

Facilitating
**Authentic
Learning**

GRADES 6–12

*For my first teachers, Nelson and Patricia Richter and Heather Kiley, and
for John, Harry, and Molly, who remind me every day why I do the work I do.*

Facilitating
**Authentic
Learning**

GRADES 6–12

A Framework for
Student-Driven
Instruction

Laura R. Thomas

Foreword by Jill Davidson





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Foreword

For more than a dozen years, I have worked on behalf of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), a national network of schools and support organizations focused on creating the best possible conditions for learning and achievement. CES has pitched a big tent that includes in-district public, charter, and independent schools that serve elementary, middle, and high school students in all parts of the United States and beyond. This broad array of schools demonstrates CES's precept that "no two schools are alike," and teachers in Essential schools represent the widest possible range of races, economic classes, cultures, linguistic backgrounds, regions, and sexual orientations. Yet within all of this diversity, effective CES educators are remarkably similar in the ways that they work with students to create collaborative classroom environments. CES educators facilitate learning, developing in their students habits of mind and heart that serve them well throughout their lives.

I count Laura Thomas as one of the masters of this way of teaching, and I am thrilled that she has so carefully, joyfully, and precisely brought to life the ways in which teachers can coach students to work with others, ask questions, try difficult things, and reach their fullest potential as learners who meet and exceed established standards of learning. Thomas puts her own experience as an educator, scholar, and parent to work in these pages. She draws from her own experiences, challenges, and insights to delineate a path to becoming an educator who facilitates understanding and skill building within a community of learners. Thomas also brings us into the classrooms of educators who have made the same passage, fusing a variety of experience with a solid theoretical framework and thereby creating an immediately practical, useful, and inspiring resource for educators at all points along the spectrum of experience.

Before I send you on your own journey through the pages of *Facilitating Authentic Learning: A Framework for Student-Driven Instruction*, I want to share a final appreciation. Thomas and the educators whose work she has researched and shares here insist that in classrooms where real, meaningful work gets done, failure is not only an option but an imperative—a required stop on the way to meaningful learning. The pressure is so very

high for educators and students that we often forget to reflect on mistakes. We therefore miss the most potent and enduring kind of learning. Educators who have developed skills as facilitators both understand that mistakes can and will happen as students develop and know how to guide students to reflect on and learn from those mistakes.

This ability to resist the pressure to go for tidy, correct answers in favor of facilitating the messy business of real learning is a hallmark of effective and enduring educators. Thomas encourages educators to be brave and guides them through their own learning. She anticipates their challenges and gives them a generous tool kit to use as they become “Next Generation instructors”—a wonderfully apt description of teachers focused on the long-term success of their students.

Jill Davidson
Educators for Social Responsibility

Preface

This is the book I wish I'd had in 1993. As a young, energetic first-year teacher, facing my own class of teenagers (who were not noticeably younger than I), I wanted to be more than a Good Teacher. I wanted to be Amazing. Life Changing. I wanted to Shape Young Minds and Change Lives. The problem?

I hadn't the faintest idea how.

I'd graduated from an excellent preparation program, and I knew the ins and outs of policy, assessment, and curriculum design. I was fluent in a number of pedagogical theories, and I had my content down cold. What I didn't know was how to actually teach. Or, more specifically, how to teach beyond the way I had been taught. It took me only a week to realize that the tried-and-true methods had worked for me as a student because I was a traditional learner. I responded well to lecture, I liked taking notes, and writing—essays, papers, short-answer responses—was easy for me. Most of my students, however, were not like me. While some were willing to play what Rob Fried calls “the game of school” (Fried, 2005), the traditional “lecture and test” or read-the-chapter-and-answer-the-questions-at-the-end schtick wasn't really getting us anywhere.

So, like the good student I was, I hit the books. I revisited my Dewey. I rediscovered Sizer and Meier and Goodlad. Their words made sense: “Student as worker” and “habits of mind” all resonated with me in a deep and powerful way. What I lacked, however, was a way to turn those ideas into lesson plans I could use on Thursday. I had the textbook, of course, and a curriculum guide, but neither of those was any help.

I needed help.

