***“Community is more important to learning than any method or technique.”* --- Ralph Peterson**

A holistic approach to education molds students into the quintessential total package. Holistic education acknowledges the need for building intellect through traditional academic structures that more readily incorporate a student’s emotions, beliefs and sense of belonging into their learning. All too often, teachers develop an educational tunnel vision when delivering content. Teachers view student learning as one dimensional. Therefore, instructing with a linear focus on the steps needed to complete a task or pass a test.

Getting teachers to think of students as multi-dimensional learners deserving of an education that breaks with tradition and goes beyond the confines of the classroom is difficult but not impossible. Shifting this singular notion of learning starts with a devoted, passionate leader who believes in the holistic learning approach and is dedicated to giving such a movement the time it needs to take root on a campus, grow a sense of community and thrive.

Unfortunately, I spent several years early in my teaching career believing in the “sit and get” method of instruction. 1. that is how I was taught. 2. I passed every grade. 3. I became a successful adult. Easy as 1, 2, 3…right? Wrong, I was focused on training my students to do well on high-stakes tests by promoting a one-size-fits-all approach to education. My focus left little or no time to bond with my students in ways other than teaching to the test. I was bogged down in test prep, data disaggregation and test reviews to the point of burn out. I could see a bigger picture but I could not show it to my students.

Seven years into teaching seventh grade Science, I was spinning my wheels in the biggest rut of my career. Feeling forced to teach a subject that I love without sufficient supplies or time for experimenting because of new state mandated curriculum standards was not one of comfort. Science is not meant to be taught from a textbook with a little technology thrown in for good measure as an attempt at differentiation.  Science is meant to be hands-on inspiring creative inquiry in a safe environment where students are free to succeed and fail through trial and error without the pressure to memorize content and regurgitate it for a test.  As a teacher, I could not continue in this stifling environment.  I felt I had two options: 1. quit teaching all together or 2. look for an elective to teach.

I chose option 2 and the following year I became an AVID elective teacher.  I would love to say that I found AVID but truthfully, AVID found me. AVID stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination and is a college readiness elective taught in 46 states and 16 countries serving nearly one million students.  AVID focuses on teaching students the three biggest skills necessary for success...organization, note taking and peer tutoring but AVID's core philosophy centers around giving teachers the freedom to build a strong sense of community with their students.  The AVID system is a true holistic approach to learning by going beyond academic skill building to address the needs of the whole student and the whole campus. AVID’s mission is to close the achievement gap by preparing all students for college readiness and success in a global society. The fundamental principle in AVID’s mission is “ALL means ALL” when it comes to developing and sustaining a college going culture of successful learners.

In reviewing ideas from various course readings, I found that the fundamental principles of the AVID system are very closely modeled by those in Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown’s book, *A New Culture of Learning*. The following chart represents a side by side comparison of the fundamental ideas presented by Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown in their book, *A New Culture of Learning* as summarized in a PowerPoint titled *Highlights from A New Culture of Learning* by David Jarvisto the closely related learning strategies of the AVID system.

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| **Fundamentals of A New Culture of Learning** | **AVID System Strategies for Learning** |
| Hard time keeping up with the rapidly changing world | AVID students use Microsoft OneNote to transition from a traditional 3-ring binder to an all-electronic binder |
| Technology makes peer to peer learning easier and more natural | AVID conducts weekly in-class peer to peer tutorials using digital tutorial request forms and Skype with college student tutors |
| Ask questions to embrace what we don’t know | AVID uses Costa’s Levels of Higher Questioning |
| Web of professionals learning from one another with one another | AVID establishes Site Teams on every AVID campus composed of like-minded AVID trained administrators and educators. |
| Production of knowledge is amplified and unlimited because of technology | Creativity and quality of student tutorial request forms increases due to the inclusion of technology |
| Collective Indwelling: feeling and belief that group members share an understanding of one another, their environment and practices necessary to complete their task | AVID Site Team has shared beliefs of learning stemming from the principles set forth in the AVID system. AVID Site Team members infuse AVID strategies schoolwide. |
| Hanging out with media and learning how to be with others in spaces that are mediated by digital technologies | AVID students use the Collaboration Space of their OneNote e-binder, Padlet and Today’s Meet as backchannels for digital group learning |
| Messing around with media in open-ended, loosely goal directed, self-taught platforms | AVID students combine digital Cornell note taking skills with Blended Learning platforms such as BrainPop to self-direct digital learning |
| Geeking out with media through an intense interest driven deeper exploration of learning | AVID students use Khan Academy videos as models to produce their own subject and topic specific tutorial videos to be used during schoolwide tutorials |
| Engaging learners through various opportunities for play that drives imagination, thinking and feeling | AVID creates highly engaged learning communities built on the principles of Relational Capacity |

