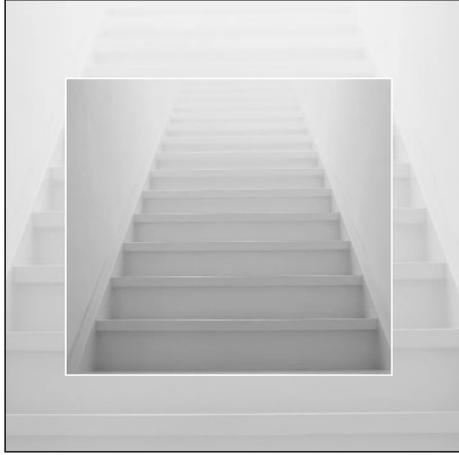


An Ethic of Excellence



*Building a Culture
of Craftsmanship
with Students*

Ron Berger

Heinemann
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

A division of Reed Elsevier Inc.
361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

© 2003 by Ron Berger

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Berger, Ron.

An ethic of excellence : building a culture of craftsmanship with students / Ron Berger.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-325-00596-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Teaching. 2. Academic achievement. 3. Excellence. I. Title.

LB1025.3.B467 2003

371.102—dc21

2003007290

Editor: Kate Montgomery

Production service: Colophon

Production coordinator: Lynne Reed

Cover design: Joni Doherty

Typesetter: Tom Allen, Pear Graphic Design

Manufacturing: Steve Bernier

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

07 06 05 04 03 DA 1 2 3 4 5

Contents

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE An Archiver of Excellence 13

Evidence in the Work 13

Evidence in the Students 24

A Library of Excellence 29

CHAPTER TWO The First Toolbox:

A School Culture of Excellence 32

Starting Small 32

Why Culture Matters 34

A Classroom Story: The Power of Positive Peer Pressure 36

The Value of Community 41

Building a Foundation for Community 45

Supporting Community Inside and Out 50

A Classroom Story: Building a Broad Notion of Community 55

CHAPTER THREE The Second Toolbox:

Work of Excellence 63

Self-Esteem from Accomplishments, not Compliments 63

Powerful Projects 65

Building Literacy Through the Work 72

Contents

<i>Genuine Research</i>	75
<i>The Power of the Arts</i>	79
<i>Models</i>	83
<i>Multiple Drafts</i>	87
<i>Critique</i>	92
<i>Making Work Public</i>	98
<i>Using Assessment to Build Stronger Students</i>	101
<i>A Classroom Story: The Water Study</i>	108
CHAPTER FOUR The Third Toolbox:	
Teaching of Excellence	117
<i>Supporting Teachers</i>	117
<i>Teaching as a Calling</i>	119
<i>Teaching as a Craft</i>	127
<i>The Scholarship of Teaching</i>	130
<i>A Classroom Story: Inspiration in Teaching</i>	135
AFTERWORD: MEASURES OF EXCELLENCE	149
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	157

Introduction

FOR TWENTY-FIVE YEARS I'VE LED A DOUBLE LIFE. I'M A FULL-time classroom teacher in a public school. In order to make ends meet for my family, I've worked during the summers, vacations, and sometimes weekends, as a carpenter. In the classroom or on the building site my passion is the same: If you're going to do something, I believe, you should do it well. You should sweat over it and make sure it's strong and accurate and beautiful and you should be proud of it.

In carpentry there is no higher compliment builders give to each other than this: That guy is a *craftsman*. This one word says it all. It connotes someone who has integrity and knowledge, who is dedicated to his work and who is proud of what he does and who he is. Someone who thinks carefully and does things well.

I want a classroom full of craftsmen. I want students whose work is strong and accurate and beautiful. Students who are proud of what they do, proud of how they respect both themselves and others.

When building a complex roof frame, some carpenters are adept at trigonometry and use calculators to figure rafter angles. Others never paid attention during high-school math and rely on a tape measure, spatial intelligence, and an experienced eye. In the end, as long as time and budget are reasonable, these differences don't matter. What matters is clear: a well-built house.

In my classroom I have students who come from homes full of books and students whose families own almost no books at all. I

have students for whom reading, writing, and math come easily and students whose brains can't follow a line of text without reversing words and letters, students who can't line up numbers correctly on a page. I have students whose lives are generally easy and students with physical disabilities, and health or family problems that make life a struggle. I want them all to be craftsmen. Some may take a little longer to produce things, some many need to use extra strategies and resources. In the end, they need to be proud of their work and their work needs to be worthy of pride.

