



Thank you

FOR YOUR
INTEREST IN
CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *The InterActive Classroom*, by Ron Nash. In this introduction, the author discusses the role of iGen'ers in the classroom and how to bring them from being passive attendees to active participants.

LEARN MORE about this title, including Features, Table of Contents and Reviews.

Introduction

I spent my formative years in a small Pennsylvania town located on the shores of Lake Erie, in the heart of grape country. We had a movie theater on Lake Street, and my friends and I spent many a Saturday afternoon at a double-feature matinee, both movies happily sandwiched between cartoons and comedy shorts (Think Moe, Larry, et al.). In particular, we enjoyed horror thrillers like *The Werewolf*, *Bride of Frankenstein*, *Son of Frankenstein*, *Second Cousin of Dracula*, *Once Removed* (okay, okay), and other nail-biters that provided us with our fill of 1950s shock and awe.

Well in advance of the dimming of the house lights, several of us planted ourselves in the middle seats of the front row, just a few feet from the screen and therefore as close to the action as possible. With sodas and popcorn at the ready, we invited an eclectic assortment of movie monsters and villains to frighten and entertain us for hours on end. We were attendees, not participants, and that was fine with us. We did not expect to learn much, although we did come to the conclusion that a certain road-runner was unlikely to be caught by a coyote who didn't appear to be the brightest bulb in the box.

One of my favorite horror films was *The Mummy* (1959), with Christopher Lee in the title role as the rudely awakened ancient Egyptian high priest, complete with an attitude and the obligatory gauze wrapping. Lee wreaked havoc on those who disturbed his tomb and interrupted his eternal slumber, but I can assure you that my friends and I were not the least bit sleepy. Lee captivated us as he took his compliance and control world with him on his vengeful journey, naming names and settling scores. Whenever and wherever he appeared in the space of 90 minutes, he immediately had everyone's attention, including ours, on one of many long and supremely satisfying Saturday afternoons at the movies.

Same Bit Part, Different Venue

Having at last traded the front row of the cinema for the back row of a good many college classrooms beginning in 1967, I pursued my dream of teaching history. My ancient civilizations class included black-and-white educational films that were not the equal of *The Mummy* when it came to getting and holding my attention. Absent the popcorn, sodas, and gauze getup, college professors ruled our world as they took roll, then mercilessly lectured for an hour or more. One professor chain-smoked his way through a 90-minute oration twice a week, daring us to cut class or come late; skipping the lesson brought with it the penalty of lowered grades and stern looks through the smoke upon our return.

My first classroom as a teacher may well have been judged by my students a fairly ruthless place, too, minus the cigarette smoke (found only in the faculty lounge and boys' restrooms). I did get the whole stern-look thing down, come to think of it; I raised my voice and, unfortunately, lost my temper on more than a few occasions. In the manner of Christopher Lee, I strode purposefully around the set, gesticulating in a semidarkened room with a modicum of subdued lighting provided by the overhead projector. I held forth enshrouded in enough darkness and shadows to grace any horror

film of the 1950s. I'm sure the reviews of my classroom in the school cafeteria at lunch included, "That Mr. Nash certainly does run to the verbose, does he not?" (or words to the like effect).

The point of this trip down memory lane is that being an attendee in the cinema—now or back in the day—is exactly what nature, the movie industry, and the makers of buttered popcorn intend. It's why each of us spent 50 cents of our hard-earned newspaper delivery income to go to Keller Theater for a weekend matinee.

In the 5 decades since my friends and I planted ourselves in harm's way a few feet from the big screen, movie audiences still seek to be entertained. The actors, directors, producers, and those behind the scenes do the heavy lifting. The rest of us just show up. Our expectation does not rise above laughing, gasping, guffawing, sobbing, or even screaming at the appropriate moments. As it was and ever has been in the world of celluloid entertainment, our task in the cinemas of the 21st century is to find a seat, settle in, settle down, deactivate our cell phones, and refrain from disturbing the other moviegoers for a couple of hours.

