

Introduction

BILL NAVE

Burn 'em all down and start from scratch with just one question: What do we need to do to make sure that each and every student reaches his or her full potential?

This was the opening line of my presentations as I traveled around the state as 1990 Maine Teacher of the Year and finalist for National Teacher of the Year. I used this line as an attention grabber because I wanted my audiences to take that one question very seriously. What *would* a school look like if it were to be designed to make sure every single student reached her or his maximum potential? It is the quintessential student-centered question. This was not a theoretical question for me, because just a couple of years earlier, I had helped to create from scratch a school that was built on this very question.

This book is a next step in my forty-six-year journey (so far—I'm not done yet) to create and document ways of teaching that work best for students by putting the students in control of their own learning. This idea was well outside mainstream thinking when I began teaching, but the science of learning and the science of how the brain works have come to confirm what has always seemed to me to be common sense—people learn when they are in charge of their learning, when they are learning what they want to learn. Our goal with this book is to show how student-centered learning can and is being done. Nine teachers have composed word pictures of their classrooms, learning environments

within which their students are learning and thriving because the students are in the driver's seat of their own learning.

MY JOURNEY IN STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING, AND MAINE'S JOURNEY

When I entered the teaching profession in New York City in 1968, I quickly became a champion of accelerating learning for students stuck in the lowest tracks of public schools. As a science teacher, I soon discovered that my students were eager to learn and that their placement in the lower tracks did not reflect their ability or their motivation to learn. I made sure they felt welcomed and respected in my classroom, because they were all hypersensitive to feeling disrespected (or “dissed,” in their terms). If they felt dissed, a literal or figurative fight ensued.

Then, in the late 1980s, after I had moved to Auburn, Maine, and was teaching all four major subjects in a special class for the lowest twenty students in the ninth grade, the school district next door decided to create an alternative program for high school dropouts. It was clear from my first interview with the district planners that their plans at that early stage were not much beyond agreeing that “this is the right thing to do for our dropouts.” But it was a challenge I couldn't resist. Mark (the other teacher in the program) and I created what would become the River Valley School, taking our cue from our potential customers—the students.

We divvied up the list of all the students who had dropped out of the district high school during the previous three years, and we spent the first part of the summer driving around the woods and farmlands of the three-town rural district to visit each former student. We found all of them, telling each that we were designing a school just for them so that they could earn their high school diploma. They were invited to help design the school by describing what characteristics a school should have if they were to think about giving it another try.

Most of the students mentioned three categories of ideas. First, they would need a flexible schedule. Some had jobs, some had child-care needs, and many just did not do mornings. Second, they wanted to study what they were interested in and thus wanted a flexible curriculum. Similarly, they had no interest in sitting through a class that they had already mastered, but for which they had not earned credit because of excessive absenteeism, for example. Third, they did

not want to be invisible. When we looked into what they meant, we discovered that every student had stopped attending school partly because he or she had felt invisible. As long as they did not make trouble, teachers left them alone, and when the students were absent, no one seemed to care or call to find out if they were okay. If they were to come to our new school, they wanted to be seen, acknowledged, respected, and cared about.

Our initial design for River Valley School included two major characteristics, which we called credit by appointment and credit by objective. *Credit by appointment* meant that we created the school schedule for each student individually according to her or his personal schedule of job responsibilities or family responsibilities such as child care. *Credit by objective* meant that our students earned credit for a course as soon as they demonstrated that they had mastered the course objectives. We obtained copies of the course learning objectives for every course at the high school and developed several options for students to demonstrate their mastery of the course objectives. For example, students could sit for a written assessment that covered the entire course, they could participate in an oral exam if appropriate, or they could enroll in and pass a similar course at a local college. In math courses, for example, most students opted for the exam because they knew the material but had been absent too frequently. If they scored 80 percent or better, the course went on their transcript immediately. We also encouraged students to pursue their interests through classes at the local technical college, the local extension school of the University of Southern Maine, or Bates College. These courses counted as electives on their transcripts.

We also emphasized relevance before a student was accepted to the school. As part of the screening process, I would interview each student. I would begin by asking the student to imagine that for the next five or ten years, life worked out exactly as it should and nothing bad happened. “Where will you be then, and what will you be doing?” I would ask. This question is, of course, one way to frame the “What do you want to be when you grow up?” question. Most of the students were a little taken aback, and most said that no one had ever asked them that question in a serious way. Nevertheless, each had an answer within seconds. Whatever it was that students described as their dream job, I honored the response as a serious one and began a process of helping the student plan backward from that future state to map out the path from here to there, beginning with high school courses to work on beginning now.

