

# "YOU'RE CONSTANTLY REVISING YOURSELF"

## *The Dispositions of a Student-Centered Teacher*

Barbara Cervone, Ed.D., and Kathleen Cushman (WKCD)

Winter 2013



**"You're Constantly Revising Yourself"**  
*The Dispositions of a Student-Centered Teacher*

Barbara Cervone, Ed.D., and Kathleen Cushman (WKCD)  
Winter 2013

*For the past two years, WKCD has been a contributor to the [Students at the Center](#) project led by the Boston-based [Jobs for the Future](#) and supported by the [Nellie Mae Education Foundation](#). **Students at the Center** gathers and adapts for practice current research on key components of student-centered learning. WKCD produced one of the nine research papers that launched the project—papers that range from a summary of the latest brain research to a synthesis of current findings on motivation, engagement, and student voice. The project will be publishing a book in spring 2013: **Anytime, Anywhere: Student Centered Learning for Schools and Teachers** (Harvard Education Press).*

*Our paper, "Teachers at Work," takes readers inside six high schools widely regarded as exemplars of deep student learning. Our study schools included Alief Early College High School (Alief, TX) Bronx International High School (Bronx, NY); Dayton Early College Academy (Dayton, OH); MetWest (Oakland, CA); NYC iSchool (New York City); Noble High School (North Berwick, NH). We observed classrooms, student exhibitions, common planning sessions, and more; we interviewed students, teachers, counselors, and school leaders.*

*Each school, we found, had its own "microclimate" tied to the particulars of its student body, geography, local circumstances, and founding principles. However, they all shared teaching practices and school structures that put students at the center and supported ambitious learning.*

*At the end of each of our school visits, we asked teachers—and students: What qualities should a school seek when hiring teachers explicitly to teach in a student-centered setting? What dispositions help teachers thrive in the demanding environment of a student-centered school?*

*Here is what we learned.*

**They genuinely care about the "whole child."** These teachers spoke with insight and empathy about the academic, social, and emotional development of the young people in their charge, as well as about their academic challenges. They enjoyed being around teenagers, and readily engaged with them in a way that conveyed both interest and respect. And they knew the important role they played in modeling mature thinking and behavior. As Greg Cluster, internship coordinator at Oakland's MetWest, noted:

Adolescents absolutely need to have their lives filled with relationships with adults. Right when they're trying to step into adulthood, all of their relationships with adults disappear. And adolescents drown in adolescence.

**They really know and care about their subject and want to share its excitement with youth.** These teachers valued and practiced scholarship, yet not in a way that came across as stuffy. They loved the substance of their academic fields, and stayed alert to its manifestations in the world around them, often bringing in articles and new ideas or examples to share with students and colleagues. In class, they let themselves get carried away with enthusiasm. Nicky, a tenth grader at NYC iSchool, told us what that meant to students:

They'll be teaching and then suddenly they'll get like a really good ... analogy, maybe, something new that they hadn't really thought about. And, like, they'll seem really happy and excited and then that like gets your attention. Just that unusual energy sort of gets you wondering about what they're talking about. And, you know, interested.

**They see themselves as facilitators—not deliverers—of knowledge and skills.** These teachers preferred to coach students' learning, not control it. From both training and experience they knew that learning starts with a spark and had figured out how to nurse that spark into flame. They relished the challenge of setting up a learning environment so that students could discover concepts and procedures for themselves. And they were adept at staying in the background until the moment students really needed them. Peggy Breef, who teaches Advanced Placement English at Alief Early College High School in Alief, Texas, described her approach:

I think of myself as a facilitator: most of the work I do goes into planning and having the materials present. Once you hand that out or whatever, the kids ... they go with it. I just kind of walk around, in case they need some assistance. I let them come to their own conclusions, make their own products, choose what they want to do a lot of times, and so forth. Sometimes I feel like if you walked in my class, you'd be, like, "Well, I didn't see her teach anything." [laughs] It doesn't even look like I'm working that hard. I'm working real hard beforehand, to make sure they have what they need, and there's a structure, kind of. But then I kind of let them go.

Their reward for creating such mutuality in the classroom, teachers told us, was that discipline issues tended to fade into the background. Greg Cluster observed:

Students learn to see adults as resources for themselves and not just as authority figures to either obey if you're a good kid, or disobey if you're a bad kid. They see that adults are resources for learning what you want to learn in the world.

**They practice teamwork and collaboration with colleagues, while exercising individual inventiveness and judgment in their work with students.** These teachers drew energy, ideas, and wisdom from working with others, whether colleagues or students. They sought out collegial work: team conversations about teaching and learning, curriculum development sessions, restructuring pow-wows. They avoided grandstanding, instead working through the details that they knew would make or break a good idea. In class, the same interpersonal sensitivity came through: they knew where to adapt a task to fit the student, when to press harder, how to spike critique with a shot of encouragement.

