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Teacher as Leader in a “Flat World”: Preparing Students to Succeed in a Global Community

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Students also have to fundamentally reorient what they are learning and educators how they are teaching it. They can't just keep the same old model that worked for the past fifty years, when the world was round.

--Thomas Friedman,
The World is Flat (280)

Four years ago, I studied abroad in Ireland for a semester. During this time, I had the opportunity to volunteer in a local primary school. The students learned various lessons in a two-room schoolhouse and shared three, outdated computers. Technological advancements in that small village were obviously limited. Still, while there, I noticed something unique about the education these students were receiving, but I could not put my finger on it. What I did know was, despite a lack of resources, the Irish students I worked with had sound awareness of the world around them—an awareness that I rarely detected in my own country. I was impressed by the Irish students I worked with but also feared that these students and students in other countries could surpass American students academically and in the job market.

Since that time, I have graduated from college, successfully completed my first year of teaching, and am presently completing my second. I still value my experience in the Irish school, but I have taken on another perspective because I recognize now that *it is up to me* to shape my students. Who will they be? Where will they go

after finishing high school? I will not find this out during the one year that I have students in my classroom, but I can use the time I have to prepare them for a world that is getting smaller.

Author Thomas Friedman suggests the world is not only smaller, but also flat: the playing ground of global competition has been leveled. Jobs in the US are being outsourced to India. Countries in Europe and Asia are quickly understanding what it takes to be successful nations in the world. The same year I opened my eyes to a new world in Ireland, Friedman, at an education conference in Beijing, observed Chinese educators formulating a plan to become one of the higher ranked “innovation countries.” Friedman says, “I listened to this with mixed emotions. Part of me said: ‘Gosh, wouldn’t it be nice to have a government that was so focused on innovation...My other emotion was skepticism. Oh, you know the line: Great Britain dominated the 19th century, America dominated the 20th and now China is going to dominate the 21st. It’s game over’” (“Learning to Keep Learning” 1).

If it is game over, what does it mean for the future of the United States? More specifically, what does it mean for our students who will find themselves in a highly competitive and global market? The idea that students could lose jobs to outsourcing or automation is frightening. Of course, Friedman does not suggest all is lost: “You can command K-12 education. But you can’t command innovation. Rigor and competence, without freedom, will take China only so far. China will have to find a way to loosen up, without losing control, if it wants to be a truly innovative nation” (“Learning to Keep Learning” 1). Innovation and creativity then are the keys to our students’ success in this global community.

In his book, *The World is Flat*, Friedman outlines eight necessary skills that embody innovation and creativity. Friedman suggests that in order to find success, these skills must be utilized. An individual, then, needs to take on the following roles (see Table 1):

Table 1: Roles Towards Innovation and Creativity

Collaborator and orchestrator	The ability to contribute different skills to help others and lead complex operations that sometimes involve various locations and linguistics
Synthesizer	The ability to see new ideas and also use them to create something innovative and original
Explainer	The ability to explain the “how-to” process; as new technologies are constantly created or advanced, somebody needs to be the expert
Leverager	The ability to stay ahead of the game; Understand, use, and teach new ideas and technologies
Adapter	The ability to practice certain skills in different situations
Green People	Becoming literate in a “go green” world
Personalizer	The ability to make something one’s own so that it becomes a unique commodity
Localizer	Knowing what is available globally so these resources can be used locally

Friedman goes as far as to suggest that in order to be successful in this flat world, we need to have the eight specific skills noted above. In *The World is Flat*, he relates these skills mostly to the business world, but they can also and should be promoted in the classroom. In other words, if we want to prepare our students to be successful in a global community then we need to consider developing Friedman’s eight skills in the classroom or local community.

In his essay, “Teaching English Language Arts in a ‘Flat World,’” Jim Burke outlines Friedman’s eight skills and provides ideas on how to promote them in the classroom (as cited in Beers, Probst, & Rief). This is an excellent guide for teachers who are looking to teach students in a holistic manner. To incorporate these eight skills, Burke suggests we utilize group discussions in and out of the classroom. For instance, organized groups might be assigned a conflict to which they provide and present solutions. Teachers can also create wikis and nings to motivate students to use their time online productively.

Students need to learn how to communicate ideas effectively in and out of the classroom. Interesting websites like iEARN (<http://iearn.org/>) and Flat Classrooms (<http://flatclassrooms.ning.com/>) facilitate collaboration among students and teachers across the globe. With these ideas in mind, neither Burke nor Friedman suggest we reinvent the wheel, but innovation and creativity are identified as important factors of student success.

