Snapshots of Meaning-Making Classrooms

Classrooms in three urban high schools demonstrate the power of teaching students to make meaning.

Jacqueline Ancess

In today's education environment, the goal of helping students make personal meaning seems to have almost disappeared from the landscape. Education policymakers have become preoccupied with preparing young people for the marketplace through high-stakes testing and accountability. The resulting test-prep/test-coverage curriculum undermines the process of individual and collective meaning making by encouraging the notion that nothing matters more than figuring out the answers to the test.

Has the democratic promise of the "good life and the good society" (Gutmann, 1987) become merely an economic dream? Does this idea no longer encompass personal, civic, and spiritual dreams in which we imagine and explore new possibilities for ourselves and our world? If we want education for our young people to transcend the trite and trivial concept of learning propagated by the current testing climate, then we need to recommit ourselves to teaching and learning for making meaning.

In classrooms that foster meaning making, teachers expect students to raise questions about the inevitable dilemmas, confusion, and contradictions they uncover as they attempt to make sense of their world, instead of being passive and powerless vessels of received wisdom. In such classrooms, students experience the excitement of belonging to an intellectual community.

Education for meaning making also demands that teachers ensure that all students have access to the knowledge they need to succeed academically. To accomplish this goal, teachers must design and organize content and instruction that enables students to learn in the ways that suit them best and to take responsibility for their own learning.

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These meaning-making classrooms transform the statement "knowledge is power" into reality.

Meaning-Making Classrooms

During the last 12 years, I have conducted research in urban and suburban schools—including the three featured here—that are succeeding against the odds in helping underperforming students achieve academic success (Ancess, 2003). My research encompasses student surveys; more than 100 interviews with students, teachers, school and district leaders, and parents; observations of classroom instruction, performance assessments, school life, teacher team and faculty meetings, and professional develop-
ment; and review of school and district documents, teacher curriculums, and student work.

One of these schools' most powerful strategies is to organize teaching and learning to engage students in personal meaning making. Let's look at some snapshots of meaning-making classrooms.

Exploring Complex Issues
International High School, located in the borough of Queens in New York City, serves recent immigrants and English language learners identified as being at risk of academic failure. In Dina Heisler's history class, these students read, analyze, and discuss literature to examine authors' diverse experiences of being American. Comparing Langston Hughes's *Let America Be America Again* with Emma Lazarus's *The New Colossus: Inscription for the Statue of Liberty*, they explore what being American means to diverse people and examine their own experiences as recent immigrants and new Americans.

Heisler wants her students to be historians, to examine conflicts along with their resolutions and residues so that they "can see the connections between the past and the present" (Ancess, 2003, p. 102). She uses a broad range of instructional materials, including newspaper accounts. On one occasion, she juxtaposed three recent *New York Times* articles that illustrated differences in the modern American experience. One article reported on a Thai woman who thought she was coming to the United States for a job but who instead was enslaved into prostitution. Another told the story of a wealthy white man who used his inherited wealth to buy a company. The third reported that an African American reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* and his mother, rushing home after a Broadway show, were arrested and jailed overnight because they went through a turnstile together after one of their subway tokens got stuck.

The students' discussion of these articles led to an investigation of class and caste in U.S. society. Students explored the history of racism and the lives of immigrants, class mobility, the privileges of inherited wealth and membership in the dominant culture, and the vulnerabilities of "the other." In their subsequent readings in history, students plotted out where diverse people fell on the pyramid of power that reflected these people's time periods. Looking at history from the perspective of other times helped students understand why people might choose a particular course of action and realize that people in different positions had different options. Students' exploration deepened their individual understandings of social class and helped them identify the continuing struggles to fulfill the promise of the American Revolution.

Developing and Defending Ideas
The Urban Academy in Manhattan, a high school serving diverse students who have struggled academically at other high schools, uses an inquiry approach to learning. The school has organized instruction, curriculum, and assessment into a structure that enables students to pursue authentic questions. For example, in a course on the U.S. Constitution (Urban Academy, 2002), students examine such questions as, How are the Articles of Confederation different from the Constitution? Do you think they are better or worse? For whom did the framers write the Constitution: themselves (mostly rich landowners), or the people?

