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The 2012 Wildly Exciting Education Conference

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The Wildly Exciting Education Conference began in August, 2004, and since then it has continued as a week-long conference held every other year. Each year, conference attendance has grown to a high of almost 500 attendees in 2012. Some of the notables who have presented at past conferences include, Jim Fay, Carol Ann Tomlinson, Doug Fisher, and Yong Zhao.

The purpose of the conference is to provide quality professional development for Michigan teachers and administrators at an affordable price. The conference committee looks for the best presenters with the most compelling ideas of the time to bring their message to the conference attendees. The conference highlights the Grand Valley State University’s “Connecting with Community” mission and the College of Education’s objective of “Facilitating Community Interactions.”

The conference is offered at the beginning of August and gives an opportunity for educators (superintendents, principals, school leaders, school staff, university faculty) to collaborate and discuss important issues and to plan for the upcoming year. The 2012 Wildly Exciting Education Conference featured the theme: Bold Change. Presenters were selected in order to bring varying viewpoints about “bold change” to the attendees.

Alfie Kohn

On Monday, August 6th, Alfie Kohn presented his ideas regarding The (Progressive) Schools that Our Children Deserve. His main point was that while research has indicated how children learn and how schools can help that our educational system has not incorporated this knowledge. He indicated they’re still more about memorizing facts and practicing isolated skills than understanding ideas from the inside out; they still exclude students from any meaningful decision-making role; and they still rely on grades, tests, homework, lectures, worksheets, competition, punishments, and rewards.
“I’ve always been appreciative of Alfie Kohn’s work. He is one of my educational heroes.”
–Jason Kornoely, 4th grade teacher

“He (Punya Mishra) taught me to not be afraid to explore, to go ahead and create, and to share my ideas.”
–Lori Watson-Layman, Allegan Public Schools
Alfie Kohn explored the alternatives to each of these conventional practices, explaining why progressive education is not just a realistic alternative but one that is far more likely to help kids become critical thinkers and lifelong learners.

**Punya Mishra**

In the afternoon, Dr. Punya Mishra, an award winning instructor at Michigan State University presented: *Creative Teaching, with Technology: What does it Take?* This presentation included information on how the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK) framework is a way of thinking about teacher knowledge, technology integration, and teacher creativity. He discussed how technologies (both analog and digital) can influence teaching and learning and focused on what teachers need to know to develop innovative approaches towards technology integration. He ended with examples of current research and practice and offered implications for teacher education, teacher professional development and policy.

**Mike Schmoker**

On Tuesday, August 7th, Dr. Mike Schmoker, an ASCD author of the best-selling book *FOCUS: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning* began the day with a rousing presentation that captured the essence of the message of his book. Wildly Exciting participants learned precisely where to focus their precious resources to ensure that all students are prepared for the 21st century demands of college, careers and citizenship. They learned about the three most essential elements of good schooling (Coherent curriculum, Authentic literacy; and Soundly-structured lessons) and how to implement them successfully using a straightforward model. Dr. Schmoker pointed out that despite their unrivaled power for improving performance in any and every school, these elements continue to be misunderstood—and grossly under-implemented. For this reason, these simple and familiar elements should be our first and highest priority. Participants left this Wildly Exciting session knowing both what to do and how to do it, in ways that will yield immediate and significant results.

**Rushton Hurley**

Tuesday afternoon brought technology presenter Rushton Hurley to the conference. Rushton's presentation, entitled *The Power and Possibility of Digital Media for Engaging Projects* captured the attention of audience as he posed the questions: What is it about audio, images, and video that so thoroughly captures the attention of our students? How can we use their fascination to help them learn more effectively and better see new possibilities for their futures? This session included a multitude of ideas on working with various digital media tools and preparing teachers and administrators to implement powerful 21st century projects with students.

**Robyn Jackson**

Wednesday, August 8th was the busiest day of the conference. The day began with Dr. Robyn Jackson, founder of Mindsteps, Inc. speaking to

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“This presentation (Mike Schmoker) was extraordinarily refreshing, and rang true. Interesting that “bold change” would come down to getting back to the basics.”

—Anonymous

“Rushton Hurley was a very motivational speaker with many wonderful ideas that can be applied to my classroom. He left me feeling motivating and ready to get back”

—Jill Singleton, Tri-County Schools
conference participants on *Seven Principles of Effective Instruction*. The seven principles are: Start where your students are; Know where your students are going; Expect to get your students to their goal; Support your students along the way; Use feedback to help you and your students get better; Focus on quality rather than quantity; Never work harder than your students.

