

January 2021

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## New Year, New Opportunities for Reflection and Growth

Far from being a welcomed disruption to our personal and professional lives, the pandemic has still provided educators with a chance to reflect on what is working, what is no longer working, and what never actually worked. Let's face it; the pandemic didn't break education. Parts of the system were already broken, and it took a global pandemic to shed some light on these issues.

Educators, such as Heather Wolpert-Gawron, see the pandemic as a time for reflection on their own growth during this difficult time. In her recent article for Edutopia, [Has the Pandemic Ushered in New Norms in Education?](#), Wolpert-Gawron characterizes "pedagogical growth" as "the kind of growth we need to recharge and reimagine education" ([Wolpert-Gawron](#), 2020). She goes on to describe "educational growth," the type of growth that will enable the "flipping of priorities in order to address achievement, or the reprioritizing of community and compassion over content as a means to positively impact curriculum and student achievement" ([Wolpert-Gawron](#), 2020). To this end, she and her colleagues engaged in their own reflection and predict certain practices will "stick."

For one, the assessment landscape is changing as educators think more deeply about the purpose of assessment and the many ways in which teachers can check for student understanding as well as hold them accountable. Not only that, but "people are talking about how to better align assessments with 21st-century learning instruction rather than align instruction with 20th-century testing practices" ([Wolpert-Gawron](#), 2020). A second important takeaway from the pandemic is a reminder of the importance of connecting with students in order to understand their individual circumstances and best support them. Focusing on social emotional health is crucial. A third takeaway is the power of flexible communication with the community, which includes treating parents and caregivers as partners in the education of their students. Finally, "[e]ngagement strategies like connecting with students, allowing for choice, using project-based learning to make lessons and units more meaningful, and incorporating visuals and recordings to make text more multimodal are key in bringing students to the learning table" ([Wolpert-Gawron](#), 2020).

Additionally, Wolpert-Gawron is hoping these practices are here to stay as well: prioritizing skills and standards, using mastery portfolios to assess learning, using inquiry and project-based learning to assess process over product, examining the importance of feedback over grades, and deepening respect for the dedication and resilience of teachers ([Wolpert-Gawron](#), 2020). I couldn't agree more.

## Engagement or Motivation?

What do we mean by “student engagement”? Do we mean that students are intrigued and entertained by our clever hooks and entry events, thereby miraculously invested in their learning? Or, do we mean that they are committed to the work of learning, even though it can be messy, challenging, and sometimes mundane? “Engagement” is a word that, according to Dave Stuart, Jr., has become “buzzwordified” - it can mean different things in different contexts or it can mean nothing at all ([Stuart, 2020](#)). So, what does engagement mean in your practice?

When defining engagement the way Stuart does, as “the during-task state in which a human being becomes fully immersed in the task at hand,” it still has meaning for educators as something they want their students to experience ([Stuart, 2020](#)). But, as Stuart points out, there is a striking similarity between “engagement” and “coercion” in that some types of classroom practices meant to foster student engagement are almost like using whistles and bells to trick students into caring about something. ([Stuart, 2020](#)). For this reason, educators should seek to understand the definition of engagement as it pertains to motivation and action in order to authentically engage their students.

In his recent article, [The Surprisingly Similar Troubles with Strategies Based on Coercion or Engagement](#), Stuart asserts that “systems that have long relied on procuring student motivation via carrots and sticks are dehumanizing: to teachers, to students, to families” ([Stuart, 2020](#)). This is a powerful statement that invites further exploration. Stuart describes this type of engagement tactic as “dehumanizing” because “it treats the learner as a brain to be engaged rather than...as a ‘person’ — a being with agency and intellect and emotion and a will” ([Stuart, 2020](#)).

There is no such thing as a “curricular utopia where every moment of a child’s education can be optimized for engagement;” that’s just not reality-based ([Stuart, 2020](#)). So, rather than trying to entice students with so-called “[seductive details](#)” ([Sundar, 2020](#)), Stuart suggests thinking more about the [beliefs underlying motivation](#): ensuring that students see **credibility** in their teacher, find **value** in the work, experience a sense of **belonging**, believe that **effort** leads to improvement, and believe that they can be **successful** ([Stuart, 2020](#)). Learning is not always novel, exciting, or fun, and “sometimes we human beings just get distracted, or sometimes an experience cannot be micro-designed for engagement, and in such times motivation — not engagement — is what brings the learner back to the work of learning” ([Stuart, 2020](#)). Laying the foundation for authentic motivation can help students remain invested in their learning, even during these times when learning is not as engaging.

