How Creating an Educational Frankenstein Can Help You Learn and Lead Your Educational Organization

While we have certainly experienced the dark ages of education, our profession is in the midst of a renaissance. These dark ages were in existence when access to the school house was significantly limited. It wasn't that long ago in our nation's history when Americans who were members of certain classes or of particular races had accessibility limits put upon them (see Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 1954 and PARC vs. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1972d).

Through these earlier times, our profession also endured a long held premise that educators had very little impact, if any, on student achievement (see the Coleman Report). Our renaissance begins with research which has demonstrated that well run educational organizations coupled with high quality teaching add considerable value to our students (Marzano, Waters and McNulty, 2005; Sanders, 2004; Waters &

... nothing contributes so much to tranquillize the mind as a steady purpose...

Be men, or be more than men. Be steady to your purposes and firm as a rock.

—Frankenstein
by Mary Shelley

Marzano, 2006). In addition, schools with what some would consider considerable odds stacked against them can, and indeed do, achieve at high levels (Reeves, 2005). We have the research-base and knowledge of effective instruction (Marzano, 2007).

Despite our past, hope does exist. Students with special needs have meaningful access to high quality instruction. More than 50 years after black students needed the National Guard to enter a school
that was previously reserved only for white students; the most powerful nation in the free world has an African-American President. Despite these rays of light, you may have doubts as to how you might be able to improve your district or school in an environment that has very limited resources.

The title of my manuscript was meant to create an image. I realize that some readers are likely familiar with the famous novel by Mary Shelley whereas others may be fans of Mel Brooks’ Young Frankenstein. A very limited number may remember The Edgar Winter Group’s instrumental piece. While all of the aforementioned are artistically and culturally relevant, none relate to the Educational Frankenstein and how it can assist the field of education. The purpose of this article is to relay to the reader what I’ve assembled to help bring order. My friends, meet my Educational Frankenstein. This is my assimilation and conglomeration not of programs, but of substantive elements that have been proven to make a difference. These are the things that I’ve come to rely on.

While I have worked in the field for a very brief time compared to some (15 years), one important observation that I’ve made and have been able to triangulate my data through experiences and observations, is our field’s infatuation and obsession with programs. Many people who hold my position in their respective organizations (that being the overseer of curriculum, instruction and assessment—what I dearly have labeled the C.I.A position) are absolutely obsessed with programs and it seems to me that they believe a program adoption or a particular materials selection will solve their “_____ problems.” Go ahead...you can fill in the blank yourself. Use words like — AYP, achievement, data, reading, math, discipline, student engagement, value-added, family dysfunction, and so on. Programs will not solve your problems. Programs do not solve the implementation gap. I believe that a steady and unwaivering commitment to implementation is the road to improvement.

The first ingredient of my Frankenstein would consist of Dr. Doug Reeves. Dr. Reeves has contributed significantly to the field of education with countless books, articles and seminars. He is simplistically brilliant. Reeves created the Leadership for Learning Framework that is in the form of 2x2 matrix (Reeves, 2006). Picture a simple graph whereby the x-axis is labeled Antecedents of Excellence and the y-axis is labeled Achievement of Results. Now divide this picture into 4 quadrants. Reeves labeled the top-left quadrant Lucky and the bottom-left quadrant Losing. The top-right quadrant was labeled Leading and the bottom-right was Learning. You can use this component of the Frankenstein to help you begin to identify the causes of your excellence and/or the causes of low results. You can’t begin to solve your “_____ problem” if you haven’t taken the time to identify the root causes of your effect data. As a district or school improvement team you would conduct such an investigation by discussing your effect data (e.g. student achievement scores, value-added, and so on) and the cause data (i.e. the instructional techniques—what did the adults in the system do to bring about the effect data, and so on). The Educational Frankenstein helps engage educators in a thoughtful analysis of why the results occur. Other than the time needed to gather the professionals to collaborate on things they should be discussing, the cost is $0.

In order to gather the second ingredient to create my Educational Frankenstein, I would be required to visit three different countries. This passionate component comes from the likes of Anne Davies (Canada), Dylan Wiliam (United Kingdom) and Rick Stiggins (USA). All three have contributed to the field by bringing the professions’ focus to the importance of engaging in quality classroom assessment practices. Unfortunately, assessment publishers have created “formative assessment programs” and have made the attempt to sell them to districts. This can be somewhat dangerous as many times the assessments are administered after student learning has occurred, the students’ performances are put into teacher grade
books and/or the district has not undergone the professional development that is needed in order to have teachers understand the purpose of these types of assessments. What results is a significant implementation gap as a result of the system not being "primed" for such an important endeavor. I've had the good fortune of learning from Rick Stiggins and Dylan Wiliam on a few different occasions—both have been very clear to point out that formative assessment is not a program. In fact, at the last National Value-Added Assessment Conference in Columbus, Wiliam indicted he has consciously chosen to no longer use the words formative assessment due to the fact that he strongly believes it is being misinterpreted.

Davies, Wiliam, Stiggins and countless others have demonstrated the worth and power of formative assessment (a.k.a—descriptive feedback). In short, when teachers make the learning targets clearer to students through the delivery of descriptive feedback during the learning process, students learn more, achieve at tremendous levels and become more motivated (Crooks, 1988; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Davies, 2004; Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007). The district where I work has dedicated itself to learning target clarity and the provision of descriptive feedback for students. The teachers that have been using high quality feedback within the classroom on a regular basis have reported significant gains in student achievement, learning and student motivation. Other than paying the cost for substitute teachers so that teachers have time to professionally collaborate on things they should be discussing anyway, the cost for this endeavor is virtually $0.

