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Emergent Benchmarking: “Properly Responding to These Influences”

John Ludy

The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences.

—John Dewey

Public education faces a dilemma. On one hand, policymakers have increasingly forced schools into a tightening spiral of academic “standards” and high-stakes testing. This spiral has forced classrooms to be increasingly content-driven. For English classrooms, this means more grammar, writing, and reading.

On the other hand, all educators know that much is lost as a result. In particular, the social skills of listening and speaking risk being minimized. If a computer program or workbook regimen can meet “standards” and raise test scores, it will too often be used . . . even if an unmeasured side-effect is socially alienated, verbally impoverished students with weak interpersonal skills. Undoubtedly, Kleebold and Harris passed Colorado’s standardized tests, but to what purpose?

Thus, all educators must seek creative ways to bridge the gap between policymakers’ demands for “accountability” and their students’ human needs to listen, speak, and become “a member of the community.”

A first step in building this bridge is a close studying of the academic standards for a given educator’s home state. In Indiana, the final English/Language Arts standard states:

Students formulate thoughtful judgments about oral communication. They deliver focused and coherent presentations that convey clear and distinct perspectives and demonstrate solid reasoning. Students deliver polished formal and extemporaneous presentations that combine traditional speech strategies of narration, exposition, persuasion, and description. They use gestures, tone, and vocabulary appropriate to the audience and purpose. Students use the same Standard English conventions for oral speech that they use in their writing.

A next step is “to select the influences which shall affect the child.” In other words, teachers must decide which classroom practices will work best. Such decisions are, of course, the difference between master teachers and drones.

Despite such narrow “standardized” parameters, I have been lucky enough to work with scores of master teachers in both Indiana and throughout the United States to create the Omnilog Framework™. As a result, “listening and speaking” is interwoven into all our classroom practices.

What is the Omnilog Framework™?

The Omnilog Framework™ is a flexible and continually evolving synthesis of progressive “best practices.” As Figure 1 illustrates, it is based on the creative interweaving of three major student “needs” and three major groupings of classroom models.

In other words, all students (and teachers, for that matter) best perform when they are secure

members of a learning community, when there is an instructional flexibility that recognizes their diverse talents and challenges, and when they are encouraged to accept responsibility for their own educational journeys.

To meet these human needs, the Framework urges educators in their own ways to incorporate some or all of the three major groupings: Emergent Design, Inquiry-Based Instruction, and Targeted Reflective Practice.

It is important to note that the Omnilog Frame is best achieved when all three groupings are simultaneously present. It is also important to note that there are oral and written components in all three major groupings. However, this article will concentrate on Emergent Design and ways in which listening and speaking may be encouraged through its use. Particular emphasis will be given to Emergent Benchmarking, one particular Emergent Design practice.

What is Emergent Design?

Figure 2 indicates some of the many ways in which Emergent Design can fit into any English class. It is NOT intended to be a complete representation of all possible Emergent Design practices. As a matter of fact, one of the key differences between the Omnilog Framework™ and other prescriptive programs is that it is not, and never will be, a static model. Thus, experimentation and action research are always encouraged.

In general, Emergent Design practices share certain characteristics.

- Students are encouraged to accept responsibility for their own educations, including the classroom environment in which they learn.
- Students are empowered to make real and tangible decisions about how their classroom environment is designed, what they study, etc.
- Students are expected to listen closely to one another, to speak with depth and clarity about a host of issues, and behave in a civil manner.

What is Emergent Benchmarking?

Emergent benchmarking is based on the premise that students know (or at least can experientially learn) what behaviors create a more humane and more productive learning environment. Further, if teachers are patient and perseverant, students will eventually formulate community benchmarks that help each classroom prize what is best about its members and grapple with what needs to be fixed.

Emergent benchmarks have only two characteristics:

- They are based on observable behavior.
- They are phrased as positive statements.

Concentrating on observable behavior constricts participants' observations. As such, it creates an artificial frame around the experience. However, at the same time, it helps the community articulate what behaviors seem to enrich group and individual performance. Thus, while these benchmarks may never capture the essence of any given classroom experience, they certainly deepen students' listening, speaking, and social skills. It should also be noted that the very act of expressing these benchmarks seems to deepen participants' observation skills, thus helping them to be more aware of the present.