Stakes are high in this global community, and often if the results of assessment do not meet the expectations, someone or something has failed. However, the numbers do not always tell all. Alfie Kohn states, “We have to remember that learning takes place in classrooms, not in district or states. To get a sense of how our schools are doing, we have to start where the learning is and move out from there” (48). We have to know the process. Students need to be innovative and think on their toes, or be prepared to take on challenging situations while communicating ideas effectively. It is crucial then, that teachers take another look at how they stand as leaders.

Students often pose the age old question, “Why do I need to know this?” If students cannot see how they benefit from an eighth grade English class in the future, motivation to succeed or to do anything for that matter is lacking. This lack of motivation is a perfect reason for teachers to grab hold of Friedman’s eight skills and use Burke suggestions as a guide, specifically to show students how they can use classroom learning in the real world. For instance, the writing process should not be limited to classroom lesson plans but should also include actively engaging students who will be expected to succeed in this global community. Carl Nagin, author of *Because Writing Matters* says, “It is an important reminder that language use isn’t solely a thinking activity, but also a social and cultural act...Student writing and reading make up part of their ‘identity kit,’ composed of ways of ‘saying-writing-valuing-believing’ that is evident not only in the language of school children but in the language practices that mark the identities of doctors, educators, steelworkers, and mechanics” (28). Developing writing skills, among others—such as reading, will go a long way for students as they pursue careers outside of school. This global community is swiftly transitioning from a data-driven society to that of a knowledge-based network, and it is up to the teacher—as leader—to prepare students for the world outside the classroom.

Since my experience in Ireland, I have made a big attempt to bring the importance of a global community into my own classroom. I have transformed that fear I initially had of students outside the United States surpassing my own students in competition into positive energy that exposes students to the world outside school doors. No matter what subject, students need to make connections in their classroom to what is happening in their local community, this country, and around the world. I continue to teach with Friedman’s “flat world” in mind and incorporate lesson plans that connect what students are learning within the classroom to their global community.

First Years of Teaching in a “Flat World”

My first year of teaching Language Arts happened to be during the 2008 Presidential Election. Even though I taught eighth graders who could not yet vote, it was very apparent

that tensions were high. Whether they learned it from their parents or decided on their own, many

students were passionate about who would be our next president. In a high stakes election, it is easy for any of us to lose our cool when we are so dedicated to a particular cause or person. This could have turned bad very quickly, but I saw this more of an opportunity for a teaching moment. No matter which candidate each student supported, I was determined to bring these eighth graders together. This was also an excellent chance to practice collaboration—one of Friedman’s necessary skills to have in a flat world.

For the election, I used “Crossing Political Boundaries” from *Teaching Tolerance* to encourage students to come together despite differences. *Teaching Tolerance* is an excellent magazine that teachers can subscribe to at no cost (information and ideas are also online, <http://www.tolerance.org/>). This organization is geared towards promoting diversity and multiculturalism in the classroom. In this case, “Crossing Political Boundaries” called for students to brainstorm different adjectives that described qualities they wanted to see in a president and characteristics they did not want to see in a political leader. The students, without mentioning Senator McCain or now President Obama, collaborated to create an extensive list of positive qualities that became the focal point of a letter that was sent to the president-elect. The students came to see that, “without saying who we supported, we discovered that we all want the same characteristics in our president. We expect leadership, determination, wisdom, and compassion.”

Ultimately, current issues were applied to reading and writing curriculum, but even more important, students, without voting, participated in the election process. An activity like this can prepare students to actively participate as citizens and even become our leaders. In this lesson plan, students collaborated to find common ground and learned

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something about our country along the way. Additionally, a collaboration activity like “Crossing Political Boundaries” started in the classroom but can have a lasting effect as students leave our classrooms and become active members of the global community. When students find themselves in new careers or leadership positions, they will be prepared to communicate and make decisions in an informed and effective manner.

Friedman also calls on us to synthesize—to put ideas together to create something new and innovative. During my student teaching, I taught a US history class, which had students with an interesting spectrum of abilities. One student in particular always seemed to fall behind and just didn’t get it. For most of the semester he maintained C’s and D’s. For our World War II unit, I decided to try a different type of assessment instead of the typical end of unit test. Students had the option to create either a children’s book or a comic book that demonstrated the effects of a specific WWII event on a certain group or culture. Students could then have the opportunity to synthesize the unit’s requirements with their ideas and create an innovative piece of writing. I received some really great comic and children’s books, but one stood out to me. The C and D student had, first of all, completed his work, and produced a fantastic comic book. It turns out this student was motivated by his own interests and skills and revealed himself to be a great artist with some post-modernistic ideas. All of this he synthesized into his project. If he could channel this effort into other assignments and later on college and the workforce, he would find his way to success through innovation and creativity.

