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## **The Power of Instructional Branding**

*Learning to brand instructional delivery is any teacher's most reliable tool.*

By Katherine Mosley

In 1969, I started my first year of teaching, and it was quite an assignment. I had six classes of inner-city children ages 10 to 16. Not one could read, and they were crammed in classrooms where temperatures frequently exceeded 100 degrees.

My training had been perfectly conventional, and I was supposed to use these traditional credentials to make a difference in my students' lives. Somebody *had* to be kidding! Nothing I had been taught to use was affecting the students' behavior or reading skills.

Inexperienced as I was, I knew there had to be another way. What could I do to sustain these frustrated students' excitement about the kind of learning that should last forever? How could they be taught to experience the exhilaration that only comes with success? How could I teach them to value the skills necessary to generate the incomes they would need to support themselves and their families?

I had to feel my way through that year, abandoning what I had been taught should work and discovering daily what didn't work. Finally, I asked my students how I could make learning what they wanted. One student answered with a statement so simplistically powerful, it changed who I was as a teacher and seasoned my instructional approach for the remainder of my career.

"You're just like all the other teachers," was all he said.

### **Making the right changes**

I already knew that, but his recognition of that reality sent me home with a mission: how could I change before the next school day? What could I do differently from every other teacher who had been taught to instruct the same way I had?

I showed up the next day with an old book, *Shakespeare for Young Readers*, and a guitar. I only knew three chords, but it didn't matter. I decided to strum one chord a certain way for correct answers and another way for incorrect responses.

I also brought humor. My students loved to laugh, and so did I, so I had to create meaningful ways to use laughter while teaching at the same time. The students asked me during recess about my skill in dancing the funky chicken. I had to admit I knew nothing about it.

Using my guitar plan and the rhyming words in limericks, we started with a deal. If they would listen while I read Shakespeare's plays and learn to read key vocabulary words from each one, I promised to have Joe -- the student they seemed to respect the most -- teach me the funky chicken during a PTA meeting at the end of the year.

The plan worked. During the year, the students started reading the plays themselves, making costumes from newspapers, and performing on stage. They wrote and memorized scripts

independently. No, it wasn't easy, but these students learned to read. We all enjoyed the process and swelled with immeasurable pride.

What I learned that year spans beyond a lesson in the value of instructional creativity. That year I learned to accept just how much instruction needed to change. At the same time, I saw more excitement about learning than I could have imagined. Each student acted responsibly and begged their parents, grandparents, and guardians to come to school to see what they had learned. Civic leaders and storeowners received special invitations to watch students, once considered incorrigible, perform richly for all to see.

These students were learning. It was important to them to share it. This concept still holds true today.

### **Why success happens**

Throughout my years as a teacher, I learned why success happens: It's not due to subject matter knowledge or teaching technique, but how eager a teacher is to change.

With each passing year, no matter what grade level or socioeconomic group my job took me to, the students' need for instructional change remained the same. My instructional discoveries remained effective with all students. I call it instructional branding.

Branding is a term used in business marketing to effectively urge consumers to associate a certain brand with excellence or quality. Instructional branding means dropping tradition from instructional delivery and concentrating on the value of teachers' own untapped personality dynamics as resources. We must recognize the individual talent now so critical in effective instruction.

Learning to brand instructional delivery is the most reliable tool any teacher needs. What teachers can give of themselves is far more valuable than anything tradition has taught them to say.

Teachers should bring more than information to be learned. They should brand *who* they are as teachers and *what* about their instructional delivery procedure is worthy of student attention. Different from well-known teaching style, teacher branding is a deliberate prerequisite to becoming a teacher.

Instructional branding requires each teacher to self-analyze his or her personality to discover what characteristics may be used to draw students into a personalized instructional program. As I found, careful use of humor can be especially effective.

Also effective are:

- Voice techniques
- Unique, non-threatening and point-driven body language
- The ability to work the element of magic, mystery, or surprise into instruction
- The know-how to make everything except correct answers and actions seem totally absurd.

Almost any comfortable, age-appropriate characteristic unique to the teacher and used consistently to keep students interested and engaged can gather student attention like a magnet.

Apart from a teacher's personality per se, but still part of the instructional branding process, is the meaningful use of teachers' secondary talents. These might be as simple as strumming a guitar at appropriate times. A flair for drawing cartoons could find a teacher flying to the chalkboard to sketch illustrations to develop a lesson. Consider the effective attributes of mime in bringing students to the lap of learning. Different teachers may have the same talent, but apply it in varied ways.

Learning to effectively use the coupling of personality dynamics and secondary talent toward successful instructional branding among existing teachers can be a powerful and enlightening self-awareness experience. It can bring new life to your staff's once-sagging success in gaining student interest.

### **The effect of good branding**

One of the least attractive aspects of being a school principal or instructional leader is evaluating your staff's success at creating the kind of learning students need to be successful. Attributes held dear by tradition include how well teachers can keep students quiet and busy. Often, a fear factor wrongfully comes into play.

Sometimes there may be too much emphasis on the visual appeal of the classroom setting. This has little to do with how well a teacher can gear students to learn or how well students will remember what a teacher said during a lesson.

Once teachers identify and practice instructional branding, administrators will see whether the technique is effective by looking at the students' expressions and behavior. Look at their facial expressions, how they are positioned in their desks, their mannerisms as they watch, listen, and become absorbed. Teachers also will know when students are buying their lessons and when they're refusing to pay.

Our students deserve creative, talented teachers who want to engage young people and help them to work hard and earn. When this occurs, students will learn to share who they are as people and how they fit into the learning process, awakening their own self worth and talent. It's time for teachers to release their personality strengths and individual talents and experience the power of instructional branding.

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