

Fostering an Ethic of Excellence

Ron Berger



For 25 years I've led a double life. I'm a fulltime classroom teacher in a public school. To make ends meet for my family, I've worked during the summers, and sometimes weekends, as a carpenter. In carpentry there is no higher compliment builders give each other than this: That person is a *craftsman*. This one word says it all. It connotes someone who has integrity, knowledge, dedication, and pride in work—someone who thinks carefully and does things well.

I want a classroom full of craftsmen.

I want a classroom full of craftsmen—students whose work is strong, accurate, and beautiful; students who are proud of what they do and respect themselves and others. 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. 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; some may 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.*

I'm concerned when I pick up a newspaper these days and find an article about the "crisis" in education and how a new quick fix will remedy things. I think as a nation we've gotten off track regarding education. Our concern seems to be centered on testing and on ranking students, schools, and districts. I believe our concern should be centered on what we can do in our schools and communities to bring out the best in kids.

Some schools are very good; some are not. Those that are good have an ethic, a culture, which supports and demands quality work. Those schools that are not effective need a lot more than new tests and new mandates. They need to build a new culture.

In my work with schools across the country, I encounter places where students are remarkably good at something. These schools dominate state competitions in orchestra, chess, wrestling, visual arts, debate, and essay contests, and have done so for years.

What's going on here? 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. 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. These schools graduate 95% of their seniors and send about 90% to college.

These schools don't have any special magic. 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. It doesn't matter what their background is. Once those children enter a culture with a powerful ethic— an ethic of excellence—that ethic becomes their norm. It's what they know.

When students enter a culture that demands excellence, they work to fit in.

Unfortunately, most students, I believe, are caught on school treadmills that focus 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 into 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 and shift their focus from quantity to quality.

Work of excellence is transformational. Once a student sees that he or she is capable of quality, 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.

Five practices (see box below) are essential for creating and sustaining a classroom culture of excellence: (1) assign work that matters; (2) study examples of excellence; (3) build a culture of critique; (4) require multiple revisions; and (5) provide opportunities for public presentation.

Classroom Projects That Inspire Excellence

When I speak, I begin with slides of children's work— work by my own students and students in other classrooms in our school. People sit up. They point to things on the screen. There's electricity in the room.

A science project

I show slides of my 6th-grade students managing a scientific project, done in collaboration with a local college laboratory, to test the town's homes for radon gas. The slides show students preparing surveys, kits, and informational packets for the families in town and learning the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet program to do data

analysis of results. They show pages from their final radon report for the town. The report turned out to be the first comprehensive radon picture of any town in the state. After being featured in the media, our report was requested by towns all over the state, by the state radon commission, and even by the federal radon commission. The slides show a classroom transformed into something like a non-profit company—printing and mailing off copies of the report, responding to requests and questions with individual cover letters. This was work that mattered.

CREATING A CULTURE OF EXCELLENCE: FIVE PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

1. Assign work that matters. Students need assignments that challenge and inspire them. At the Raphael Hernandez School in Boston, for example, middle schoolers took on a study of vacant lots in their Roxbury neighborhood. Students researched the history of the sites and interviewed neighborhood members regarding what uses they would prefer for the lots. Their proposals were formally presented to the mayor of Boston and his staff, and one of the sites was later converted into community gardens.

2. Study examples of excellence. Before they begin work on a project, the teacher and students examine models of excellence—high-quality work done by previous students as well as work done by professionals. What makes a particular science project, piece of writing, or architectural blueprint so good? What was the process of achieving such high quality? What mistakes and revisions were probably, part of the process?

3. Build a culture of critique. Formal critique sessions build a culture of critique that is essential for improving students' work. The rules for group critique: "Be kind; be specific; be helpful."

Students presenting a piece of work first explain their ideas or goals and state what they are seeking help with. Classmates begin with positive comments and phrase suggestions as questions: "Have you considered . . . ?" The teacher uses the critique session as the optimal opportunity for teaching necessary concepts and skills. Through this process, students have regular experiences of being able to improve the quality of a piece of work as a result of feedback from others.

4. Require multiple revisions. In most schools, students turn in first drafts—work that doesn't represent their best effort and that is typically discarded after it has been graded and returned. In life, when the quality of one's work really matters, one almost never submits a first draft. An ethic of excellence requires revision.

5. Provide opportunities for public presentation. Every final draft students complete is done for an outside audience—whether a class of kindergartners, the principal, or the wider community. The teacher's role is not as the sole judge of their work but rather similar to that of a sports coach or play director—helping them get their work ready for the public eye.

Biographies of seniors.

In another project, my 6th-graders interviewed senior citizens and wrote their biographies. No one needed to tell them the reason for doing a quality job. These books were to be gifts to the seniors, gifts that might become precious heirlooms. Because their work would have this public audience, students were motivated to seek critique from everyone. They read the drafts of their biographies to the whole class for suggestions. They labored, draft after draft, on their cover designs. They wanted their books to be perfect. This, too, was work that mattered.

Once students see that they are capable of excellence, they are never quite satisfied with less.

Archiving Excellence

One of my jobs as a teacher is to be an archiver of excellence. Wherever I am, in my school or in other schools, I am on the lookout for models of beautiful work, powerful work, important work. These examples set the standards for what my students and I aspire to achieve in school.

In my library I have photographs of historical architectural scale models built by 4th-graders in Decatur, Georgia, that would set a high standard even for high school students. I have a field guide to a pond in Dubuque, Iowa, written and illustrated by elementary school students, that is bookstore quality. I have statistical math studies designed by 3rd-graders in Maine. I have photocopies of students' stories, essays, reviews, novels, and poetry. I have videotapes of portfolio presentations by students from all over the country. And I have 25 years of models from my own classroom and school—copies, photographs, slides, and videotapes—that I draw from almost daily.