Luckily, the education gods intervened, and I changed jobs quickly, moving into a school that had been awarded a large five-year grant to “innovate” (whatever we decided that meant), and the results saved my pedagogical soul. We joined the nascent Coalition of Essential Schools, and I was lucky enough to find myself surrounded by teachers and administrators who were engaged in the same struggle as I. We created one of the first Critical Friends Groups in the nation, allowing me to be part of a

group of reflective practitioners in the formative years of my career. I wrote a Learn and Serve America grant and watched as my students deepened my understanding of service learning. I read and discussed more books and was allowed to attend more truly excellent institutes, conferences, and workshops in the next four years than most teachers attend in ten. I was encouraged to step beyond the curriculum guide, to take risks, and to fail brilliantly in service to our shared journey toward meaningful instruction.

Not only was this a seminal professional experience for me, but it laid the foundation for this book as it pushed me to look at my own experiences—both within and outside the field—to improve my practice. During my undergraduate years, I'd been fortunate to work for the American Youth Foundation (AYF) as part of summer camp staff in the dunes of Michigan and the mountains of New Hampshire. In the intervening years, they had refined their philosophy, a Framework for Facilitation, for use in their own work, and this was brought to my attention nearly 15 years later by Heather Kiley, director of Merrowvista (and—not incidentally—my sister). Learning about the Framework codified my own first introductions to experiential learning, my early teaching experiences, my graduate work at Antioch University–New England (AUNE), and later my role as a Core Faculty Member in AUNE's Education Department (home of the Critical Skills Program). All of these elements combined to provide the raw materials for what you hold in your hands.

It was my time in the woods that introduced me to facilitation. I learned that “teaching” is more about creating the right situations and asking the right questions than about being the smartest person in the room. I discovered and refined the art and science that are designing and processing experience. My time in that Essential school helped me to transplant that understanding to my classroom and gave me an understanding of what reflective practice means for teachers. It allowed me to see that “experiential learning” was more than just ropes courses—that it meant I was learning from my own teaching experiences in the same way my students were learning from their experiences in my room. Antioch and the Critical Skills Program gave me a system for creating more intentional, increasingly powerful experiences for my students and for unleashing the power of combined content and process instruction. Ultimately, Next Generation instruction is the sum total of all of those experiences, combined to create a synergistic Something New. My best hope is that you will take it, refine it further, and make it your own.

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A number of individuals had a hand in making this book a reality. In addition to the individuals named throughout, I'd like to acknowledge and thank John Thomas for asking me questions I didn't want to answer; Heather Kiley for introducing me to the AYF's Framework and for sharing her knowledge and perspective; Susan Dreyer Leon for pointing out that, while I had accumulated a great deal of snow, I had failed to create a snowball; Peter Eppig for setting me on this path and supporting me as I found my own way; and Peg Smeltz for doing simply everything under the sun. Thanks to Cathy Hernandez, Hudson Perigo, Lisa Shaw, and Lisa Whitney at Corwin for answering question after question with humor and patience. Finally, to all of the unnamed educators and students who served as teachers and guides along the way, I offer my deepest thanks.

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Laura R. Thomas is the current director of the Antioch Center for School Renewal (www.antiochne.edu/acsr/), the service division of the Department of Education, Antioch University–New England. Her web page can be viewed at www.antiochne.edu/ed/ed_faculty.cfm.

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Laura's expertise lies in the support of system-wide change, the building of learning communities for both adults and students, and facilitative instruction. She is affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools and the School Reform Initiative (www.essentialschools.org) and recently served as copresident of the New Hampshire affiliate of Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council).

In addition to acting as a school change coach and leading workshops and institutes on a variety of topics, including the Critical Skills Program, assessment, and school change, Laura teaches graduate-level courses in assessment, facilitation, and social issues in education. She is currently engaged in developing degree concentrations in Next Generation learning and problem-based learning. Both series launched in the spring of 2012.

Introduction

WHAT THIS BOOK IS AND IS NOT

Forty students. There were 40 students in my fourth-block class. The block schedule—which I loved (and still appreciate) with a deep and powerful adoration—required that my entire Contest Speech class come to me during one block—fourth block—and I had no idea how I was going to teach a speech and debate class of 40 kids with completely different levels of experience and commitment. As I looked out on that classroom of energetic, smart, creative kids, I knew only one thing: I couldn't allow myself to mess it up.