What Students Can Do and What They Need to Get There

I am ever impressed with what my students have to offer. For many of the students we see come and go, most if not all of Friedman’s eight skills are engrained in them already. We, as teachers then, have to hone in on these skills and encourage our students to make a habit of practicing them wherever they might find themselves. For instance, students can become “explainers” by creating digital stories or “leveragers” when they use the SMART (Self Monitoring Approach to Reading and Thinking) reading strategy in my

class. With this, students can easily check off what they understand and stop to use fix-up strategies where they meet obstacles. Some students have taken advantage of this strategy to help them advance in their reading. As a result, the students who understand the material become teachers themselves and are able to teach what they have learned to their peers.

Reading and “writing to learn” strategies can help students become “adapters” when they use basic skills and habits to solve problems or create a product. When I want my students to “write to learn,” I often have them practice the RAFT (Role Audience Format Topic). In doing this, students can write from a different perspective and experiment with different formats. While reading *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor, I asked the students to explore personification through the role of the poor quality book that had been thrown to the ground by Little Man when he, at such a young age, realized how he as a black student experienced discrimination. One student took basic instruction and turned it into a beautiful poem about racial strife. He was able to adapt this role and produce a profound poem. This is the type of skill that will help a student succeed. Once we can adapt to something and face change in a practical manner, we can begin to personalize it and make it our own. I encourage my students to do this with all of their work—“make it yours,” I tell them.

If students can realize during their educational careers the skills needed to be successful in a “flat world,” then chances are they will be able to adapt in a new career. Friedman says, “Anyone who can take an old middle service job—from telephone operator to health-care provider to service workers of all types to office receptionist—and give it something personal, something special, some real passion, will have a good chance of turning it into a new middle job that cannot be outsourced, automated, or digitized” (*The World is Flat* 299). When I pass out a quiz or discuss plagiarism, I often tell my students that I want to see their work, not someone else’s. In creative writing or projects, I want to see what students can bring to the table in their own unique ways. This philosophy can carry over into any field. In interviews, employers want to know what distinguishes one person from the rest; and in classrooms, teachers need to see how

students can create something and personalize it. The same idea holds true for Friedman's localizers.

Not only do students need to personalize what they produce, but they also have to take a global idea and bring it to a local level. In other words, students need to know what is happening throughout the world and how it applies to their own lives and local communities. Most of my students truly enjoy connecting a personal experience or contemporary issue to the subjects we learn in class. When I assigned a project in which students would research an issue and how we can help that cause, students researched organizations or causes that interested them. Some even became directly involved with a cause—working at the local animal shelter or donating hair to Locks of Love. Although I did not require students to volunteer, they took it upon themselves to be actively involved. Ultimately, these students understood some of the social challenges we face as a global community and figured out how to help on a local level—a skill that will take them far.

Friedman identifies one more skill that is crucial to this twenty-first century world: we need to be “green people.” As leaders in the classroom, we should recognize and teach the hot topics. Currently, the “green revolution” is one of those topics. Yes, we do have curriculum to follow, but often state and national standards expect lesson plans to incorporate current world issues so students can make important connections. When I teach reading strategies, I urge students to practice those strategies while reading articles about environmental issues. In practicing these reading strategies, students not only develop reading skills but also learn something new about sustainable energy or green jobs. This type of activity should not only be limited to environmental issues, but other current events that inform students of what is happening in the world around them. Students become aware of what is waiting for them out there in the real world.

When I came back to the States after living in Ireland for four months, I was so impressed with European education that I became skeptical of ours. However, authors like Friedman show us that there is much to be excited about. The eight skills Friedman suggests we have are so versatile that if students work to become innovative and creative, they might be surprised by how

much opportunity they find in what has recently become a “gloom and doom” world. If this is to happen, of course, educators need to refocus on what is being taught in the classroom. Perhaps we are already using powerful strategies that adhere to Friedman's eight skills. If that's the case, we need to sharpen these lessons and provide the best learning environment for our students, an environment in which students know why they are learning, what they are learning, and understand how, through innovation and creativity, they can thrive in a global community and in Friedman's flat world.

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About the Author

Ann Burke (burkeann@aquinas.edu) earned a BA in English and history from Aquinas College and is completing her second year as a middle school teacher. This article originated from her participation in the Third Coast Writing Project at Western Michigan University where her eyes were opened to a new world of learning.