A few years ago I was crouched on the roof of a playhouse, nailing shingles with Aaron, one of my sixth-grade students. It was a glorious October Sunday, bright and crisp, one of those rare days that made me remember why I live in New England. The afternoon light was on the maple trees around us, the leaves yellow and scarlet, and from up there the world looked good.

Holly and Justine, fifth graders from my class, were painting trim down below and giggling about something. Mike showed up with his little sister and called up: I know I'm not in your class but could we help out, too? So they pitched in and soon Kate showed up and joined the crowd. With a crew of seven you might think we could finish the whole thing off quickly; it was only a playhouse. The truth was my class had been working almost every afternoon during school and after school for three weeks and still we had quite a way to go. Building with kids takes time.

I'll admit it was an elaborate playhouse. It was designed by my students in collaboration with their Kindergarten buddies as a service project during our study of architecture; it was a gift to the younger students of the school. By Kindergarten request, it was two stories tall with a stair-ladder inside, a "spy window" on the second floor, two windows on the first floor, and a front porch. It also had clapboard siding, Victorian trim details, and interior paneling. It wasn't that big, but it was nicely done.

Introduction

I had argued repeatedly with my students that they were making a big mistake with their color choices: With pine green paint for the siding and cream colored trim, they had chosen green shingles. A green roof with green siding! I explained to them that it was going to clash and pleaded with them to consider a safer shingle color, something like black or tan. I got outvoted by my class. Turns out I was totally wrong. The shingles were a dark shade of gray-green that complemented the siding very well. My students received glowing comments from the community on their color choices. And don't think they didn't point this out to me all year long. As I was nailing off a shingle I noticed Aaron smiling at me. I know they look good, I said.

About ten years ago my double life actually became a triple life. In addition to teaching and building, I began working as a consultant for other schools. I felt the need to share my passion for excellence in education on a wider scale, particularly to work toward increasing educational opportunities for urban students. In the past few years my consulting work had been so busy that I had little time left for carpentry. It felt good to be pounding nails again.

Though my own school is in the back woods of Massachusetts, most of my consulting work is with city schools spread around the country. My students are mostly white, rural kids; the students and staffs I work with in cities are often non-white, sometimes with a variety of primary languages or cultures. My consulting work involves sharing strategies to help staff and students become motivated together about quality. To become excited about doing a good job.

I looked at Aaron carefully spacing roofing nails. I looked at the kids below me working together intently, installing clapboard and painting trim. I looked at this beautiful playhouse the students had designed and built. How do I share this?, I thought. How do I capture this?

The power of that Sunday was not really about New England

or playhouses. It was not about gifted kids, or clever teaching, or curriculum that should be marketed. There was a spirit, an *ethic* in the air that day. It was partly about the kids, the teaching, the curriculum, the school conditions, the community, but importantly, it was about all of these things at once. It transcended these things. It was the *culture* of the school that encouraged these kids to volunteer, to work together, and to care deeply about the quality of what they did. It was the ethic that this school culture instilled.

How do you share a culture? An ethic?

I'm concerned when I pick up a newspaper these days and so often find an article about the "crisis" in education and how a new quick fix will remedy things. More tests, teacher-proof curriculum, merit pay, state standards.

It reminds me of the advertisements for diet products. Fast Weight Loss! Dramatic Weight Loss! No Work! Lots of money is spent on diet products and a lot is spent on new educational tests. But it seems that almost everyone who loses weight quickly with the aid of a quick fix product ends up gaining it all back. Weighing yourself constantly doesn't make you lighter and testing children constantly doesn't make them smarter. The only way to really lose weight and keep it off, it seems, is to establish a new ethic—exercise more and eat more sensibly. It's not a quick fix. It's a long-term commitment. It's a way of life.

I have a hard time thinking about a quick *fix* for education because I don't think education is broken. Some schools are very good; some are not. Those that are good have an ethic, a culture, which supports and compels students to try and to succeed. Those schools that are not need a lot more than new tests and new mandates. They need to build a new culture and a new ethic. I don't believe there's a shortcut to building a new culture. It's a long-term commitment. It's a way of life.

Introduction

I think as a nation we've gotten off track regarding education. Our concern seems to be centered on testing and ranking—ranking students, schools, and districts—over and over again. I believe our concern should be centered on what we can do in our schools and communities to bring out the best in kids.

In my work with schools across the country I sometimes encounter places where students are remarkably good at something. Working with my colleague Scott Gill, I learned that the high school his own children attend has a record in athletics that's hard to believe. This school, Cuba City High School in Cuba City, Wisconsin, is tiny: It has a graduating class of about seventy-five. The district is by no means wealthy; most families work in dairy farming or at the meat packing plant. In the past thirty years Cuba City has won fourteen state championships and forty-seven conference championships in a wide range of girl's and boy's sports. I have visited other schools that dominate state competitions in orchestra, chess, wrestling, visual arts, debate, and essay contests, and have done so for years, sometimes generations.

