

Learning as a Sandwich: Revisiting the Ingenuity (and Radicalism) of K-W-L

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*I believe it was Dale Carnegie who first counseled public speakers to “tell the audience what you’re going to say . . . say it . . . then tell them what you’ve said.” This advice, which presumably appeared in his book *How to Lose Friends and Irritate People*, suggests a rather dim view of the audience’s capacity to comprehend or remember what they’ve heard – or, perhaps, the speaker’s capacity to come up with enough content to fill the allotted time.*

Nevertheless, the general idea of sandwiching the main event between some sort of preparation and some sort of reflection actually makes a fair bit of sense when applied to learning – provided that the goal is more ambitious than mere repetition.

*Consider the iconic K-W-L chart, first described by literacy expert Donna Ogle in an article published almost thirty years ago in *The Reading Teacher*.^[1] Students are asked to brainstorm what they already know (K) about the subject matter of the text they’re going to read and also to anticipate the kinds of information it’s likely*

to contain. Then they discuss what they want to learn (W). Finally, after reading, they consider what they actually did learn (L).

I'll return in a moment to how this procedure illustrates what might be called sandwiching, but first let me say a word about K-W-L in its own right. Its status as one of those nifty practical ideas that teachers can pick up quickly and start using the following morning probably explains why it became so popular. But, like other teaching strategies that are deceptively radical in their implications, K-W-L is also easily corrupted – and often implemented so poorly as to undermine any meaningful benefit.

For example, rather than being given time to reflect on what, if anything, they genuinely want to know about a given subject, students may be asked to cough up questions on the spot – which results in responses that are perfunctory and inauthentic. Even when students come up with thoughtful questions, moreover, the teacher may write them down and then ignore them, teaching the unit exactly the way she had originally planned. Finally, the initial “K” step is sometimes turned into – heaven help us – a pre-test, suggesting an all-too-familiar factory model of schooling focused on the transmission of facts and a preoccupation with measurement.

Why do I say that K-W-L, used properly, is actually radical? To begin with, it's collaborative. Kids aren't asked just to come up with questions and conclusions individually but to engage in a conversation with their peers that has the potential to deepen each child's initial ideas. More remarkably, Ogle introduces the whole strategy as a way “to help teachers honor what children bring to each reading situation” (p. 564) – a striking contrast with the nothing-matters-but-the-text-itself ideology that informs the ELA Common Core standards.[2]

K-W-L charts aren't merely a clever way of organizing kids' ideas about what they're reading. Rather, Ogle emphasizes, “The teacher is making clear that learning shouldn't be framed around just what an author chooses to include, but that it involves the identification of the learner's questions and the search for authors or articles

dealing with those questions” (p. 569). That’s an extraordinary sentence. It’s children’s questions that actually drive the lesson – as opposed to a list of prefabricated outcomes produced by the teacher, district administrators, state legislature, or Pearson employees. The learning is owned by the learners; they actively select and use texts to find out what they want to know.

This approach constitutes not just an alternative to the top-down standards-and-testing movement that has come to define “school reform”; it’s a rebellion against traditional teacher-centered classrooms that remain the norm in most public and private schools – classrooms where virtually the entire curriculum (accessorised with learning goals, expectations, and assessments) is devised without any input from the students themselves and without attention to the needs and interests of these particular students.

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Even educators who aren’t especially eager to pull down the pillars of traditional schooling may nevertheless be impressed with K-W-L for the intellectual sandwich it creates. The primary lesson is located between anticipation of what we’re about to do and consideration of what we just did. That strategy can be enormously useful for just about any kind of learning. Students begin by exchanging ideas about what’s to come; they converse – and ideally make decisions about – what they’re going to do, and how, and why. Later, they discuss what questions were answered, which ones remain, what new ones were generated, and how they should approach the next topic.

“Just Do It” is a fine slogan for selling athletic shoes. It may even work for cramming facts into short-term memory to prepare for a test. But for meaningful learning, you don’t just do it; you anticipate and then you process. As the eminent educator Ralph Tyler once remarked, “We don’t learn from our mistakes; we learn from thinking about our mistakes.” The same goes for our successes.

Does it make sense to take class field trips? To require students to

perform community service? The value of these and other activities depends on how they're done, and one of the most promising approaches involves conversations before (What do we think will happen? What are we looking for? What might go wrong?) and after (How did things work out? Were our predictions accurate? What would we do differently if we knew then what we know now?).

Like K-W-L, good sandwiching is an excursion we take together, not just a series of prompts for each student to respond to alone. And while it could be described as "metacognitive" – thinking about thinking – it's carefully structured to avoid interrupting, distracting from, or contaminating the learning itself. (The same, alas, cannot be said of a lot of what's done in the name of metacognition – for example, forcing kids to stick Post-Its all over their books, drawing their attention to their reading strategies. "Do not risk ruining the reading of stories by teaching children to focus on how they're processing them," Nancie Atwell warned.[3])

These marvelous before-and-after steps can infuse learning with direction and energy, but they tend to be jettisoned when there's pressure to plow through a large quantity of material. The obstacle here is threefold: a view of teaching as covering rather than discovering; a simplistic emphasis on rigor; and a top-down model of education in which policy makers far away from classrooms impose their to-do lists on those actually engaged in the learning. All of these developments ought to be opposed vigorously – and the vision reflected in K-W-L may help teachers do just that.

NOTES

1. Donna Ogle, "K-W-L: A Teaching Model That Develops Active Reading of Expository Text," *The Reading Teacher* 39 (1986): 564-70.

2. Many thoughtful educators are rejecting the Common Core standards not just because of the one-size-fits-all approach or the prominent role of high-stakes testing, but out of alarm about the content of the standards themselves. That fact is almost never mentioned in mainstream media accounts, which treat the standards as synonymous with an emphasis on problem solving and deeper understanding,

ignoring the controversial assumptions about pedagogy they actually embody. For more, see Patrick Shannon, ed., Closer Readings of the Common Core: Asking Big Questions About the English/Language Arts Standards (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2013).

3. Nancie Atwell, The Reading Zone (New York: Scholastic, 2007), p. 63. Such overzealous applications of the idea of metacognition fix students' attention on their performance (how well they're doing) at the expense of engagement with the learning itself (what they're doing). Also, they echo the current enthusiasm for promoting "self-regulation" – self-discipline, grit, deferral of gratification – that's all about fixing the child rather than improving the pedagogy or curriculum. I discuss these two wider concerns in, respectively, The Schools Our Children Deserve (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), chapter 2; and The Myth of the Spoiled Child (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2014), chapter 7.

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