Now, nearly 20 years later, I find myself thinking the same thing nearly every day, not because I'm facing 40 students but because I'm facing two—my own kids—and I'm realizing that the language of schools in the new millennium is the language that will shape the way they experience learning. At the same time, I'm facing rooms filled with educators who are looking for real, meaningful answers. And I'm talking with administrators who need to squeeze everything possible out of every single moment and every single dime of their professional development budgets—and who recognize that they (and their teachers and their students) haven't a moment to waste in useless edubabble or impractical advice. The faces may be different, but the stakes are no higher now than they were then. It's about kids—it's always been about kids—and they get only one trip through school. It's up to us not to allow ourselves to mess it up.

21st Century Skills. Innovation. Common Core. RTI. Differentiated Instruction. Technology Integration. Service Learning. Problem Solving. Place-Based Instruction. Critical Thinking. Inquiry. Collaboration. The new millennium has already been filled with the jargon of change. On the education front, this change has been marked by a paradoxical emphasis on improving student achievement (as measured by standardized assessments) while also increasing the level of rigor, community engagement, and real-world connections between content and process. Teach students to think—but be sure they score well on the standardized exams. Engage

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them in meaningful work—but be sure to cover every topic in the curriculum guide. Frustration grows when we try to serve both masters, but the wise educator will realize that it isn't an either/or proposition. Students engaged in rigorous, meaningful work *will* score well on exams. Students who are used to seeing complicated, unexpected problems (and who have successfully solved them in the past) don't panic when faced with unfamiliar ideas on standardized tests.

Experienced educators recognize that (at least the meaningful half of) this “new” way of educating, with its roots in the work of Mann and Dewey, has been shaped over time by educators at all levels seeking better, more engaging, more authentic ways of teaching. The purpose of this book is not to convince the reader that this perspective on education is valid. I assume you already hold this philosophical position to some degree and are ready to move beyond the theoretical and into the practical. These progressive (some would say constructivist) methods have different names today—problem- (or project-) based learning, service learning, inquiry-driven instruction, experiential learning, place-based education—but they all have at their center the same presuppositions:

1. Students learn best when they are working on meaningful tasks that connect content with context and experience.
2. Classrooms must be safe but challenging places where interdependence, risk taking, and reflection are not only encouraged but expected.
3. Teachers know how to shift the center of gravity in their classrooms from themselves to the students (Dewey, 1938). In short, teachers know how to facilitate.

It is the third assumption with which I am most concerned in this book, but I would be foolish to imagine that any one of these three can be fully separated from the others. Classrooms are systems in which each element depends upon the others much like natural systems. Changing one part of such a system requires attention to all parts of the system (Fullan, 2007). Systems thinking—the awareness that organizations are self-organizing entities that adjust themselves to maintain their own existence—applies to classrooms in the same way it applies to businesses, national parks, and schools of fish. Remove the wolves from Yellowstone, and the elk overpopulate and die of starvation, establishing a smaller population of elk that can survive in the new system. Schools of fish are governed by two simple rules: Stay in the middle of the group and don't get eaten. Each fish adjusts its position relative to the others in order to maintain its own position in the center and, therefore, survive. Students in our classrooms adjust their behavior based on who is in the room, what actions were last taken by the other students and the teacher, what the physical space requires of them,

and what they most need in order to be “successful” (as they define success). We must look at all the elements of our classrooms in connection to each other in much the same way that naturalists must be attentive to an entire ecosystem rather than just one part (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996).

fa·cil·i·ta·tor n

1. somebody who enables a process to happen, especially somebody who encourages people to find their own solutions to problems or tasks
2. an organizer and [a] provider of services for a meeting, seminar, or other event (“Facilitator,” 2009)

Facilitation is a term not often applied to classroom instruction, particularly in traditional public schools. We talk about pedagogy, instructional strategies, classroom management, and assessment, but the term *facilitation* is most often heard in outdoor education settings. Looking at the first definition, however, can anyone deny that good teachers engaged in powerful work with their students are doing just that—enabling young people to complete meaningful tasks in service of a real problem and encouraging them as they do so? Next Generation instruction is the application of facilitation methods to the regular classroom.

This book is an action guide—a tool designed to be pulled off the shelf and used throughout the school year. Written with classroom teachers in mind, it draws on resources developed and used by practicing teachers and skilled facilitators from diverse professional settings. In short, I’ve culled tried-and-true strategies from across the continuum and combined them here for your use.