What's going on here? It doesn't seem likely that all the children born in Cuba City are good athletes, nor that all the great musicians live in one town in Iowa. I don't think this is genetics or luck. Private schools and universities can recruit talent, but these are public schools. Every year they take whatever kids they happen to get and make them stars. This phenomenon isn't limited to special areas, either. Cuba City, despite its demographics, has a stellar academic record. My colleagues at the Central Park East High School in Harlem and the Fenway High School in Boston work with urban students, almost all of whom are low-income and non-white, for whom the predicted graduation statistics are dismal. Both of these schools graduate 95 percent of their seniors and send about 90 percent on to college.

These schools don't have a gimmick, they don't have any special

magic. We can say that they have high expectations for students, and this is certainly true. These schools have high expectations for students regardless of student background, race, or academic labels. Although almost every school in America claims to have “high expectations for every student,” few schools actually do.

As a teacher, though, I can attest to the fact that high expectations guarantee nothing: they are simply the starting place. What is remarkable is that these schools make their high expectations manifest in student achievement, and they do this by sustaining school cultures that compel and support students to achieve. Newspaper articles on a successful urban school often choose one element of the school’s culture and attribute the school’s success to this single factor. It might be extended hours, school uniforms, tutors, or a classics curriculum. When I work with successful urban schools, it seems almost silly that anyone could imagine there is a single strategy—a magic bullet—that broke the cycle of failure in these poor communities. The challenges these schools face are broad and overwhelming and the school cultures they have built to address these challenges are complex and thoughtful.

The key to excellence is this: It is born from a culture. When children enter a family culture, a community culture, or a school culture that demands and supports excellence, they work to fit into that culture. A culture of excellence transcends race, class, and geography; it doesn’t matter what color, income, or background the children come from. Once those children enter a culture with a powerful ethic, that ethic becomes their norm. It’s what they know.

Two years ago I was asked to do a presentation on high-quality project work at The Austine School for the Deaf in Vermont. In addition to slides, videotapes, and samples of student work, I took along three of my sixth-grade students, Sonia, Lisa, and Chloe. All were hearing students but were, due to a class study of Deaf Culture, capable users of American Sign Language. In the morning we

Introduction

toured the school, visited classes, met students, and after lunch we did a presentation for the school staff. The students spread out their portfolios of work from the past two years and answered questions in sign language, with voice interpreting. The girls were thoughtful and articulate, and their work was stunning; I was very proud of them. So far things were going well.

When I concluded my presentation of slides and video, questions from the staff were directed to me and, equally, to the three students. The questions for the students centered primarily around one issue: what made them work so hard. Why do you have such high standards? Why do you prepare so many drafts? Why do you accept so much pressure? Why don't you complain or give up or turn in sloppy work?

The girls didn't quite get the questions. They were so much a part of the school culture, the town culture, that the questions didn't really make sense.

This is just the way school is, they finally said. It doesn't seem like high pressure—it's normal. This is the only school we know. Everybody does this many drafts, everybody worries about quality, everybody works hard. This is what school is about.

This book is an attempt to describe what an ethic of excellence can look like in a school, and to share strategies for building and sustaining a culture predicated on this ethic. The notion of excellence proposed here is broad—it includes academic and artistic excellence as well as excellence in character. It recognizes that schools play a major role in shaping values in children. Though society debates the question of whether schools should *teach values*, the process of schooling itself imbues values—we have no choice about this. If we want citizens who value integrity, respect, responsibility, compassion, and hard work, we need to build school cultures that model those attributes.

School cultures that support excellence can look very different

from one another and can be housed in diverse settings; there is not one blueprint. The ideas in this book are garnered from a wide variety of educators whom I've had the privilege to read or to work with, from the work done by the staff of my school in trying to maintain such a culture, and from my own struggles to build a classroom culture of excellence.

This book is also the story of my quest to capture and share that culture in a way that can be useful to others, particularly to schools in need. To build a new culture, a new ethic, you need to begin somewhere. You need a focal point—a vision—to guide the direction for reform. The particular spark I try to share as a catalyst is a passion for beautiful student work and developing conditions that can make this work possible.

I use the phrase *beautiful work* broadly. Recently a teacher at the beginning of one of my presentations called out, My goodness! You've been talking so much about beautiful work that I thought you were an art teacher; this stuff is math and science. As a fifth and sixth grade teacher in a small town I teach all subjects; work of excellence in any discipline is beautiful to me and I don't hesitate to label it so.