All Urban Academy classes practice the following norms for inquiry: Students investigate a question using multiple sources of information that have multiple perspectives; develop their own point of view; support that viewpoint with evidence; and engage in discussion and debate with peers and teachers. Teachers encourage disagreement and challenge. One student explained,
You have to think for yourself. You have to research so you understand what you're talking about because when you get into class and you want to give your opinion, you have to be able to back it up. (Ancess, 2003, p. 105)

Another student commented,

We are able to see different points of view and understand more about the subject than when you read from only one person's side.

In Avram Barlowe's course on the Civil War, students discuss Abraham Lincoln's position on race and slavery. Barlowe gives them diverse materials that include primary sources, scholarly articles, and readings for adolescents, which he expects students to use as evidence for their opinions. The texts are on different levels so that students' literacy skills do not limit their access to knowledge. Barlowe's goal is for students to see history as an ongoing debate. He explains,

I want them to see it as a field where there are many interpretations to any issue. I focus on teaching students how to interpret conflicting sources of information, how to analyze historical information, and how to draw on multiple perspectives to develop a point of view. (Urban Academy, undated)

The following excerpts from one discussion demonstrate how a controversial issue engages students in a struggle to make sense of human complexity and to understand the past in the context of the present:

Student 1: Lincoln could not completely abolish slavery because he would have lost support in the North.

Barlowe: Where in the readings did you find evidence of this anti-abolitionist support he would have lost? What is the evidence that he was racist or not racist?

Student 2: In the second reading, page 38.

Student 3: In this text, they look at Lincoln as a real smart leader not outright opposing slavery, yet taking small actions.

Barlowe: Is it acceptable for politicians to say different things as long as when they get elected they do the right thing? Look at the words [reads from Lincoln's speech]: "As much as they cannot so live while they do remain together, there must be a position of inferior and superior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race." Can you say those words in public and really be committed to ending slavery?

Student 4: People are saying that he had a passion for freeing the slaves, but he's gonna have to say something to get into office.

Student 5: You know who had a passion to free slaves? People like John Brown, who sacrificed their lives so slaves could be free. But Abraham Lincoln by his contradictory statements—I just don't see that passion. When he got elected, he might have made the Emancipation Proclamation—he might have legally freed slaves, but I don't think that he did it for a moral reason.

Student 6: I think that Zinn [author of a reading] also talked about the different roles people played in the world back then. He felt that Lincoln made more strategic moves in playing the role of abolitionist.

Student 7: White people were rich. White people were smart. It was all stereotypical. That's what everybody believed. For him to say that wasn't a racist statement. It was just seen as true.

Student 8: It was wrong. No matter what angle you look at it, it was terrible. And when he said whites and blacks can't be equal—those are racist comments. I don't care if it's right now or back then or in the middle. That just shouldn't be said. (Urban Academy, undated)

**Mastering Content**

Teaching for meaning making also requires ensuring that students have access to content and self-knowledge that has previously eluded them and limited their achievement. Wally Warshawsky's Urban Academy mathematics classes demonstrate how pedagogy that emphasizes meaning making gives students opportunities to gain new mastery, success, and confidence.

In heterogeneous groups of four or five, students work collaboratively on math problems. As Warshawsky circu-
lates, students call out to him, telling him about their problem-solving process and asking for his advice when they get stuck. Instead of offering formulas, Warshawsky provides reassurance and asks questions designed to get students back on track working with their group.

As students share their own and their peers' individual strategies for solving math problems in their small work groups, they discover that the capacity to learn the content lies within them. Warshawsky's emphasis on making sense of mathematics demystifies the subject for students. One student explained,

I couldn’t get math by teachers’ lecturing and copying from the board and memorizing. In a group, someone can show me. I see what others are doing. I can understand that. And I'm going to have a whole hour so I'll have the time. And I can be with somebody to help me find where I’m stuck. With Wally you can say at any point, “I'm not getting it. What do I do here?”, and you’re not afraid Wally will feel that you’re stupid. You’re not afraid because kids at Urban ask questions. You’re not getting taught in one way. Everybody at Urban knows there are different ways of learning. (Ancess, 2003, p. 107)