Phrasing observations as positive statements builds awareness of what is good and right in a group performance. Accentuating the positive creates a more affirming atmosphere AND is proactive. Words have impact, and there is a giant difference between saying "There were no put-downs" and "Participants complimented one another." The former benchmark relegates participants to the role of the "Sin Squad," ferreting out misbehaviors. The latter allows participants to become the "Praise Patrol," noting what has been done well.

It should also be pointed out that there is a fundamental difference between benchmarking and *emergent* benchmarking. Benchmarking is often perceived as a way to

develop a list of iron-clad observable behaviors that invariably lead to a “good performance.” Whether there are or aren’t such behaviors is immaterial. **All emergent benchmarks are grounded in the specific group, the specific text, the specific experience, and the specific environment.** This means that the community should not be saddled with a list of pre-determined and external benchmarks developed by others. Nor should communities be encumbered with their own past benchmarks. As Heraclitus pointed out many centuries ago, people change; groups change; ideas change; texts change. As a result, emergent benchmarks change. Thus, each community’s benchmarks should emerge and evolve organically. It is, after all, the cultivation of present-based observation that matters far more than the exactness of any set of benchmarks.

In short, the act of observing, articulating these observations, and sharing them with the community gives emergent benchmarks relevance. As facilitators, we must be still and allow this process to unfold.

What Does Emergent Benchmarking Look Like in an Actual English Classroom?

Early in the freshmen English course year at Fremont High School (Indiana), students begin taking part in Socratic seminars. Seminars, perhaps more than any other Omnilog Framework™ component, value listening and speaking.

As part of their oral reflections following a seminar, students are consistently asked to formulate and assess the effectiveness of their own emergent benchmarks. They are also given Figure 3 as a homework assignment.

Students often have difficulty with this assignment since it requires them to observe closely and make value judgments based on these observations. Further, students have a far easier time formulating negative statements than positive ones. It is thus not unusual for students to take several weeks to satisfactorily complete this assignment. Since I use a “Fix-and-Resubmit” grad-

ing system in my class, this poses no real problem to me; however, the constant requirement that students rethink and reword their benchmarks reinforces a few course assumptions. First, it makes clear that only quality is acceptable. Second, by immediately incorporating all acceptable benchmarks into seminar assessment instruments (See Figure 4), students’ responsibility to create an optimum learning environment is reinforced.

This year’s third block “regular” freshman English class was comprised of 25 students. By week, here are their eventual emergent benchmarks.

Week One

1. Everyone talked.
2. People made eye contact with the participant speaking.
3. People waited their turns to speak.

Week Two

4. People referred to others’ statements.
5. People nodded their heads in nonverbal support.

Week Three

6. People shared personal connections.

Week Four

7. People asked questions for clarification.
8. People laughed in an affirming manner.

Week Five

9. People allowed the facilitator to route omnilog and allow new voices in.
10. People invited others to take part in the seminar.

Week Six

11. People used “I agree” and “I disagree.”
12. People referred to the previous speaker by name.

While this list may look simple, its production wasn’t. Students put considerable effort and self-reflection into its creation. It is important to

note that EVERY benchmark they eventually created was centered on observable listening and speaking behaviors. It is also important to note that while this was not exactly what the writers of Indiana's Academic Standard 7 had in mind when they developed it, these students' emergent benchmarks dealt with "gestures, tone, and vocabulary appropriate to the audience and purpose."

In short, Emergent Design in general and emergent benchmarking in particular serve as a bridge between "standards" and our students. Given the opportunity to speak and listen, to join "the community" in real and meaningful ways, students will respond.

For the record, in standardized testing these students improved on average more than twice their projected gains in reading and slightly above average in grammar/writing. Their performances assured my central office administrators that the Omnilog Framework™ can produce tangible results.

About the Author

John Ludy teaches English and social studies at Fremont High School (Fremont, Indiana). He also is an adjunct professor of education at Indiana University-South Bend and a nationally-recognized Socratic seminar facilitator-trainer. The creator of the Omnilog Framework™, Ludy is the 2001 Hoosier Educator of the Year. He can be reached at jfludy@dmci.net.

Figure 1.