**Brian Pete**

On Wednesday afternoon, Brian Pete, co-founder of Robin Fogarty and Associates presented the topic of *Teaching Thinking Skills in the Common Core State Standards* (CCSS). Brian helped educators answer the important question: Given the challenges to make practical sense of the Common Core State Standards, how do educators and schools arrive at practical solutions that will move learning for all students more rapidly into the 21st Century? Conference participants discovered the desired student proficiencies of the CCSS: critical thinking, creative thinking, complex thinking, comprehensive thinking, collaborative thinking, communicative thinking, and cognitive transfer. Brian discussed thinking skills associated with each of these proficiencies that were drawn from a high frequency list of key verbs in the Common Core State Standards. He presented a framework that provided an explanation, a rationale, and a mental menu that teachers can use to explicitly teach these skills.

**Patricia Polacco**

A very special presentation took place at the end of the day on Wednesday. Dr. Patricia Polacco, author and illustrator of over 50 children’s picture books and a native of Michigan, presented *The Heroes of My Life* where she thanked the heroes who have made a difference in her life. She paid homage to the distinct people who have inspired her to become the person she is today—those who continue to make the biggest difference in the world each and every day, insuring the preservation and wellbeing of our most precious resource—our children.

**Thomas R. Guskey**

Dr. Thomas R. Guskey, a professor of educational psychology in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky presented, *Grading and Reporting Student Learning: Effective Policies and Practices*. This presentation described the good, the bad, and the ugly of grading and reporting policies and practices. Stressing the importance

**Dru DeGraaf, Kent City**

“*There are a number of things that I can take from this afternoon and DO on September 4.*”

**Patricia Polacco**

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**Mark Heagle,**

*Hudsonville principal*

“I don’t know what to say about her (Patricia Polacco), except, what a remarkable woman who touched my heart and brought me to tears several times throughout her presentation. She speaks in such a manner that you are hanging on every word and want to hear more.”

**Anne Hoekstra,**

*Grand Rapids Colleagues*

“*She (Robyn Jackson) turned the focus back on the teacher’s belief in their own ability rather than just the potential of the student. Our focus must be in developing teachers so they feel confident in what they are doing with students.*”

**Mark Heagle,**

*Hudsonville principal*
of fairness and honesty in grading, a variety of ways to report student learning progress to parents and the community were discussed, including report cards, alternative formats for parent conferences, newsletters, phone calls, and other reporting tools. Designing new reporting structures that better communicate and involve parents in students’ learning were highlighted, along with policies and practices that should be avoided due to their negative consequences for students, teachers, and schools.

Martha Kaufeldt

A consultant, coach, author, and keynote speaker, Martha Kaufeldt presented *Think Big: Start Small—Differentiating Instruction*. Differentiating instruction in any classroom with diverse learners can be a labor-intensive, daunting task—we know! Conscientious, dedicated teachers were encouraged to think big in their dreams and goals of designing differentiated instructional strategies. Martha showed how to start small by demystifying differentiated instruction as teachers create an environment that maximizes student learning; engage learners with interesting, meaningful, relevant tasks; modify and extend learning to accommodate struggling learners and challenge capable students; and assess student progress and provide feedback.

Anthony Muhammad

Dr. Anthony Muhammad, a much sought-after educational consultant, ended the week with a powerful presentation entitled, *No More Drama: Getting everyone on the Bus and Becoming a Real PLC*. This address dealt head on with the issue of conflicting agendas within schools. A professional learning community (PLC) has a very clear purpose; learning for all students. The presentation examined the barriers to aligning the adult agendas with the school agenda and what leaders must do and what teachers must do to develop the synergy necessary to guarantee learning. Participants discovered how to understand the root cause of social division and how to heal old wounds; understand everyone’s role in developing a healthy learning environment; embrace the moral imperative of schooling over personal agendas.

We look forward to another Wildly Exciting Education Conference in 2014. If you have ideas for presenters, please contact Sally Hipp (hipps@gvsu.edu) or Jacque Melin (melinj@gvsu.edu).

“I have dozens of ideas to try out in my classroom.”

—Colleen Kleinhans, teacher

“I walked away from this presentation with a whole new outlook for the upcoming school year. I now have the motivation for looking at my flaws and doing what is required for fixing them.”

—Tom Joy, Calhoun ISD.

“In all of the 14 years I have taught, the staff has never discussed how and why we grade. This presentation (Thomas Guskey) has sparked the need for an important conversation.”

—Michelle Spach, Tri-County Schools