This semicomatose state is fine for the tiered seats of the multiplex but not for classrooms. For today's iGen'ers, being relegated to the role of attendee is simply not acceptable. They don't want to "just show up." They don't want to "settle in" for a 90-minute block, and their cell phones might actually serve to advance the cause of learning during class. And frequent academic conversations in seated or standing pairs, trios, or groups may also enhance the learning experience; no one is bothered by talking if everyone is *supposed* to talk.

For today's iGen'ers, being relegated to the role of attendee is simply not acceptable.

Roles Not of Their Own Making

Students today do not covet—or have access to—20th-century manufacturing jobs where simply getting to work on time and doing what one is told was once *de rigueur*. The work and the workplace have changed. The world has changed. The kids have changed, and so have their expectations. The relevant word here is change.

Yet my travels over the past 2 decades have shown me time and again that too many students are still trapped in the role of attendees, for the simple reason that tradition and the status quo are hard taskmasters. Old habits die hard or, like Christopher Lee's on-screen persona, seem to live forever, even when dispatching outmoded and ineffective classroom routines to the great beyond might serve the cause of learning. In the world of education, many of these habits were brought to life in the industrial age, when control and compliance ruled the day in classrooms, in horror films, and on the factory floor.

But the industrial age has gone the way of 10-cent boxes of popcorn and nickel sodas. "The conveyer belt of the last century," write Wagner and Dintersmith (2015), "is gone. Lifetime employment with a large company is increasingly unlikely; individuals will change jobs, companies, and even professions many times in their lifetime" (p. 63). Today's students will perhaps have many jobs before they reach the ripe old age of 30; many of them will innovate their way to success and, perhaps, fortune. Witness the number of young entrepreneurs on TV and online, selling book bags, mattresses, socks, carry-on luggage, and everything imaginable.

The young are moving quickly; many of them have college credit or even college degrees before we would have graduated from high school. I listened from the back of

an auditorium as a school superintendent told the story of a high school senior in his district who had created from whole cloth not one but *two* online businesses.

The good news is that districts all over the country are coming to realize that today's students will find—or create—jobs where communication and collaboration are required, along with an ability to think critically, identify *and* solve problems, write and speak with force and clarity, and work independently when necessary. Sitting in the front row, listening—or pretending to listen—to a teacher deliver information in fire hose fashion is not sufficient to prepare iGen'ers for their future in the workforce and as informed citizens in a constitutional republic. “The complexity of today's civil society places extremely high demands on citizens,” assert Wagner and Dintersmith (2015, p. 68). Those essential skills (communication, collaboration, and critical thinking) will serve these future voters well.

An interactive classroom is *not* one where students sit in the front row expecting to be entertained until the movie is over or the bell rings, then hurriedly head for the exits. A dynamic and distinctly interactive classroom is filled with learning partners, including the teacher. Winston Churchill liked to say that he enjoyed learning but did not like being taught. I suspect many students today would agree with the late and long-ago British prime minister. My experience is that students who are *allowed* to be students, rather than daily guests in room 206, appreciate thinking of themselves as lead actors in their own continuous-improvement narratives. Attendees attend; participants participate—and learn. And classroom teachers learn right along with them.

A dynamic and distinctly interactive classroom is filled with learning partners, including the teacher.

An Inexorable Shift

The continuum along which we as educators *at every level* should be remorselessly moving stretches from a passive, adult-centered approach where compliance and control are king to a more learner-centered classroom culture. Every teacher is, right now, *somewhere* on this continuum. Teaching doesn't take place unless learning does, and no amount of explaining, expounding, describing, pontificating, gesticulating, or entertaining on the part of a classroom teacher will result in the creation of a culture of learning.