One potential challenge in meshing the New Culture and AVID strategies will be getting the AVID Site Team to create a campus culture of learning by following their passions and dispersing their expertise for learning schoolwide. Ideally, AVID Site Team members consist of an administrator, counselor, AVID elective teacher/site coordinator and a representative from each campus department. All AVID Site members receive in-depth training in the AVID way at staff development workshops held each summer. The expectation is for the AVID Site Team to return to their campus and implement AVID strategies with quality and fidelity schoolwide. As the Site Coordinator and AVID head cheerleader, it is my job to plan meaningful, purposeful back-to-school staff development days where Site Team members who attended AVID Summer Institutes can show and tell ideas for creating a sustainable campus culture of learning.

Another potential problem arises in assessing how supportive your teachers are with using play to form and shape campus culture. To address this challenge, teachers would take an AVID prepared Pre-Assessment Quiz rating their current level of support of forming classroom cultures rich in relational capacity. Teachers would receive immediate feedback of their ratings along with ample time to collaborate with their colleagues to share in their glows and time to cultivate their areas for growth.

Adopting the AVID system perspective of creating and sustaining significant learning environments by transforming the key campus domains of Instruction, Systems, Leadership and Culture will greatly and positively impact all stakeholders. Focusing on improving instruction, begins with incorporating the foundational tools of Writing, Inquiry, Collaboration, Organization and Reading. Providing meaningful staff development in these areas and giving teachers the freedom to implement proven strategies results in success for all.

Reforming school systems takes time and attention to details. Collecting and disaggregating data becomes important to teachers lobbying for student enrollment in rigorous courses that prepare them to not just go to college but to graduate.

Leadership sets the vision and tone that promotes college readiness and high expectations for all students in the school (Bendall, Bollhoefer & Koilpillai, 2015). Great leaders create buy-in from all by investing time, money and resources into campus initiatives. Teachers who feel supported are more likely to set high expectations for students helping them to meet and exceed their goals.

Perhaps the most impactful domain on a campus is culture. When implemented with quality and fidelity, the AVID system shifts the beliefs and behaviors of administrators, teachers, students and parents to one of a college going culture ready for success in a global society.

Reflecting on my twelve year teaching career, I can honestly say AVID saved my life as a teacher by transforming me into a lifelong, holistic learner. I believe in giving my students my best every day in every way. I trust in the AVID process to guide me in building strong collaborative communities rich in relational capacity where learning happens naturally with energy and comfort. Every year, each of my AVID classes become a family. This sense of family cannot be forced and does not happen by chance. It starts with me modeling my passion and love for learning that unlocks the potential for success in ALL students. Our family culture is contagious. It spreads schoolwide to where students who are not involved in the AVID elective come into our classroom and ask how they can join AVID. I always ask them why and their overwhelming response is because it seems so fun to belong to a school family. I could not ask for a better response to validate my purpose and my role in creating significant learning environments.

References

Thomas, D., & Brown, J. S. (2011). *A new culture of learning: Cultivating the imagination for a world of constant change* (Vol. 219). Lexington, KY: CreateSpace.

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Bendall, P., Bollhoefer, A., & Koilpillai, V. (2015). *AVID Critical Thinking and Engagement: A Schoolwide Approach.* San Diego: AVID Press.