

AMY MINTER MAYER



# BEYOND WORKSHEETS

**CREATIVE WAYS TO  
TEACH & ENGAGE STUDENTS**

**JB JOSSEY-BASS™**  
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*Professor of Educational Leadership,  
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Amy Minter Mayer

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# Introduction

**I wrote this** book with the hope that it will inspire teachers who, when they are told not to use worksheets or that worksheets are “bad,” secretly think, “But what else is there? How do I have students practice in an organized way without worksheets?” Whether a school is trying to get beyond worksheets because of copier click limits or ideological incongruities, the question for teachers remains, and it deserves an answer. How do I restructure my classroom and the learning taking place within so that worksheets will naturally die? The question this book seeks to answer is: “What do I do instead?”

The death of worksheets, for me, came naturally. I didn’t start out my career having any idea what to do instead; in fact, I started out knowing nothing. After two years of teaching public school, or should I say being paid as a public school teacher, I still didn’t know much about what else to do besides hand out worksheets, take up worksheets, and grade worksheets. Thank goodness, I guess, that I was mostly an English teacher so that at least students were writing something from time to time.

Looking back now from such a distant vantage point, I recall the thrill I felt when I found a CD for sale online with quizzes and questions (worksheets) for just about every classic novel you can think of. I used that thing until the lasers wore the shine off the disk. I mean, I modified the content for my students, but that CD was the starting place for just about everything. Thinking about having students read *x*, *y*, or *z*? That depends; is it on the CD? So, what was wrong about sending kids home to read a chapter or two then peppering them with written questions on the daily? Nothing much except, come to find out, hardly any of them were actually reading any texts except SparkNotes, by then ubiquitous and free online for almost any piece of literature, and actually a pretty good resource. The problem wasn't just that, though; it was that what I should have been teaching and what I wanted to teach, and what I MEANT to teach could not be taught in that way. Inadvertently, what I taught instead was how to fake it through reading checks, not how to enjoy, or even understand, literature. For the most part, only I was having a good time. Not to defend myself too much, but everyone I knew was pretty much hinging their lesson plans on the same premise. Honestly, most teachers still are. The problem is, we don't know what else to do besides what was done unto us. An interesting perversion of the golden rule: "Do unto others what was done unto you" instead of "Do unto others what you would have done unto you."

Eventually, I "taught" a class that instead taught me several thousand valuable lessons about motivation. I applied those lessons pretty promptly to my "on level" students, but I failed to make a bridge to my Dual Credit

charges. I tormented them with the worksheet methodology throughout my public school career. I got better at writing questions, and eventually, abandoned the trusty old CD (yes, before CD players in computers stopped being mass produced). Sometimes as I look back on the whole of my teaching career of both those over and under 18, I think every single thing I've learned is really about one thing: motivation. It's much easier to learn about curriculum and instruction than it is to understand how to create the motivation to learn that most students have to have to achieve diddly squat beyond what they came into the room knowing how to do. As you might have guessed, neither the CD nor the content I created to emulate it in future years took into account motivation beyond the most basic transaction students and teachers make, also known as grades.

Ironically, if grades had mattered to even 50% of the students I taught, I never would have had to become the master manipulator that made other people say I was a great teacher or that allowed me to be an adult professional educational development provider company owner. As Arthur Ashe, legendary American tennis player, famously said, "Success is a journey, not a destination." How true those words are. Throughout much of my teaching career, I would have told you that I longed for students who cared about my opinion of them or about the grades on their report cards, but you know what? In most ways, those are the easy ones. I'm not saying I didn't come to love many of those little grade grubbers dearly, but I am telling you that they are not the ones who taught me to question every little thing I thought I knew about education, every little thing that had been done unto me, every little thing that, in former

times, I would have told you education was about. Thank goodness for the other ones. The ones who came to school dirty and disheveled. The ones who didn't have front doors on their trailer houses. The ones who needed school to be good and to make them care about it more than I had ever needed anything.