When my class begins a new project we begin with a taste of excellence. I pull out these models of work by former students, videotapes of former students presenting their work, exemplary work from other schools, and examples of work from the professional world. We discuss what makes the work powerful; what makes a piece of creative writing compelling; what makes a scientific or historical research project significant, and stirring.

Culture Matters

The achievement of students is governed to a large degree by their family culture, neighborhood culture, and school culture. Students may have different potentials, but in general their attitudes and achievements are shaped by the culture around them. Students adjust their attitudes and efforts in order to fit into the culture. If the peer culture ridicules academic effort and achievement—it isn't cool to care openly about school—this is a powerful force. If the peer culture celebrates investment in school, this is just as powerful. Schools need to consciously shape their cultures to be places where it's safe to care, cool to care.

When children first come to school, they do care. An enthusiastic attitude toward learning seems universal in kindergartens. By secondary school, however, things are very different. I am struck in particular by conversations with middle school and high school students from poor urban or rural neighborhoods who attend large schools. When I ask about the social norm for showing interest in learning, I am often met by friendly laughter. Students say you would be out of your mind to raise your hand in class or otherwise show interest in school. This attitude appears to be a primary obstacle to achievement in these schools.

Jason's Story: The Power of Positive Peer Pressure

I was raised with the message that peer pressure was something negative. Peer pressure meant kids trying to talk you into smoking cigarettes or taking drugs. I realized after ten years of teaching that *positive* peer pressure was often the primary reason my classroom was a safe, supportive environment for student learning. Peer pressure wasn't something to be afraid of, to be avoided, but rather something to be cultivated in a positive direction.

Schools need to create a culture where it's "cool to care."

A few years back I got a boy who was new to my school as a sixth-grader. He entered the class with a bad attitude and wasn't about to change it to please an adult.

This boy, whom I'll call Jason, was clear about who he was. The evening of the first day of school I read through his background sheet, an introduction form he had filled out to let me know a bit about his life and interests. I met with him the next day to learn more about him. I learned that Jason's father was a logger who spent his life alone in the woods cutting firewood. Jason worked with him whenever he had the opportunity—clearing brush, cutting and stacking wood, and working with heavy equipment. Jason was proud of his skill in the woods, and he loved his life there.

Jason hated school, he said. He hated teachers. He had always done terribly in school, but it didn't matter; he didn't need school—his father hadn't needed school, and he didn't either. Soon he could leave school and cut wood full-time and make a living. He hated the fact that he didn't live with his father. He hated the fact that his mother had moved to this junky town. He hated women and girls in general. Jason made no friends the first two days of school. In the classroom and on the playground he was suspicious and unfriendly. On the third day, I took the class and their parents on an Outward Bound-type adventure trip to build a sense of community and challenge. We climbed a mountain and went cave-exploring together. The students and parents were scared and excited and knew they had to work together as a team. Underground, in the dark, Jason couldn't worry about whose hand he was grabbing for help. He helped others, even girls, and they helped him. He got compliments from others for his support in the tight squeezes and smiled for the first time.

But he wasn't a new person. The trip had been a beginning, had built important bridges, but back in the classroom it wasn't long before his scowl returned. He'd be darned if he was going to put any effort into his schoolwork.

Adult Approval Was Not Enough

If my teaching personality were all I had going for me with Jason, I wouldn't have gotten too far. Adult approval was not the big motivator in his life. Fortunately, I had the power of the school culture on my side. Students in my school have learned to care since pre-school. They have shared their work with pride with different audiences since they were four years old. They have been surrounded by models of strong work and children who enjoyed school, cared about their work, and were outspoken about it. They have learned to feel that a safe and inclusive emotional environment is the norm. This is not to say that work or behavior is always good, but rather that it is expected.

***Our students have learned that in order to fit in,
working hard and respecting others are expected.***

There was no role for a mean-spirited class clown in our classroom. Jason may have garnered social power and attention in other schools by cracking jokes at the expense of others or at the expense of class lessons, but here he got only frustration and complaints from peers. Jason may have fit in fine in other schools by turning in lousy work, but here, during our regular classroom critique sessions, he was met with critical eyes and helpful suggestions from peers. When Jason turned in sloppy, meager work, other students advised him to put a little more care into it. At first, he met their suggestions with defensive anger.

The turning point for Jason came when he pinned up something for class critique that was well done and was showered with compliments from the class. They knew what a breakthrough this was for him. He actually blushed. In the same way, the first time Jason stepped out of his role as a bully to do something nice for another student, it was discussed during our morning meeting, and he was met with unfamiliar praise.

During the course of the fall, Jason's work began to improve, along with his attitude. At one point he looked at his work and smiled. "I'm proud of this," he said. "I think it's the first good thing I've ever really done in school. I think the class will like this."

Jason had bought in to school.

Jason's academic skills didn't become stellar overnight, and his personality remained difficult at times. But he was a different kid. He made eye contact with me and with others. He was proud of his work. He was willing to put time into reading and writing. He had bought in to school.

An Ethic of Excellence

How do I really know what I have done for students? How do I know what my school has done? I think of my life in my small town. The policeman is a former student. I trust him to protect my life. The nurse at my medical clinic is my former student. I trust her with my health. The lifeguard at the town lake is my former student. She watches my grandsons as they swim. There may not be numbers to measure these things, but there is a reason I feel so thankful trusting my life to these people. They take pride in doing their best. They have an ethic of excellence.

Adapted from Ron Berger's An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students (Heinemann, 2003). Ron Berger was a public school teacher for 28 years and is now a school consultant/designer for Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound. He can be reached at rberger@massed.net.