



*Students become teachers. Photos courtesy of Ben Krueger*

# Students as Experts in Professional Development

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**I**nvolving students as experts in our adult learning community has been a great way to build a positive, collegial school culture. It invites students into the conversation about teaching and learning in a way that they find relevant and exciting. I describe below two ways to involve middle school students in adult learning that have worked well for us: soliciting student feedback, and enlisting student expertise.

## **Soliciting Student Feedback**

Our staff set up a time during our afternoon professional development where the teachers and staff all interviewed current and former students to find out how they felt about different aspects of our school. We had a great range of students for the panels. In the process, I discovered that one of my shy 6th grade students, Nathan, loved working on computers as well as fixing computer-related problems. He had been proud of some work he had done last summer, fixing his parents' computers. He and I talked about how this interest and skill could benefit our class and I ended up giving Nathan increased responsibilities with tech help and maintenance of the class computers.

At High Tech Middle, we often ‘tune’ our projects; soliciting help from others to create the best projects we can. We have included students as respondents in these structured conversations, and their perceptions have been incredibly insightful.

For example, I helped a friend and colleague, Bobby Shaddox, tune a project for his 6th grade class on creating a book about San Diego. We had a panel of ten students from his class. As we discussed the project as a group, ideas started to emerge. The students had a vast array of ideas on how they wanted to write about San Diego. They wanted choices about where they wrote about and what style they would use. They offered insight on how Bobby should structure his groups and organize responsibilities for the publishing process. They had ideas for selecting groups that would give students a choice, but also ensure that the groups were productive. Bobby left that meeting with a clear picture of his next steps in creating a project, and the students benefitted from a leadership opportunity and voice in their education.

### **Enlisting Student Expertise**

Students love to be experts. It can help to empower them, as well as help them to see learning as a continual life long process. The vast majority of students I have met love to help out and have a job. I have facilitated professional development sessions where a group of adults from other schools learn how to use Sketch Up from my students. They also work with the students on brainstorming ways in which they can use this 3D modeling program in their own school settings. The initial prompt is to design their dream home. They get to work with my students in small groups who have learned from our project work in class, and are bringing in their experience and expertise. The adults have a great time and learn so much more than I would be able to teach them, or they would learn on their own in the hour. They strike up conversations with the students while they work, and friendships are made. The students benefit because they are empowered with teaching someone who will go back to their setting and share this with others.

Nathan, who helped out in my class, also helped me support all the new High Tech High teachers in creating digital portfolios in our

summer "Odyssey" for new teachers. The new teachers range from computer whizzes to people who have never created a website. The Odyssey offers a great opportunity for our new teachers to receive help from a student. Nathan pushed himself to work with this large group of unknown adults, going from one raised hand to the next. This was a leadership opportunity for Nathan and his peers, and it gave our new teachers a chance to see students in the driver's seat. Having a team of students offer tech help ensures that people leave that meeting with a website to show for their time. As a result, I have seen Nathan assume more leadership in class, as well as participate more in class discussions.

I recently organized staff development time in which our entire staff learned how to play a musical instrument of their choice. They got to choose between guitar, ukulele, bass, vocal coaching, or drums. They were taught by ten of our music students, and two of our staff members for 90 minutes. We all paired up and started jamming. My favorite moment from the workshop was when we realized we needed another ukulele teacher, so one of the students went to grab a friend, who just happened to be staying after school that day. He came back with Kim, and she taught our new 6th grade teacher Bernice ukulele for the first time. I saw Kim's eyes beam as Bernice caught on quickly and worked through her song. It was heartwarming to see Bernice make connections with students outside of her class as she acclimated to our school setting in her first month. The two have a special connection to this day.

Seeing the power of students as teachers and co-learners has changed the way I think about teaching and learning and school as a community, as well as what our students have to offer our school. The next time you are planning professional learning in your setting ask yourself, "How can we involve students?" You may find yourself pleasantly surprised with the outcome.