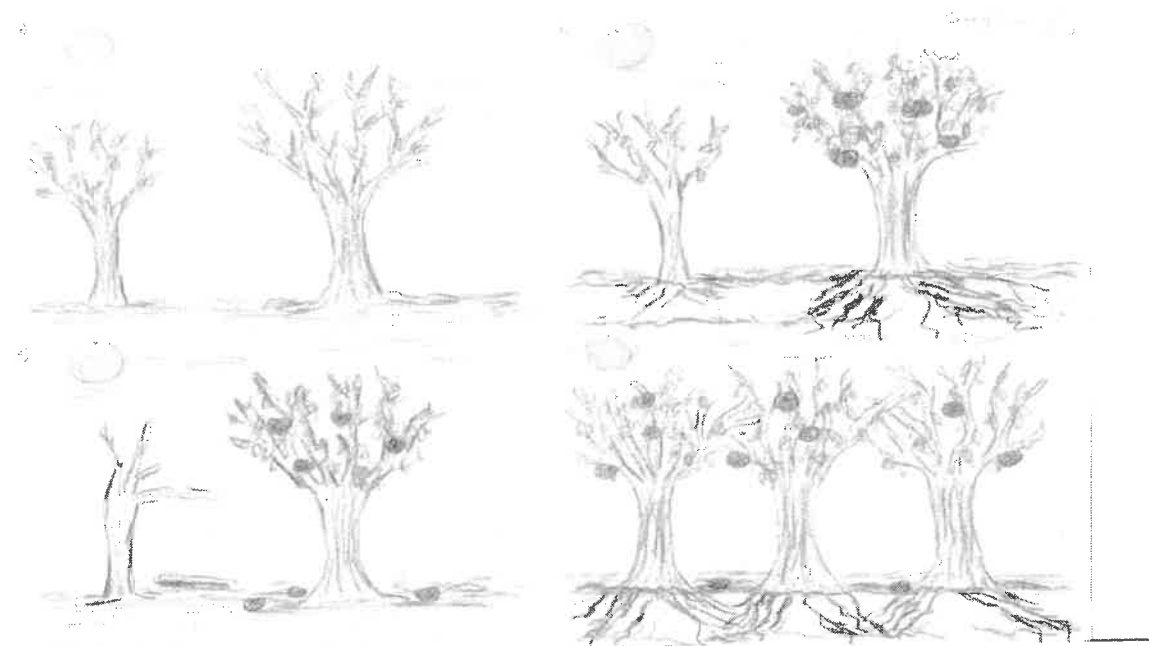


Table 1. Comparison of the Number of Students Passing the EOC Exam with a 'C' or Greater Among the Entire School District, Local School, and Individual Teacher.

School Year	Semester 1			Semester 2		
	District	Building	Individual	District	Building	Individual
2003-2004	60	69	63	65	70	73
2004-2005*	61	49	54	68	66	74
2005-2006	72	63	88	72	85	95
2006-2007	73	66	86	75	74	99

Note. *indicates a major revision in the EOC

then go directly into single celled organisms and advance from there to multi-cellular organisms. It ties in better and the students get enough information to keep expanding the concept, while using the same vocabulary for a longer period of time. In past, it was like starting over second semester and re-teaching the material that was covered in first semester. This led to added issues, particularly with transfer students or repeating students that would come into class without adequate

background information to start second semester in a successful way.

I approached this sequence change in 2006 with the District Area Supervisor and was met with approval. There had been some individuals that wanted to pilot this change and I had been doing it for three years with a great deal of success. I had navigated my way around the issue of test and curriculum correlation between the two semesters by requiring the students to