Mr. Larry Ainsworth would be the third ingredient to my Educational Franken-stein. Mr. Ainsworth has written several books; two of which I’ve almost literally read the covers off of. His books on Power Standards and Unwrapping the Standards are nothing short of simplistically profound. I have facilitated professional development with several teachers who have put Ainsworth’s strategies of identifying the most important learning targets in reading, math, science and social studies into practice and have had the privilege of listening to teachers engaged in intense conversations as they unwrap the Ohio Aca-
demic Content Standards. Why would educators perform such tasks? Such professional development requires teachers who teach students in the same school to deeply think about what the grade level learning indicators require students to know and be able to do. If making the learning targets clearer to students increases achievement, then it should be a priority. What better way to begin to establish clarity than to have teachers engaged in deep conversations pertaining to the targets they teach students? When identifying power indicators, teachers collectively use a common criteria to determine which indicators endure, leverage and serve as a foundation for future learning (Ainsworth, 2003a). Unwrapping the standards is a collaborative, purposeful activity that requires teachers to examine the complexity of the verbs within the learning targets they teach their students. In addition, it provides teachers the opportunity to generate the big ideas and essential questions that are at the root of the academic standards they teach (Ainsworth, 2003b). These ideas and questions are then diffused into the classroom and serve as instructional anchors for students. Teachers purposefully make connections to these anchors and help students realize that learning isn’t comprised of a series of teacher generated activities, but rather is connected to a set of
skills that build not only within the subject discipline, but across many disciplines. Ainsworth’s books are under $25 for each. Other than paying the cost for substitute teachers so that teachers have time to professionally collaborate on things they should be discussing anyway, the cost for this endeavor is virtually $0.

The final ingredient and the one that gives the Educational Frankenstein its life comes from Benjamin Bloom—founder, generator and creator of Bloom’s Taxonomy. While Bloom’s original taxonomy has been revised, it was done so by his former students (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Most every educator or psychologist during undergraduate training had exposure to Bloom’s Learning Taxonomy. In short, Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy should be used by teachers as an alignment tool for learning targets, instruction and assessment. For instance, you could have a group of teachers identify power indicators and place them on the learning taxonomy. The taxonomy is applied when unwrapping standards as well. Teachers unwrapping respective learning standards consider the concepts and skills when doing so. The task requires the educators to consider the verb(s) of the learning target along with what the learner is required to consider when learning the content. Take the following 9th grade Ohio math learning indicator in the Data Analysis and Probability Standard: Analyze and interpret frequency distributions based on spread, symmetry, skewness, clusters and outliers. When using Bloom’s taxonomy, the teacher first considers the content contained within the learning target. In this case, it is the Conceptual Knowledge of spread, symmetry, skewness and so on. Second, the teacher considers what the learner is required to do with the content. In this case, the learner is required to analyze and interpret frequency distributions. The previous example is an application of the taxonomy for learning target clarity purposes. When educators engage in this activity, the conversations they have about the learning targets enable them to develop a deeper collaborative wisdom about instruction.

The taxonomy allows educators to consider the complexity of the learning targets and it is through this process that teachers develop a deeper understanding of what the learning targets require students to do. When this is more fully realized, teachers can more readily apply the principles of quality assessment as defined by Stiggins and his colleagues in order to develop balanced assessments. Learning targets that require learners to analyze and evaluate content need to be assessed in a specific manner. In addition, those learning targets that require the learner to become more cognitively engaged (e.g. analyze, evaluate and create) require a much richer instructional approach. For example, picture educators in a job embedded professional development activity that requires them to choose a unit of study, consider the learning targets for the unit (especially the power indicators), determine the assessments that will be used to provide students with effective feedback throughout learning the unit (formative assessments) in addition to evaluate their understanding of the learning targets at the end of instruction (summative assessment). This level of planning occurs before instruction even begins. By engaging in this process, alignment becomes evident. Teachers align their instructional activities with the complexity of the learning targets and have determined what evidence they need to gather from students on their journey towards accomplishing the learning.
targets, in addition to determining what evidence they are willing to accept, that the students have indeed met the requirements of the learning indicators. The figure on the previous page depicts how Bloom's Taxonomy can be used for alignment purposes.

Other than paying the cost for substitute teachers so that teachers have time to professionally collaborate on things such as these, the cost for this endeavor is virtually $0.

In conclusion, you'll note that my Educational Frankenstein was built not of programs, but of a collection of ideas that are grounded in research and practical application. It consists of a focus on collaboratively developing an understanding of cause and effect data coupled with an operationalized set of principles and thoughts that engage and empower educators. Currently, Ohio is piloting such an engaging decision making process that consists of these principles.

The Ohio Improvement Process is an extension and application of the work done by the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council.

When educators employ this continuous improvement process, they are provided with a series of tools that assist their district and building leadership teams through data exploration.

The teams reflect on the cause and effect data, use the products of their conversations to set a limited number of very focused goals which are designed to make an impact on the instructional and learning process. I would ask that you think about building your Educational Frankenstein and consider becoming part of this renaissance.

References

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