The first time you read this book, I hope you will do so in order. I hope the stories and examples make sense in the order they are placed. Later, I hope you go back to chapters when you need them. In the future, there will be a course that accompanies this book, which will be available in our learning platform called friEdOnline (Fried Online, located at <http://friedonline.com>). In most chapters, you will find a connection to technology that not only makes sense, but also inspires you to either try replacing a process you currently have in place with something that will, once thoroughly learned and adopted, be categorically better than what you had before and save you time and effort or to increase engagement with your students. You'll also find periods to reflect. I have to admit, in college education classes, I wrote a lot of "reflections" and I grew to hate them very much. I thought they were another form of busy work (and they were) that professors gave out when they didn't know what else to do. No one read them. Once I figured out I was just filling pages with drivel no one but me would ever read, I had a lot more fun with them, and ironically, that is actually a good point. Reflections should be for the learner themselves, not necessarily for another audience. I can 100% confirm regarding those college assignments that NO ONE READ THEM because I would have had some awkward comments if they had. But, now, I see reflections

differently. Whether you write them down or just take time to think your thoughts about my message and your reaction to it, that is the beauty of two minds melding in the way that only a book written by and read by a human being can. So, please take a minute to yourself when you reach a reflection and let us commune in thought together about a profession that is precious enough to you to read a book and to me to write one.





# Giving Up the “Good Old Days” of Education

**I want you** to take a moment with me and picture the first school that you attended. You might not remember the layout of every classroom, each teacher’s name, or who you played with at recess, but I would be shocked if you don’t remember the pride in seeing a drawing you worked tirelessly on taped up in the hallways, the sound of the intercom buzz for morning announcements, or the smell of the cafeteria emanating through the halls at lunchtime (to me, elementary schools always smell like canned green beans). For so many of us who have spent our lives in the field of education, we chose this path, not only due to our own success as students, but because of these memories and the comfort that we can so easily find in a school environment. Those walls that we remember fondly haven’t changed much. In fact, if you haven’t moved from your hometown, it is likely that the same school building where you attended is still in use today. Many school buildings have been used for over 100 years, but even for schools that have been built in recent years, the layout, intention, and design of the school has not changed significantly. There are a

few notable trends that briefly threatened the larger trend (anyone remember open concept schools?), but even then, the mental constructs that continue to define the life of a school have, for the most part, remained unchanged since the one-room schoolhouses went away and the “factory model” of schools arose. If you were to suddenly wake up in a classroom one morning, you might not know much, but you would know that you were inside a school right away. While these mental and physical constructs of the space haven’t changed beyond our recognition, the daily lives of the students who inhabit those hallowed halls is likely an entirely different story.

At the age of six, I started attending what was the only elementary school in my small hometown, Livingston Elementary School. My family’s communication structure fell apart one day when I was about nine, which meant there was no one there to get me as I stood outside squinting to try and pick out the family car. I know that I was probably less than a mile from my grandparents’ house and a half mile away from my mom’s job at the town’s library, but none of that made me feel much better. As a child, it was scary. So scary I can’t even remember now how I solved the problem. I think someone at the school called one of my parents and obviously (thankfully) I am not still there. Someone eventually came and picked me up, but I will never forget the way I felt. This was another time, there were no cell phones, I had no money to use a pay phone (had there even been one), and I certainly wasn’t prepared to hoof it on the side of the road. I already had significant general anxiety, which was thrown even further out of proportion due to this incident. So much

so that when my own daughter started school, I knew that I needed to talk to her about what to do should this ever happen to her. With me at the helm, I knew it was definitely a possibility. So I asked her, “Sylvie, if no one picked you up from the bus stop or at school, what would you do?” She was calm, completely missing the implied anxiety behind my question,

“Um, just call you on my cell phone I guess?”

Oh . . . oh, yeah, I guess you would just do that, wouldn't you? SO MUCH has changed in the world between 1980 and 2005. The ubiquity of smartphones was a powerful part of that, but it certainly was not the only thing. As I write this in 2023, it's been a shocking 43 years since I was nine years old wondering what to do after school. But nevertheless, my school experiences somehow happened that long ago. I'm not trying to upset you. What I am trying to do is to make you think about how long it's been since you were that age, what memories and experiences you might be bringing with you to your career as an educator, and how the changes that come with the passage of time can and do completely alter the life of a student now compared to then, even if “then” for you is more recent than for me. It's unfortunate that memories don't yellow like newspapers, giving a better hint of their age. My childhood must have been just a few weeks ago and has to be filled with relevant, accessible memories of school that I can use. Except it wasn't, and it's not.

