**How ‘Deprogramming’ Kids From How to ‘Do School’ Could Improve Learning**

[Katrina Schwartz](http://blogs.kqed.org/mindshift/author/katrinaschwartz/) | December 15, 2014 | <http://blogs.kqed.org/mindshift/2014/12/how-deprogramming-kids-from-how-to-do-school-could-improve-learning/>

One day, Adam Holman decided he was fed up with trying to cram knowledge into the brains of the high school students he taught. They weren’t grasping the physics he was teaching at the level he knew they were capable of, so he decided to change up his teaching style. It wasn’t that his students didn’t care about achieving — he taught at high performing, affluent schools where students knew they needed high grades to get into good colleges. They argued for every point to make sure their grades were as high as possible, but were they learning?

“I felt I had to remove all the barriers I could on my end before I could ask my kids to meet me halfway,” Holman said. The first thing he did was move to standards-based grading. He told his students to show him they’d learned the material, it didn’t matter how long it took them. ‘We know how kids learn; we know what classes should look like, and yet our classes look almost the opposite.’

“The kids realized this made sense,” Holman said. He taught physics and math at Anderson High School in Austin, before moving on to become a vice-principal. His students were mostly well-off, high achievers, and they knew how to play the game to get the grades they needed. But Holman found when he changed the grading policy, students worried about grades less and focused more on working together to understand the material.

“It turned my students into classmates and collaborators because I didn’t have a system in place to deny the collaboration,” Holman said. His students stopped copying homework. There was no curve that guaranteed some kids would be at the bottom. Instead, the class moved at its regular pace, but if a student persisted at a topic until they could show they understood it, Holman would give them credit. “It turned the kids on my side,” Holman said. “I was there to help them learn.”

**BUILDING TRUST**

Holman didn’t just change his grading policies. He also changed his teaching style to focus on inquiry, good questions and independent discovery. Starting off, he knew juniors and seniors weren’t used to learning that way, so first he had to build trust with them so they’d understand why he was asking so much of them. At the start of each class period Holman and his students did icebreakers and read and discussed articles about how human brains learn best. Holman knew he was asking students to be vulnerable with one another–to share their misperceptions about math and physics–and so he spent precious class time working to make sure students trusted one another and him.

The class read Timothy Slater’s article, “[When Is a Good Day Teaching a Bad Thing?](http://sites.utexas.edu/utes_educatorresources/files/2012/12/When-is-Good-Teaching-a-Bad-Thing2.pdf)” which discusses the unspoken contract that can exist between teachers and students by which a teacher will pass a student as long as he or she doesn’t make trouble. Students recognized their own experience of education in the article. “It wasn’t meant to be a bash on teachers, but just to say we are aware that teaching is really complex,” Holman said. “It’s really difficult and sometimes we don’t know how to handle kids.”

Holman also asked students to read “[Sermons For Grumpy Campers](http://www4.ncsu.edu/unity/lockers/users/f/felder/public/Columns/Sermons.pdf),” by Richard Felder, a graduate level professor who never lectured. In it, Felder describes his students grumbling that they hated group work and that it was his job to teach them, not the other way around. Holman’s students said the complaints sounded like they came from kindergarteners or themselves and were amazed to find out the complainers were graduate level engineering students. Talking about these issues openly validated the inevitable complaints of students and helped them buy into the new approach. If an article was a little harder, Holman would use it as differentiated instruction, asking his best readers to take it on and summarize it for the class.

“It wasn’t perfect and it didn’t turn my kids into all physics majors, but for the kids who were on the border, it made a difference,” Holman said. Discussing their learning with them, switching grading policies and assigning more inquiry-based, hands on lessons all helped Holman’s students feel he trusted and respected them. And they rose to the challenge. “I think the kids were just waiting to be let loose and to be treated like adults,” Holman said.