Davis, Summers, and Miller (2012) contrast environments geared toward learning with those that have traditionally focused on “getting the work done” while keeping things under control:

In a classroom oriented toward learning, the climate tends to have a more open, collaborative feel because students are focused on understanding. In a classroom oriented toward completing work, the climate tends to feel more burdensome with students focused on labor and production. It is important to understand that research consistently demonstrates when students approach classroom tasks with a learning orientation, their understanding of the performance of the task improves. (pp. 60–61).

Watching the body language and general deportment of students in both settings, a visitor to any classroom can immediately gauge how students feel about the situation in which they find themselves. Kids of any age know full well whether they are being cast as attendees or as participants. They know the difference between busy work and

meaningful engagement in pursuit of a worthwhile goal. As they move through the grades or consider dropping out of school, thus delegating their uninvolved role to an understudy, they know when they are being shortchanged.

This, then, is where today's iGen'ers are. They don't want to mark time before "going out into the real world." They are *in* the real world. Social media and countless Internet destinations put them in the real world *right now*. Global climate disruption is pounding with increased urgency on their doors *right now*. On graduation, they will compete in tight labor markets that value 21st-century skill sets, and we as educators should help them prepare for all this right now.

Operating as participants in their own learning, students need to learn to think critically, communicate effectively orally and in writing, reflect independently and interdependently, challenge assumptions, investigate when warranted, seek feedback from multiple sources, and otherwise begin to function as serious and thoughtful citizens. No worksheet can accomplish that. No lecture is powerful enough to move the needle. No amount of classroom *efficiency* can substitute for an engaging and *effective* lesson or a project where students are fully committed to meeting a clearly understood learning goal.

No amount of classroom efficiency can substitute for an engaging and effective lesson or a project where students are fully committed to meeting a clearly understood learning goal.

We need to meet students where they are as they—and we—look to their future and not insist they prepare for a world we once inhabited, one which no longer exists. This means educators need to move steadily and confidently along that continuum from treating students like attendees to joining them as participants and partners in the learning process. Teachers can inspire, even as they aspire to improve their own performance. The status quo needs to be revisited and overhauled. There is much about traditional education that works and works beautifully. Teachers and administrators can work together to do the hard work that comes from figuring out what to keep, what to change, what to fix, what to improve, and what to relegate to the attic with much else that we will never use.

For Whom the Filmstrip Tolls

When I began teaching in 1972, I quickly mastered all of the up-to-date technological wonders. Various projectors (overhead, filmstrip, slide) provided the visuals, while I delivered the goods on the auditory side. On behalf of the school district, I loaned each student a history textbook (out of date the minute it came off the presses and even more out of date on the back end of a multiyear book contract), and I made sure they knew where the library was (containing sets of encyclopedias even more out of date than the textbooks). With the preliminaries out of the way, I flipped the switch on the overhead projector and proceeded to give my students facts they duly recorded as notes to be consulted 30 minutes before a test or quiz.

Tradition demanded I give my eighth graders the straight skinny; in the manner of modern news organizations or blogs disseminating information to people with short attention spans, I told them exactly what they needed to know. When the school library was gutted by fire one December night, it put a serious crimp in the information flow, and it wasn't until the library was rebuilt, refurbished, and restocked that our students had access to resources beyond what we teachers doled out in 50-minute blocks of time, 5 days a week. As a history teacher, I was excited that our new library would have a

recent set of encyclopedias, a new edition of the *Dictionary of American Biography*, and a brand-new atlas and globe. The library also purchased a new wooden lectern on which a dictionary the size of a riding lawnmower was perched for the use of everyone in the building. It contained all the latest words and definitions.

That was then, this is now, and this is new: We are inescapably and increasingly awash 24/7 in a sea of information, and the sources of all these data compete mightily for our attention. Information winks, blinks, and waves its arms at us in the form of advertising on our computers, and “breaking-news” bulletins crawl across the bottom of our television screens lest we miss anything. Information in the form of advertising beats us senseless before the movie starts in the local multiplex, even though we already paid to see the film. Long-lost friends resurface on social media and inform the world about what they are doing. I can listen to or watch any baseball game anywhere in the country by subscribing to a service, and I can read every statistic about every ballplayer at the click of a mouse. All the words I could ever want spelled or defined lie only a click or voice command away.