Even with all of these changes, schools have largely remained the same in substance and in form. Even some of the most damaging aspects of school have remained the

same as when “we” were growing up, no matter how long ago that may have been. Policies forced down through systems, like No Child Left Behind (instituted in 2001), have been impacting public education systems with standardized testing requirements for practically as long as I can remember. I graduated from high school in 1990 in Texas, home of the standardized test—thank you (but no thank you), Ross Perot. I believe my senior class was the first to have the requirement of passing a test in order to graduate, at least that’s what we were told, and it seemed to play out.<sup>1</sup> The test was of minimum skills and most everyone I knew passed easily. There was no test prep in advance, and as I think back, I don’t even think we knew the test was happening until the day it was given. (Contrast that to the deeply embedded high-stakes testing environment of today and you will long for the “good old days” with good reason.) I only remember one classmate of mine not being able to pass a portion of the test. I had attended school with her on and off since first grade. I’d been to her house, seen her at parties, and considered her a friend. It was stunning to think she wouldn’t be able to attend graduation over a test we hadn’t even heard about before it happened and that none of our teachers decided to give us. Never before had we encountered a test that had such an impact on our educational careers. I didn’t realize it at the time, but it was the end of an era in education, an era where schools decided who did, and did not, graduate; at that moment, then and to this day, the state, at least in my home state of Texas, had thoroughly and finally wrested that control from the school district.

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## What Do We Mean by “the Good Old Days” Anyway?

Through the lens of the introduction of standardized testing, I do sometimes long for the good old days. There is another kind of “good old days” I think we can often refer to in the mythical past. There was a time when children sat quietly in rows, everyone had enough to eat at home, and no one’s parents said curse words on a daily basis. Each child was taught what the “bad” words were, *everyone* spoke English, and when the school called home, the student was the one in trouble, not the teacher. Teachers were expected to “cover material,” and students either got it or didn’t, at no apparent fault of the teacher. The understanding was that it was there if you wanted it, or if you didn’t, that was a “you” (student) problem if you couldn’t keep up. This is the version of “the good old days” I was thinking of when I began this chapter. The nostalgic past where we had nuclear bomb drills that required holding a hefty textbook cracked in half over your head. The world where a hefty textbook could either teach or protect you from doom, clear proof that words held power.

This world demanded a level of conformity and homogeneity that appears not to exist now. (Did it ever? I probably don’t know because I was a member of the “in” group.) We all *had* to agree on what the bad words were AND that they were, in fact, “bad.” We *had* to see the systems as “in charge” and students and parents as supplicants to those systems. These are just a couple of minor examples of the agreements that had to remain in place for that

old system to be sustained. When I hear educators long for the good old days, I always think about what they really mean. I think part of it is the relaxation of living in a world where white middle-class privilege is so firmly in place that it cannot be called into question. The world we're picturing might have seemed better for everyone, when in fact, it was only better for some. Not to be too heavy-handed about this point, but I think that this quote brings it home:

“Better never means better for everyone. . . . It always means worse, for some.”

Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

## Journaling Activity

Close your eyes and picture your quintessential school experience using all of your senses. What does it smell like? What do you hear? How does that metal seating that we somehow all had feel?

Grab your favorite notebook, a scratch piece of paper, or whatever is closest to you that can be used to write on (the margins of this book also work just fine, I promise I won't be upset!). Writing it out, take this moment to name and reflect on what each of your senses immediately recognizes when thinking about your school experience. Then, think about how these spaces may have changed or remained the same in the years since. This isn't an essay to be graded or an assignment to turn in, so write as much or as little as you would like. There are no wrong answers!

Make sure to keep the paper you used close, as we will reflect back on this once more at the end of this chapter.

## **If the “Good Old Days” Were Good, Why Should We Leave Them Behind?**

Thinking back to those days that I keep referring to as the “Good Old Days,” a world that, at one point, I would often get nostalgic for, I have come to realize that I had no idea that I was living in the midst of privilege. Poor as we were, I still had a privilege that was making life impossible for so many others while creating a cradle for me. Because of this insight that I now have, I cannot, in good conscience, continue to wish for the “Good Old Days.” I now understand that these days never truly existed.