**STUDENT RESPONSES**

Most of the students responded well to the new teaching style, Holman said, but he was most touched by his struggling math class. “I saw that my kids had been told they were stupid and failures, but I saw so much potential in them,” Holman said. They’ve never been given the time to master a concept through multiple tries. So when Holman opened his door to help them after school and during lunch for as long as it took, many seized the opportunity. ‘I think many students didn’t realize that they could learn without a textbook or without step by step instruction.’

Holman remember one struggling math student, Isabel, particularly well. She was taking algebra, convinced she was terrible at math. But when the grading policy was changed and she had a little more time to work on units that were difficult for her, she became a top student in the class. “She said, ‘for the first time in my life I’m trying to learn everything instead of just get a 70 [percent],’” Holman said.

“Students clearly learned in Mr. Holman’s class, and he never pushed fear,” wrote a former student, Kate Nunke, in an email. She described the rest of her high school experience as one long fear fest: “Fear of not getting into college, fear of not passing, fear of disappointing parents, fear of looking like a fool in front of your peers,” the list goes on. But Nunke says Holman’s teaching style jolted students into thinking about their learning in a new way.

“I think many students didn’t realize that they could learn without a textbook or without step by step instruction,” Nunke wrote. “At times I felt that Mr. Holman’s physics class was the hardest class ever because I didn’t get a step-by-step instruction. We are used to being handed the answer, thus not necessarily learning, just being told.”

Nunke said she’s been thinking a lot about Holman’s approach now that she has graduated and is taking a gap year in which she spent a semester at an outdoor education school focused entirely on experiential learning. “A lot of the teaching that Mr. Holman did, now that I think back to it, was teaching his students how to ask questions and investigate by themselves,” she wrote.

**TEACHERS RESIST WHAT WORKS**

Despite his success, Holman has had a hard time convincing other teachers to try some of his more progressive approaches. He became a vice-principal to spread and support the instructional practices he believes work, modeling lessons and pushing teachers to step out of their comfort zone.

“We know how kids learn; we know what classes should look like, and yet our classes look almost the opposite,” Holman said. He says there’s a particular deficit in math, where teachers and parents expect things to be taught the way they learned them. Not everyone has [experienced good math instruction](http://davidwees.com/content/why-it-so-hard-change-math-education) themselves, Holman said, so they can’t even begin to conceptualize a new way of doing it. “Imagine explaining color to someone who has never seen it,” Holman said. “You have to show them, you have to model it.”

But all of these approaches require taking a leap of faith and many teachers don’t feel they have that luxury. Teachers often complain that more progressive approaches like this suck up time and they can’t cover everything in the jam-packed curriculum. These arguments are excuses, Holman said. He said he never covered every single topic in the curriculum, but he did delve deeply into the ones he saw as most important.

Day one: Read it. After each of the following days’ activities, record at least one answer/insight to that day’s reading practice.

Day two: Tell table group what you remember from yesterday, read it again, and together create a one sentence paraphrase for the text. Record on your SAT warm up for the day.

Day three: Tell table group what you remember from yesterday, read it again, and find/learn new words from the article to build vocabulary. Add them to vocabulary words.

Day four: Tell table group what you remember from yesterday, read it again, and identify/explain any author’s craft techniques you can find. Record all of the author’s craft items you found as a table group on your SAT work.

Day five: Tell table group what you remember from yesterday, read it again, and in your table group write a “text as a whole” sentence that explains the author’s intent and what kind of text it is. This might sound like, “This author wrote this compelling narrative to teach his readers the lesson of not taking life for granted.” Record this sentence on your SAT practice work.

Day six: Tell table group what you remember from yesterday, read it again, and produce insightful inferences about the text and/or text’s topic. Record all inferences on your SAT work.

Day seven: Table group creates a satirical cartoon that expresses the author’s theme through satire. Go to <http://news.distractify.com/culture/satirical-paintings/?v=1> for examples. Share this cartoon with the class.