Biography

Tanner Ragland is the Educational Technology Chair and Computer Science Department Chair at The Buckley School in Sherman Oaks, CA. Tanner teaches three computer science courses at Buckley, including AP® Computer Science.

Tanner has a B.A. in History from UCLA and will graduate with a Master’s in Educational Technology from Pepperdine University in the summer of 2009. He has taught computer science and served as Head Coach of the Varsity Girls’ Volleyball team at Buckley for the past seven years.

Tanner describes himself as a very upbeat, adaptable person. His interests include golf, volleyball, and wakeboarding. He spends most of his time wedding planning with his beautiful fiancée Erin, and playing with his English Bull Dog named Lily, aka “Piggy.”

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Facilitating Adaptive Expertise

Can you imagine a school where the phrase “why do we have to learn this?” has never been uttered? A school where students complain when the bell rings because they don’t want to leave class? I have been experimenting with a classroom environment where these ideals are entirely possible.

Grades are poor long term motivators for students. The students that learn the most from a class are the ones who are active learners who are able to apply what they have learned to new problems and settings. My Action Research project is about pinpointing the source of prolonged motivation in students and finding a way to cultivate the growth of that motivation. I have found that if I can teach my students how to align themselves on the path towards expertise in learning, they will blossom into expert learners who pursue subjects for the challenge of learning, rather than a letter grade.

Action Research

I started by facilitating the construction of a community where knowledge building can take place. I moved myself away from the center of the classroom by using discussion boards, wikis, and group projects as tools to help the students learn how to leverage each other rather than relying on me. My students struggled to break through the confines of a “traditional classroom.”

For the second cycle, I tried to make my students’ metacognitive strategies overt. The more control I gave the students over their learning, the more they needed to know about what to do with that control and what it means to have control. I utilized the new found trust they had in each other (cycle one) by having them analyze each other’s metacognitive strategies. I did this as a way to emphasize their process over the end result (the grade). By making their metacognitive process overt, they were then able to iterate over their course of action and discover what helps them learn best, the best angle to approach a project, and how to move the pieces of a problem around to plan for a solution.

I set out in my third cycle to assess my students’ commitment to learning. The true test of adaptive expertise is if students are able to make and understand connections outside of the context of the original problem. Essentially, I changed “the problem” for my students to see if their process would still reflect that of an expert. I watched to see if motivation on a project would start high, but quickly dissipate as the novelty of the project wore off.

Reflections

From my research cycles, I have found that the potential for learning is infinite, for me and my students. My students learned more this year than ever before; however, the total instruction time (time spent teaching) was far less compared to years’ past. Freedom and independence only led to my students doing more work, given the right foundation. This process has opened up new ways for me to present information to my students. It has also allowed me to put the pieces of a community together that will last far longer than just a school year.

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