As PBL (project-based learning) gains traction nationwide, affirm Boss and Larmer (2018), adult-centered classrooms will have to give way to ever more learner-centered approaches that require more of students, *even as it changes the role of teachers*. Time must be made for projects that require students, working independently and interdependently, to do tons of research, consult with teachers and classmates, identify and solve problems, raise and then wrestle with questions, and present their findings to peers and/or adults. In a truly interactive classroom, teachers shift from being information givers to serving in a coaching role, and “their classrooms become learning environments that foster creativity, encourage student voice and choice, and promote equity by rebalancing the traditional student–teacher power relationship” (p. 162). As students move from passive observers to active participants in their own learning, they will need to develop 21st-century skills that will serve them well in the workplace and in life.

Revising the Script

So where we were not that many years ago is no longer relevant to where our students are today, and we need to acknowledge this reality, then act accordingly. As Cheryl Lemke (2010) asserts, “There is no turning back. The Internet has become integral to life in the 21st century—a place for work, play, communication, and learning” (p. 243). The students who walk into our classrooms today are quite different from those who sat at desks in my classrooms through most of my years as a teacher. Teachers and administrators can facilitate progress for students whose role shifts more swiftly than ever from passive to active. And Marc Prensky (2010) is right in saying teachers need to be partners in the learning process:

Young people (students) need to focus on using new tools, finding information, making meaning, and creating. Adults (teachers) must focus on questioning, coaching and guiding, providing context, ensuring rigor and meaning, and ensuring quality results. (p. 10)

Teachers as learners don’t need to know everything; they don’t need to pretend they know everything, and they can admit this to themselves and their students. This makes teachers human, and it takes the pressure off as they shift from chief information officer to learner-in-chief in classroom

Teachers as learners don't need to know everything; they don't need to pretend they know everything, and they can admit this to themselves and their students.

environments where everyone is a partner in the learning process. Teachers and students alike can learn to actively listen in such a classroom. Teachers can model speaking *and* listening skills. In collaborative classroom settings, students can help, teach, support, and get to know and appreciate each other. Asking questions, locating information, and providing and seeking feedback can be everyone's job. Talking is thinking, and students can explain, describe, illustrate, and otherwise think out loud in classrooms where tired scripts have been revised or discarded by teachers willing to take risks on behalf of kids. And teachers can go from *broadcasting* to the room to *working* the room as accepted and valued partners in the learning process.

The Conductor's Magic

Perhaps the role of the teacher best approximates that of the orchestra conductor. The musicians make the music, but the conductor is in a position to influence the flow of the music, affecting, by her actions, the volume, tempo, and timing. She gives feedback when necessary and acknowledges effort constantly. A symphony is the ultimate collaborative effort. Everyone contributes. Everyone has different strengths and varying levels of skill; in the final analysis, the conductor figures out how to combine it all into a supremely satisfying effort. *It is at once the score, the talent, the practice, the discipline, the commitment, the passion, and the ability of the conductor to multitask and influence process that determines the quality of the performance.*

The interactive classroom is a place where the teacher effectively influences the flow of process and where his students do most of the work. It is a place where students are frequently encouraged to actively reflect on and process information, skillfully practice the art of communication, purposefully move and share, and continually engage in their own learning. Active classrooms are alternately noisy and quiet places. They are usually colorful places, and they are always safe places. *It is at once the lesson, the talent, the practice, the discipline, the commitment, the passion, and the ability of the teacher to multitask and influence process that determines the quality of the learning.*

The purpose of this book is to help teachers energize students and energize themselves in the process. My belief is that learning should be active, contemplative, dynamic, purposeful, spontaneous, safe, constructivist, brain-compatible, engaging, reflective, and *fun* for everyone involved in the process, including the person in the best position to choreograph it all—the teacher.