We saw an example of these dynamics at NYC iSchool, where English teacher Fran Fay teamed up with Christina Jenkins, a social studies teacher with an interest in “design thinking,” on two curriculum modules involving both their classes. One was the “Sixteen” project mentioned earlier, in which students researched and produced a documentary about adolescence in different cultures around the world. In the next semester, they were planning for their students to mount a Shakespeare play, with half taking on the acting and directing and the other half working on production. Collaboration, academic substance, depth, know-how, individualized learning: a recipe for 21st century skills for all involved.

**They are willing to open their teaching practice to observation, feedback, and input from colleagues and students.** Modeling for their students an essential attitude about revision, these teachers set aside their pride in the interest of excellence. As Andrew Korman, a teacher at Noble High School in North Berwick, New Hampshire, said, “You can’t be defensive, as a teacher here. You need to get to the point where dialogue goes back and forth and feedback isn’t threatening.” That meant having fellow teachers into the classroom and using a helpful protocol to invite their observations afterward. It also meant not blaming the kids when learning didn’t stick, Dayton Early College Academy (DECA) teacher Jessica Austin pointed out:

If students do poorly on a quiz, you have to step back and ask not, “What’s wrong with the students?” but “What’s wrong with how I approached the topic?” You have to figure out, say, if the sequence was off or the reading was inappropriate. You’re constantly revising yourself.

These teachers respected student feedback as well, said Janice Eldridge, another Noble teacher:

The teacher culture at our school is that we have a lot of perfectionists, who want their curriculum to be really good, who are revising their curriculum all the time. Why revise it without student input? It’s a learning process like anything else. You realize that the kids aren’t saying anything personal about you, they’re just saying, “Here’s how you can do this thing or that thing better.” We have an open door policy here: anyone can come into your classroom at any time. I think that openness helps you to know that it’s okay to try things and make mistakes, it’s okay to constantly revise things.

**They are willing to take risks and comfortable with fluidity, flexibility, and change.** These teachers would try anything if they thought it had a good chance of helping students. A schedule that made way for deeper learning, a different entry point to curriculum, an innovative way for kids to show understanding, a clearer way to chart their learning—they were usually willing to give it a shot.

One of the things I value most about this school is that it’s a constant revision and a constant reflection on what we’re doing and everybody has a say in what’s going on. As a first year teacher last year in the staff meetings, I felt completely comfortable to raise my hand and say, “You know, I think with this gateway you could change it to this and it would be much less time consuming and much more effective for the kids.” I knew that my voice would be heard. (Jolie Ankrom, Spanish teacher, DECA, Dayton, Ohio)

Everything here is a progression. As we change as students, DECA changes too. When we come back each year, there is always a lot that's new. It's not like you get something down and that's the end. (Dante, grade 12 student, DECA)

Our teachers will take risks with a new idea or activity. As students, we sometimes want to roll our eyes. But we trust them, we give it a try. Usually it turns out fine, better than if they toed the line. If it flops, we'll talk about what went wrong. The teachers here aren't defensive. And here's the other thing: by taking risks themselves, they show us it's okay to take risks *ourselves*. (Jean, grade 11 student, Noble)

**They are hard workers.** These teachers were not superhuman: their hours were long, their workplace environments frenetic, and they got as tired as anyone. Yet they stayed in the game, taking on the seemingly endless responsibilities of meeting the very different needs of students. Michelle Deiro, a teacher-adviser at MetWest, described how the ever-changing dynamics of her multiple roles at school somehow added up to support the student's learning:

You see the student in so many varied ways. You see them at an overnight retreat when everybody's exhausted at two in the morning and you're getting really silly and you can have fun with them. You can draw on that experience three months later when they are refusing to do their work, and maybe go back to that memory to crack a joke to lighten the load. You can work with the mentor and see all the strengths that the mentor brings to the table. And really—because you know the student and the family and the mentor—really pool what you know. I ask my mentors a lot, “Can you offer this to the student? I don't have those skills, that knowledge, can you be the expert here? Can you let me know how the student did today?” They have a different set of eyes, and students often are different at their internships than they are here at school. And then families, we're talking to families all the time: “How's it going, what do you need, here's what happened at school today, can you follow up with that?” (Michelle Deiro, MetWest adviser)

Susan Herzog, a teacher near the end of her career, came to teach science at NYC iSchool because she valued its student-centered, break-the-mold approach. We followed her into her classroom as her only prep period was dwindling into minutes and several students were still waiting to see her. Her paper-bag lunch sat untouched on her desk. She didn't have time to talk, she said; she had to get hold of a Columbia professor who might consult with her class on their green roof project.

“At home, I find I spend all my time at work,” she said wearily. “It's always very interesting. It enriches you as a teacher. But it requires a huge amount of time. Now I'm getting tired.”

She sat down at her desk, cluttered with papers and plans, and opened her lunch bag with a resolute air. Then, just as we turned to leave, this veteran teacher finished what she had to say: “In my life, it's absolutely been worth it.”

**NOTE: To download the full paper, “Teachers at Work: Six Exemplars of Everyday Practice” by B. Cervone and K. Cushman, go to [www.studentsatthecenter.org](http://www.studentsatthecenter.org)**