The Omnilog Framework: Creating the Classroom with a Human Face

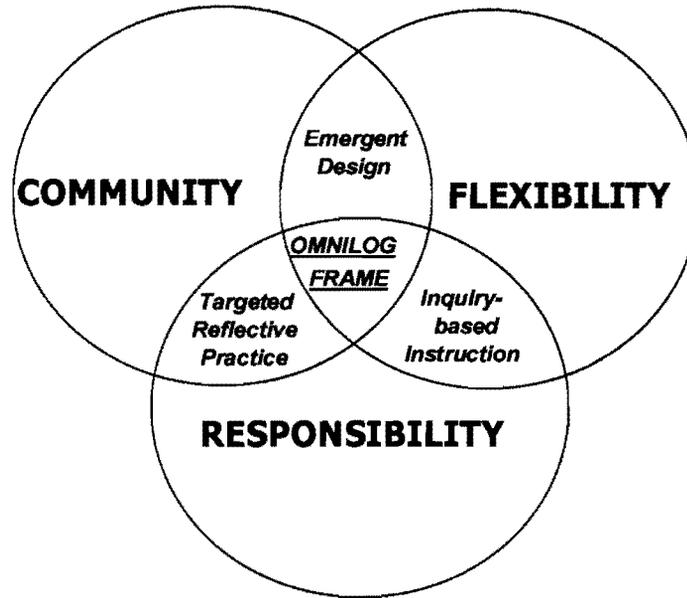


Figure 2.

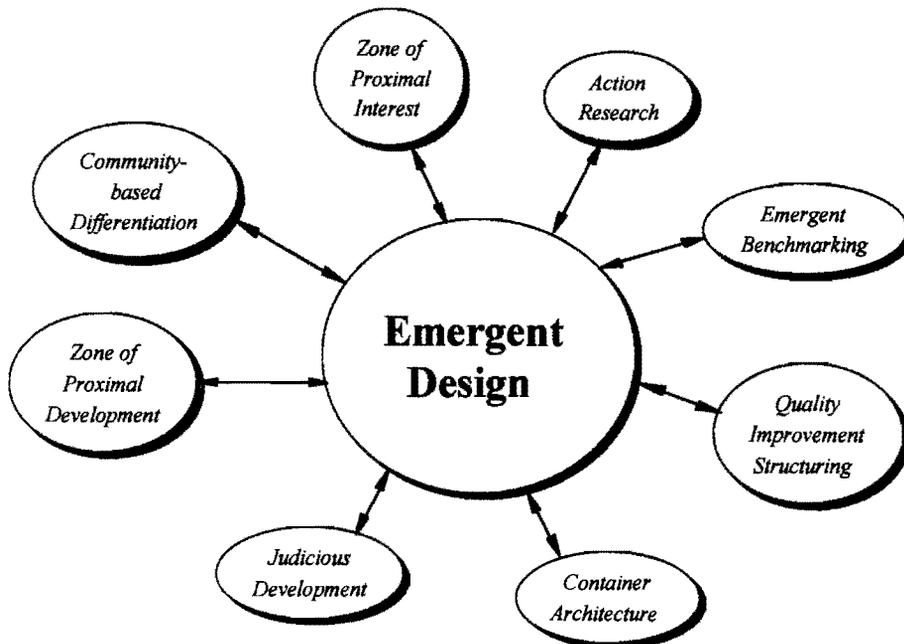


Figure 3.

Emergent Benchmarking

Name _____

Date _____ **#** _____

What behaviors did you observe that improved our community's performance? Please phrase them as complete sentences. Also, remember that benchmarks have two characteristics.

- They are observable.
- They are positive statements.

Observation Notes:

Based on your observation notes, what is a possible benchmark our community of learners should consider.

Thanks for your feedback. Together, we're building a stronger community of learners.

Figure 4.

Block 3: Seminar _____

Name _____

Date _____ **#** _____

Text title and creator: _____

<i>Emergent Benchmark</i>	<i>Outstanding</i>	<i>Acceptable</i>	<i>Unacceptable</i>
1. Everyone talked.	_____ / _____	_____ / _____	
2. People made eye contact with the speaker.	_____ / _____	_____ / _____	
3. People waited their turns to speak.	_____ / _____	_____ / _____	

In a single paragraph with a topic sentence and three supports, please assess our community's performance in this seminar.