We were fully aware of the backgrounds and reputations that our students carried with them, and we made it one of our goals to begin to change those reputations and to provide opportunities for the students to see themselves in a different light as well. Therefore, we scheduled community service activities for our students to participate in, and we always invited local media (newspaper reporters and the local television station) to document the students' work. The media did not always show up, but when some newspaper pieces about a student's good deed began to appear, we observed subtle changes in the students' attitudes and demeanors as they could grasp how the community began to see them a little differently.

Many of our students lived in challenging home situations, and often, the parents did not have a positive experience in school—indeed many students were on track to become the first in their families to earn a high school diploma. Therefore we instituted another tradition—monthly family dinners. Mark possessed considerable culinary skills, so he worked with the students to create a menu, shop, and prepare a meal for students and their families. The students learned about nutrition, comparison shopping, modifying recipes for larger groups, cooking from scratch, creating semiformal table settings, and participating in an unhurried family meal with easy discussions around the table.

During the first three years of quietly running our little alternative school and working with the students, 75 percent of our graduates went on to pursue postsecondary training, ranging from college to trade school to the military. Then I was selected as Maine's 1990 Teacher of the Year (and subsequently selected as one of four finalists for National Teacher of the Year). Suddenly we had lots of visitors who wanted to see what we were doing and how we were doing it. It could have been disruptive to have so many visitors, but our students saw this as a chance to learn from these visitors as well as to evangelize, if you will, about how and why River Valley School worked for them.

In retrospect, the success of River Valley and the naming of an alternative education teacher as Teacher of the Year was probably instrumental in the creation of more than fifty alternative programs across the state in 1990 and 1991. Apparently, we had made it safe for districts to let the existence of their at-risk students and dropouts become visible and then to take the next step of meeting the needs of these students in a public way. The Maine Department of Education even created a position that employed a professional educator to advise and support districts as they developed their own homegrown alternative programs.

In addition, when a new school district was formed in a nearby town and its new high school was established (Poland Regional High School), it was designed from the ground up, both physically and organizationally, to make sure that every student reached his or her learning potential. Derek Pierce, the founding principal, hired his new staff according to their commitment to that goal, namely, proficiency-based learning for every student. In fact, this principal acknowledges that he based the school's design on the philosophy of the River Valley School, and he has since created Casco Bay High School, an award-winning alternative high school in Portland, Maine, based on the same principles, most importantly, that of proficiency-based teaching and learning.

River Valley School also influenced the transformation of King Middle School in Portland in a roundabout sort of way. During the summer of 1990, I hosted an educators' camping retreat at the Mountain Outward Bound Center in Newry, Maine. During our several days together, I led the participants through some thought experiments and planning sessions focused on my question of how to build a school where all students succeed. The principal of King Middle School, along with eight of his teachers, attended the session. A year or two later, the school became the first school in Maine to join the new Outward Bound Expeditionary Learning school reform movement. You will read about this movement in chapter 5—Karen MacDonald was one of those teachers, and the principal is still there guiding the school.

At present, student-centered, proficiency-based learning is the law in Maine. The legislature passed, and the governor signed, LD 1422 in 2012, a law that requires all schools to implement proficiency-based teaching and learning for all students.¹ The graduating class of 2018 will be the first class of Maine students to earn proficiency-based diplomas. All graduates will be required to demonstrate proficiency in eight areas of study to receive their diplomas. These areas of study are those described in the Maine Learning Results: career and education development, English language arts, health education and physical education, mathematics, science and technology, social studies, visual and performing arts, and world languages.²

In addition, in order to graduate, students also must demonstrate proficiency in the guiding principles that undergird the Maine Learning Results. Each student must demonstrate proficiency as a clear and effective communicator, a self-directed and lifelong learner, a creative and practical problem solver, a responsible and involved citizen, and an integrative and informed thinker.³

The teachers in the nine classrooms we feature here are leading in their schools and districts in this transition, and they represent all corners of the state, from the northern tip of Maine (Aroostook County) to the far Downeast coast (Washington County) to the high-poverty region of Central Maine to the city of Portland with its substantial immigrant population in the south of the state. The majority of the nine schools have a high percentage of students living in poverty. Yet, because of the teachers' skills in creating student-centered classrooms, the educators succeed in raising their students' achievement levels and in closing achievement gaps, as you will see.

THE BIRTH OF THIS BOOK

Fast-forward to Wednesday, August 28, 2013, when I received an invitation from Rebecca Wolfe, a colleague and former student, to attend a panel discussion of *Anytime, Anywhere*, a newly published book she had co-edited.⁴ The timing could not have been better. I was already scheduled to be in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the day of the panel discussion (September 12) to consult on a program evaluation project, and I stayed on to join the discussion at the Harvard Graduate School of Education that evening before returning to Maine late that night.

Anytime, Anywhere provides a comprehensive summary of the research that supports the efficacy of student-centered teaching and describes six high schools where student-centered teaching is the norm.⁵ Eight major characteristics are common across these six schools (see the sidebar “Characteristics of Student-Centered Schools”). The book also lists student-centered teaching practices that are supported by how the brain learns (see the sidebar “Student-Centered Learning Practices”).