I believe that work of excellence is transformational. Once a student sees that he or she is capable of excellence, that student is never quite the same. There is a new self-image, a new notion of possibility. There is an appetite for excellence. After students have had a taste of excellence, they're never quite satisfied with less; they're always hungry. When the teachers at the Austine School for the Deaf pointed out to Sonia that many students wouldn't obsess over their work as she does, her reply was quick: This school has ruined me for life, she said. I'm never satisfied with anything until it's almost perfect. I have to be proud of it.

At its core, my consulting with schools and districts is an effort to share the power and the pride of this ethic of craftsmanship. Most students, I believe, are caught on school treadmills that focus

Introduction

on *quantity* of work rather than *quality* of work. Students crank out endless final products every day and night. Teachers *correct* volumes of such low-quality work; it's returned to the students and often tossed in the wastebasket. Little in it is memorable or significant, and little in it engenders personal or community pride. I feel that schools need to get off this treadmill approach and shift their focus from quantity to quality.

My builder friends make fun of architects. I have great respect for architects; I have a few as friends and am indebted to the many architects who have come to my classroom to share their knowledge and to critique student design work. I have to confess though: I join right in during the architect-bashing lunch breaks at the construction site. The argument is always the same. Architects would never design all these screwy things if they actually had to build them. When you're a builder you know what makes sense and it seems that architects don't seem to have a clue about this. They don't have any real, practical knowledge, just fancy ideas.

Architects have identical, if opposite, dialogues—builder-bashing discussions: You can't trust builders to follow the plans. Builders always make changes and cut corners, always think they know better. They just want to stick with what they're used to and hate creative new ideas or innovations in design.

Who's right here? Both sides are important. Both need to be listened to and taken seriously. In the end, both voices are treated with respect by anyone putting up a building.

I wish I could say the same for the national dialogue on education. We've got a lot of designers with ideas for improving schools, but no one seems to be talking to the builders. The architects of educational policy get a lot of attention in the media, but there is a voice that seems left out of this dialogue—the teachers. My motivation for writing this book is to introduce another rare teacher voice into this discourse.

I can't speak for others. All I can offer is a single, personal perspective. I can promise though that it is a voice from the building site, not from the architecture firm. Even though a goal of excellence in education is one we all share, the notion of how to get there may sound very different in these pages than it sounds in campaign speeches or newspaper headlines. As every teacher knows, you can mandate tests and standards and curricula all you want, but it means nothing if you can't inspire kids to care.

In my work as a carpenter, the first thing I do when I arrive at a job site is unload my toolboxes. In my work as an educational consultant, the first thing I do when I arrive at a school site is the same: I unload my education toolboxes, metaphorically speaking.

I bring no blueprint for school change. As I mentioned, I believe each school is different and there are many models of excellence. But I have tools to share, ones that I've borrowed from others, and ones that I've built myself. My hope is that at least some of those tools will prove useful to others. The tools I offer here are *strategies*, *models*, and *metaphors*, and along with them I have classroom stories that I hope put these tools in context and make them clear and human.

I have three toolboxes; each has a dedicated chapter in this book.

The first toolbox, Chapter Two, is concerned with building a foundation for *A School Culture of Excellence*. Particular strategies for improving student work and thinking are almost useless unless they're embedded in a community that encourages and supports excellence.

The second toolbox, Chapter Three, is a big, heavy one. It contains strategies for building *Work of Excellence*. This box is the heart of my work with schools, and describes practical suggestions for improving the quality of student work and thinking.

The last toolbox, Chapter Four, concerns the *Teaching of*

Introduction

Excellence. Much of the country seems seduced at the moment with visions of *teacher-proof* curriculum, where teachers are seen as little more than semi-skilled gas station attendants *delivering curriculum* into student brains. I'm not sure what these people are thinking. Anyone who has spent time in a school classroom remembers well the difference between weak teaching and inspirational teaching.

Of course in real life these metaphoric toolboxes are not actually discrete, nor are the tools inside; the boxes and tools are all inter-related. I have chosen to describe them as discrete here in an effort to make the strategies more easily referenced by the reader. My hope in sharing this perspective on schooling and in sharing these strategies is the same here as when I work with schools personally: that something in this approach or collection of tools, even a small thing, may prove useful.

Before unpacking these toolboxes for the reader, I have included an opening chapter to give the reader a sense of my vision of craftsmanship and excellence. Chapter One tells the story of my quest to share this vision with educators.