Similarly, teachers at Paul M. Hodgson Technical-Vocational High School in New Castle County, Delaware, have designed and organized math instruction that provides students with increased access to mathematics. Many students attend Hodgson because they have been turned off by traditional education. As one teacher said,

The way they've been taught in the past is not the way they learn. A lot of these kids don't see in the abstract. They're learners who actually want to apply what they're doing. Give them something concrete, and then it starts to make a lot more sense to them. (Ancess, 2003, p. 80)

To meet this need, math and vocational education teachers integrated the curriculum. For example, one math teacher has taught geometry and measurement in the construction trades shop as students work on roofing problems. Another math teacher has worked in the visual arts shop, helping students understand proportion as they enlarge pictures on a grid. Another teacher has taught trigonometry in the carpentry shop. The teachers report that their shop projects provided an authentic context for students to learn the same mathematics that often eluded them when taught in the abstract. Students became engaged in learning the math because they really needed it.

School Conditions That Support Making Meaning

The education taking place in these three high schools provides insights into the specific conditions that support teaching and learning for making meaning.

*Teacher ethos.* Teaching and learning for meaning depends on teachers' belief in the importance of making meaning in the education process. The teachers in these snapshots have reflected deeply about the purpose of school, what they want their students to learn, and the relationship between their pedagogy and those goals. Just as important, the culture of their school supports their efforts, providing opportunities for students to practice, internalize, and deepen the requisite habits of mind that develop meaning making as a norm not only in school but also in their lives.

*Trust in teacher judgment.* In these schools, teachers are both trusted and expected to make important decisions about how they design and organize the curriculum and what instructional materials they use.

**Organization of curriculum into focused units.** Instead of just offering classes in the subject areas, these schools organize the curriculum into meaningful units. Examples are college-like courses, such as The Nature of the American Revolution, The U.S. Constitution, and Latin American Literature; thematic clusters of courses taught by interdisciplinary teams, such as The American Dream and Beginnings; and student projects, such as What’s a Good Job?, How Does Architecture Affect People’s Lives?, and A Futuristic Look at Propaganda.

**Infrastructure to support meaning making.** For various reasons, students may initially resist the school’s efforts to teach for meaning. In some cases they fear failing or appearing foolish or uncool. They may lack the skills, content, procedural knowledge, work and intellectual habits, strategies, or persistence required for in-depth internal and external investigation and meaning making. They may have had little experience with meaning making in school.

Student resistance to the demand for meaning making may take the form of minimal effort; sloppy or perfunctory work; chronically late, incomplete, or missing assignments; or avoidance of revision. In meaning-making schools, teachers anticipate this resistance and meet it with persistence. They are supported by a schoolwide organizational and instructional infrastructure that anticipates students' needs. For example,

- Teachers explicitly teach students...
skills for making meaning (how to use the library, find different kinds of publications, take notes, read conflicting texts, find and use evidence, revise work, and so on).

- Students have both formal and informal access to teachers so that they can meet with them for tutoring, clarifying discussions, and expanded conversation about issues raised in classes. This access to additional support reinforces meaning making as a school value.

- The school maintains a manageable teacher-student ratio. Teachers usually work with fewer than 100 students so that they get to know their students well and can meet their individual academic needs.

**Meaning Making for All Students**

Even the positive school conditions described in this article are not, by themselves, sufficient to sustain teaching and learning for making meaning on a large scale for all students. To achieve that goal, we as a society must begin to value meaning making at least as much as we value test scores.

As the words of Thomas Jefferson remind us, the security of democracy rests on an intelligent populace and a popular intelligence (Lee, 1961). To develop that intelligence, we must understand teaching as a thinking activity, a problem-solving activity, and a responsive activity. We must keep our eyes fixed on learning goals, our ears attuned to where students are in the journey, and our minds focused on expanding students’ understanding. No formula, script, or off-the-shelf program can do this for us. Teaching for meaning requires that teachers work together in communities of practice. It will only become the norm if we commit ourselves to creating a culture of professional development in public education.

Humans are meaning-seeking beings. We need to make meaning—to make sense of our lives—just as we need to breathe. We would be wise to put that need at the center of the work we do in schools.

**References**


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