## Professional Learning Interest Inventory

I know how busy everyone is and I want to make sure I am addressing your current needs, so if you could take a minute to fill out [this short interest inventory](#), I can use the information you provide to create professional learning opportunities that are relevant to your current work. Thanks!

## The Benefits of Teaching Handwriting

In response to the prevalence of computer keyboards and now smartphones and tablets, many people ask why educators should “bother” teaching students to write by hand, especially cursive. In this short video, [Neuroscientists Say Don’t Write Off Handwriting](#), Edutopia outlines the major findings of two research studies, both of which support continuing to teach handwriting and require handwritten work. In 2012, researchers studied the brains of preliterate children and found “crucial reading circuitry flickering to life” when they printed letters and then read them, but not when they typed or traced them ([James and Engelhardt, 2012](#)). More recently, researchers studied the brains of 7th graders while they handwrote, drew, or typed words – handwriting and drawing produced “telltale neural tracings indicative of deeper learning” while typing on keyboards did not ([Askvik, van der Weel, and van der Meer, 2020](#)). Of course, it is still important to teach students keyboarding as this method of writing can help those with disabilities such as dysgraphia and dyslexia. Additionally, and all students need to develop digital skills for today’s world. The point is that educators should not discount handwriting and the benefits it can have for students.

## Resources

*Read more about this month’s topics here:*

### From Edutopia:

I have been reading a lot of articles from Edutopia lately and thought others might find some of the following valuable:

- [How Teachers Can Use Their Own Writing as Model Texts](#), by Jennifer Davis Bowman, 2020.
- [How to Help Students Focus on What They’re Learning, Not the Grade](#), by Sarah Schroeder, 2020.
- [Rethinking Homework for This Year – and Beyond](#), by Mary Davenport, 2020.
- [Using High Expectations to Boost Students’ Sense of Belonging](#), by Ian Kelleher, 2020.
- [The 10 Most Significant Education Studies of 2020](#), by Youki Terada and Stephen Merrill, 2020.

### Engagement and Motivation:

- [The Student Engagement Trap, and How to Avoid It](#), by Kripa Sundar, Edutopia, 2020.
- [The Surprisingly Similar Troubles with Strategies Based on Coercion or Engagement](#), by Dave Stuart, Jr., 2020.
- [10 Drivers of Engagement You Can Use Right Now](#), by Eric Toshalis, KnowledgeWorks, 2020.

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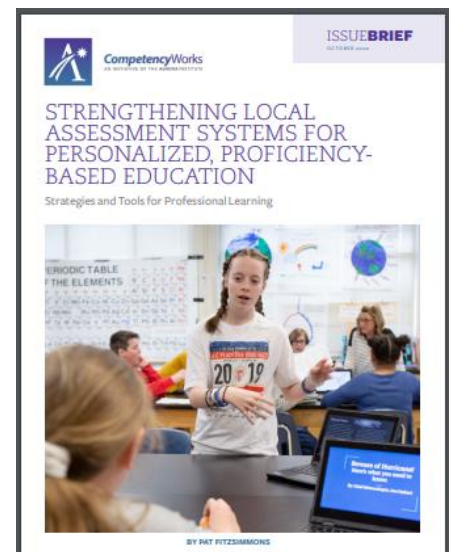
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**Research Studies Related to Teaching Handwriting:**

- [The Effects of Handwriting Experience on Functional Brain Development in Pre-Literate Children \(2012\)](#)
- [The Importance of Cursive Handwriting Over Typewriting for Learning in the Classroom: A High-Density EEG Study of 12-Year-Old Children and Young Adults \(2020\)](#)

**Professional Offerings and Activities**

**Strengthening Local Assessment Systems for Personalized, Proficiency-Based Education: Strategies and Tools for Professional Learning:** Join members of the Vermont Agency of Education's (AOE) Proficiency-Based and Personalized Learning Teams as we delve into strategies for strengthening local assessment systems. Participants will learn about essential components of strong proficiency-based systems of assessment, investigate resources for improving systems, and see how evidence of learning can be captured in personalized learning plans. [Learn more and register](#) now for this workshop from the Aurora Institute, featuring AOE presenters and highlighting the [recent Aurora Institute publication of the same name](#), written by the AOE's own Pat Fitzsimmons.



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