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENT-CENTERED SCHOOLS

Teachers in the six schools highlighted in *Anytime, Anywhere* weave the following eight characteristics into the in-school and out-of-school experiences of their students. These characteristics could thus reasonably be described as facets of the school culture:

- Strong relationships with students
- Personalization and choice in curricular and instructional tasks
- Appropriate challenge levels for each learner
- Support for students' social and emotional growth and identity development
- Anytime, anywhere, and real-world learning
- Technology that is integral to teaching and learning
- Clear, timely assessment and support
- Practices that foster autonomy and lifelong learning

Source: Rebecca E. Wolfe, Adria Steinberg, and Nancy Hoffman, eds., *Anytime, Anywhere: Student-Centered Learning for Schools and Teachers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013).

STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING PRACTICES

These eight teaching practices derive directly from recent research findings about how the brain learns:

- Individualized instruction
- Formative assessment
- Planning out-of-school experiences
- Active learning
- Progressing at student's own pace
- Serving youth who may learn differently
- Attending to emotion
- Teaching executive functioning

Source: Rebecca E. Wolfe, Adria Steinberg, and Nancy Hoffman, eds., *Anytime, Anywhere: Student-Centered Learning for Schools and Teachers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013).

Finally, *Anytime, Anywhere* demonstrates that these teaching practices fit perfectly with what we know about how to increase students' sense of agency,

their motivation to achieve, their engagement with the school, and their voice in what happens at school. All of this makes perfect sense, but can ordinary teachers in ordinary schools do student-centered teaching? Is it possible only in special schools?

As the panelists described the book and the evidence supporting student-centered learning, I kept thinking about a group of colleagues in Maine and how their instructional practices exemplified exactly the sort of strategies that the book was advocating.⁶ It seemed to me that a book describing a set of student-centered classrooms flourishing in ordinary public schools would be the perfect follow-up, especially if it were to be written by teachers so it embodied their perspective.

I approached Rebecca and told her that I personally knew all sorts of K–12 teachers who were putting student-centered teaching into active, effective practice. These teachers could provide other teachers across the nation with excellent examples of what student-centered teaching looks like in real, live classrooms—in elementary schools, middle schools, special education classrooms, and high schools. I had come to know these teachers through my program evaluation work that included classroom observations across the state and through my mentoring of nominees in the Maine Teacher of the Year process.

I suggested that I introduce these teachers to her so that she could create the perfect follow-up book. Rebecca looked me in the eye and said, “Bill, I don’t have time to do that. Why don’t you do it?” After a brief pause, I thought, yes, why don’t I do that? I’ll select some of the teachers whose classrooms I knew to be thoroughly student-centered, and I’ll ask them if they would be interested in joining me in such a project. They were interested, enthusiastically so. These teachers had developed student-centered classroom strategies that worked for their students, were committed to continuing to improve those strategies, and were excited about the opportunity to share their work with others beyond their schools and districts.

Rebecca introduced me to her editor from Harvard Education Press, and my colleagues and I began crafting a book proposal. Thus began this book’s gestation. We envisioned a set of classroom portraits, with each teacher describing in some detail how she organizes her classroom instruction and why she does it that way, and we planned to include detailed descriptions of some of the strategies that each teacher uses to support student-centered teaching. Our goal was to inspire other teachers to begin to shift to more student-centered teaching

and to help them get started by sharing some of the classroom strategies that we knew worked for our students. The first question raised by one of the teachers was a good one—in fact, it was probably the best question raised during our entire process. “What is student-centered teaching?” she asked. “I need to know because I’m not sure I’m doing it and I don’t want to work on this book if I’m not doing student-centered teaching.”

I knew they were all doing student-centered teaching, because I had read the essays they wrote for their Teacher of the Year nomination packet. I had conversed with them at length as I mentored them through the Teacher of the Year process, and I had visited some of their classrooms. I responded to that question with other questions. “Do you work to make sure every one of your students learns what you intend? Do you work to get to know each student well enough to know where their growing edges are so that you can start them from where they are?” All the answers were yes.

So we began. I asked the teachers to keep a daily journal if they were not already doing so, so that they would have examples to use in their chapters. We agreed to meet in person or virtually about every five or six weeks to monitor our progress. I suggested that the chapters be so vivid that readers could feel as if they were sitting in the classroom observing a lesson. One of my early ideas was that the chapters might be sort of like a screenplay, capturing what students were doing and saying.