Nostalgia in education is longing for a world where only some of us could prosper, so as chaotic as the world of education may seem now, at least there has become room for so many more voices, ways of being, and an overall more equitable experience, though we still have so far to go. I don’t want to pretend or even imply that life is now easy for those who come to public school from poverty, or for those who are different from what many may still call “normal” in any way. (What is “normal” anyway?) However, a child who is transgendered, for example, has a chance today to be treated with dignity, although it may still be an uphill battle, there would have been no chance in the elementary school I attended in the 1980s.

As another example, a child whose native language is not English will undoubtedly have a better chance for a “free and appropriate education” (to which every child is entitled under federal law regarding students with disabilities) than they would have in 1985, 1995, or even 2005.<sup>2</sup> Much more is understood in our school systems about the many varieties

of inclusion, acceptance, and how instructional practices can increase opportunities for more students. A student who is in need of special education services would also have a better opportunity to encounter a learning environment where they may grow today than in the “you get what you get” learning environment norms of yesteryear.

So, in hindsight, the “Good Old Days” weren’t that good; we still have a long way to go, and no one has all the answers. As chaotic as schools may seem today, we may be closer than we ever have been to true equity and inclusion in the diverse world we find ourselves in today.

## **Evaluating Your Learning Environment**

For those of you who are teachers or administrators, you are probably starting to wonder, “If school is so much better for so many, why is it so much worse for me?” One answer is that schools are no longer, for the most part, organized solely around the needs of the adults who work there to be good places to work. Please do not think that I am saying schools are only for students; at their best, schools form communities, and at times, safe havens for the adults who work there as well as for the students who attend. So there is a problem here too: how do we create a school environment that serves all students equitably as opposed to equally, giving each what they need instead of everyone getting the same, while still providing a happy and healthy working environment for the adults who also populate the buildings? It is time for designers of systems to figure out how the needs of students can best be met with the adult resources that are available without burning those adults out. Schools cannot be everything to everyone, at least not with the funding any system

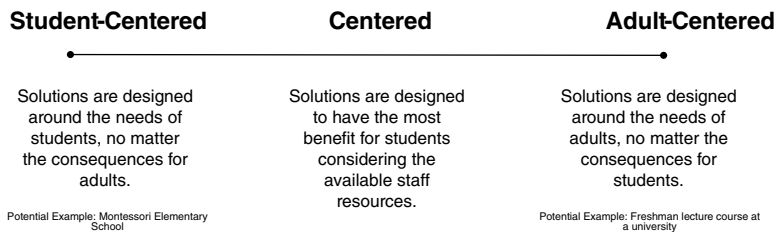


in the United States has dedicated to it. I have worked in private schools where parents pay \$40,000 a year per student and in the poorest school district in the state of Texas; in neither of these organizations was there ever “enough” time or other resources for educators. Although, I have to admit, the private school was a much better environment for adults than the public one. Conversely, the public one was a much better environment for a student with special needs than the private one.

A thought experiment that I think has a lot of value for educators is to figure out where their school falls on the continuum shown in Figure 1.1.

Let’s take a look at an example that will help you think through how to evaluate your learning environment, whether it’s a school campus or a school district (group of schools).

In our imaginary scenario, as so often in real life, yet another mandate has arrived from the state: all students classified as “at risk,” that is, identified as living in poverty (qualifying for free or reduced lunch), who have been identified as homeless, who failed the state standardized assessment in the last three administrations, or have met one of a bevy of other identifiers, must have three extra



**FIGURE 1.1** Student-centered versus teacher-centered schools.

hours per week of instructional time with a highly qualified teacher. In our fictional district, although this is often the case in many real districts around the country, there is little or no funding for extra personnel to carry out this mandate. Those “highly qualified” teachers are already at their wits’ end with the existing work and now all eyes are on them to somehow provide these “extra hours.”

How will the learning environment and school community address the mandate? Thinking through how your school would address it will tell you everything you need to know about whether you are working in a mostly student-centered environment, a mostly adult-centered environment, or if you are one of the lucky few who are at some healthy place in between (how did you do it?!). I’ve taken the liberty of talking through how I think each type of system would address this mandate as follows.