At our first meeting, all my colleagues told me that the screenplay idea wasn’t working and they couldn’t see how they could make it work. I withdrew the suggestion, and then we brainstormed what to include in each chapter. A consensus emerged; we should describe the strategies that we consider the foundational pieces of our practice. We should include stories about how students respond to these strategies. The teachers should describe their individual journeys that led them to their student-centered practice. We agreed that these journey descriptions would be extremely important because they would provide readers with nine maps showing them “how to get there from here,” that is, how to get to student-centered teaching from where they were at present.

The teachers began writing with a new focus, and they shared with me and with each other what they were writing. We provided ongoing feedback to each other. We continued to meet every six weeks or so to share our progress, sort of like a book group—only we were writing a book, not reading one. During this time, I also spent a full day in eight of the nine classrooms and, occasionally,

more than one day.⁷ These observations allowed me to see firsthand the strategies the teachers were using and how the students were responding, to *feel* the culture of the classroom and the school, and to chat with students about the work they were doing when I was there. The visits also provided me with several ideas for specific activities or strategies that I asked the teacher to include in her chapter. As I edited each chapter, my classroom observations helped, because I had witnessed the strategies the teacher was describing. All student names have been changed to protect their privacy.

WHOM THIS BOOK IS FOR

It is often assumed that student-centered teaching can happen only in very special schools that were designed from the beginning to be fully student-centered, have strong outside institutional support, and can hire special teachers who sign on to the student-centered approach when they are hired. In short, student-centered teaching can supposedly happen only in schools that are not ordinary public schools.⁸

The nine teachers whose classroom portraits are included here work in ordinary public schools. These teachers began their careers as ordinary teachers, but as you will see, somewhere along the way, they made a commitment to become more student-centered, and in doing so, they became extraordinary. The point about ordinariness is important to understand. For the most part, our nine teachers have developed their student-centered teaching practices over time, building on their commitment both to students and to their own learning and professional growth. Three of the teachers work in schools undergoing schoolwide transformations to become fully student-centered and proficiency-based in their instruction. These include Karen MacDonald's King Middle School (chapter 5), which embarked on its relationship with the Outward Bound Expeditionary Learning school reform model more than twenty years ago, and Shelly Moody's and Cindy Raymond's schools (chapters 3 and 6), which are part of Maine's original cohort of schools working to implement mass customized learning.

It might feel intimidating at first for a teacher to think about trying to do student-centered teaching. Thoughts like these come to mind: "I teach eighty students a day—how can I possibly individualize for all of them?" Or, "What about my slow learners? I have a curriculum to cover, and there's only so much

time.” Or, “I have to teach all subjects to my twenty-five students. I can’t imagine the time it would take to individualize instruction for all of them in all the subjects. I couldn’t physically work that hard, even if I wanted to.” The nine chapters in this book address those questions and more as the teachers describe how they work with their students and, just as important, what has influenced the evolution of their practice over time. To repeat: the nine teachers whose classroom portraits are included in the book began their careers as ordinary teachers, but somewhere along the way, they made a commitment to become more student-centered, and in doing so, they became extraordinary. *Any teacher* can work to become a student-centered teacher and, as a result, can evolve to become an extraordinary teacher. You can too.

These chapters show that student-centered teaching can be done in ordinary schools with ordinary students and ordinary teachers. You will read about powerful student-centered strategies, how students respond, and evidence that the strategies do lead to improved student achievement.

In the conclusion, I note the commonalities across the nine classrooms in terms of the strategies teachers use and the cultures they cocreate with their students. I also point out how readers can respond by working to support student-centered teaching wherever they may be and from whatever role they currently play in relationship with their local schools.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Some very thoughtful comments and questions from the blind reviewers of our proposal included some misgivings about the value of a book about teachers in Maine. For example, the descriptions of Maine teachers’ classrooms may be of interest to other Maine teachers, but would the book benefit teachers in other places that are more diverse and more urban? The short answer is yes.

We responded to these queries by describing the diversity that would be evident in our teachers’ classroom portraits. For example, our kindergarten teacher is second-generation Mexican American who grew up living in poverty in the projects of San Francisco. She now teaches kindergartners in a small town in Downeast Maine, where many of her students are English language learners, children of migrant farm workers who settled in the community rather than returning to Central America, and where 75 percent of her students live below the poverty line. One of our middle school teachers works in a school where

twenty-nine languages are spoken and where many of the students live in the nearby projects (yes, Portland, Maine has projects). Seven of the nine teachers are in schools with a high percentage of students living below the poverty line. One of the schools is in a town where many of the students face myriad problems: a parent lost to a drug overdose, fathers or older brothers in prison, alcoholism within the family, or parents who have not graduated from high school.

In short, we believe that the teaching strategies described here can benefit any teacher in any classroom, be it urban, rural, suburban, or exurban. Indeed, we invite, we implore you, the teachers who read these chapters, to try out these strategies in your own classrooms with your own students. No special tools are required. Adapt the strategies to your own situation, and watch what happens.