In a mostly student-centered learning institution, conversations will revolve around who gets the services and what the services will be. Definitions may even be expanded locally to include more students than required or use more time than is required by the mandate. Educators may look at how they can accommodate student needs for extended transportation. Meaning they, or some other adults, will be spending extra hours after the end of the school day with students instead of accomplishing all of the other work they usually do during that time. An assumption may be made that the services will be provided in small groups with a human teacher or that this content will be created by each teacher taking part. Art, physical education (PE), lunch, and recess will probably be off limits unless there are extreme extenuating circumstances because, again, the assumption

will be made that students need these subjects, wouldn't want to miss them, or would feel punished by doing academic work during these sacred “non-academic” time periods. In the student-centered model, the problem may be restated like this: At-risk students need expanded instructional time.

To contrast, in an adult-centered learning environment, conversations will first revolve around excluding as many students as possible from receiving additional services. Next, rules will be examined to see how many students can be accommodated at once and how few adult resources can be dedicated to meet the requirements of the mandate. One or more pieces of software may be procured to help with the work and to decrease the load on staff. Decision-makers may also examine the rules to see when the services can be delivered with the least amount of additional strain to the adult system, for example, at lunch, during PE, music, art, or during other “elective” subjects. In the adult-centered model, the problem may be restated like this: The state says at-risk students have to spend three extra hours a week doing schoolwork.

The problem with the completely student-centered approach provided is that it may not be sustainable, in which case decision-makers will have to go back to the drawing board no matter how “good” their solution is for learners. While the students' needs are kept front and center, if there are not enough resources to consistently provide the services, then what “good” is really being done? The problem with the completely adult-centered approach is that the underlying reason for the extended services (most likely to raise test scores or to “catch up” on lost learning)

may trump much of the potential joy a child experiences at school without regard for that quite important facet.

As an interesting aside that ties into this thought experiment, a colleague of mine did an informal study once. They took a look at mandatory student tutorials and test scores and found that for boys who were forced into after-school tutorials, scores actually dropped versus girls whose scores remained stagnant. Neither group of 5th graders benefitted from thousands of hours and dollars spent to try to “catch” them up. My theory is that the instructional practices used in the initial instruction were the same ones used during the “extra” learning time. They didn’t work initially, so they also didn’t work just because they were done more frequently or for longer periods of time. At any rate, if you are part of a discussion around extending instructional time to combat learning loss, it’s worth noting that a proposed solution may pose no benefits for either students or adults. Ask questions and look at data before finalizing any plan of action.

Now, let’s get back into our scenario. A balanced approach must: address the need to comply with the mandate, serve the students receiving the instructional services meant to help them, and be sustainable by the adults required to provide these services. If your school has a centered approach, I hope you are seeing decision-makers work with classroom teachers to design solutions that solve problems in creative ways. For example, can classroom teachers work with art, music, or PE teachers to integrate learning in new and different ways to address the underlying problem of learning loss? Can services be expanded in ways that will raise up all of the learners while meeting the requirements of the edict? Are people thinking through how to make

school better for everyone, adults as well as students, when “problems” like this arise? Or is only one of the two groups involved in this extra learning time being considered? In the centered model, the problem may be restated like this: At-risk students need expanded opportunities to address learning loss without impinging on the work/life balance of highly qualified teachers.

## **Dealing with Mandates from On High**

Dealing with the adversity of working within a monolithic system teaches us about who we are as individuals and as educators. Here’s a quick guide to dealing with the ever-expanding mandates from on high that might lead to more centered, inclusive, and balanced outcomes:

- First: What problem are we trying to solve?
  - Before diving in to find a solution, play around with how you frame the problem you are experiencing. How the problem is framed is going to determine how you approach solving it and your flexibility in finding solutions. Problems can, and should, always be framed in multiple ways before a solution begins to be developed.
  - Example of a well-stated problem: Some students need expanded learning time delivered in new ways in order to achieve maximum growth.
- Second: Is there a way to address the problem that benefits more or even all students?
  - Here, we would ideally take into account the entire student experience, including but not limited to: the